

MATERIALS FOR THE STUDY OF THE WORK AND THOUGHT OF ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE

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MINOR WRITINGS ON HISTORY AND HISTORIANS

ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE, *The Prescient Genius*, review of *The Letters of Jacob Burckhardt*, selected, edited and translated by Alexander Dru, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955, in «The Observer», Sunday, May 1, 1955, p. 16.

BURCKHARDT, THE PRESCIENT GENIUS

by Arnold J. Toynbee

The letters in this selection run from 1838, when Burckhardt was twenty, to 1897, when he was seventy-eight. In Great Britain, we think of this span of time as having been a unity: "the Victorian age". But in continental Europe, as in North America, it was broken in two, by a bout of warfare, into an obviously uneasy spell of peace (the Twenties, the Thirties and the Forties) and an apparently tranquil and prosperous one (the Seventies, Eighties and Nineties). The present series of letters gives us glimpses of Burckhardt's feelings about both the pre-1848 and the post-1871 age, and, looking back in 1871, when he was fifty-three, he makes it clear that the earlier period is more to his taste than the nascent one.

In 1839-43, he had been captivated by the glamour of an effervescent post-Napoleonic Germany. Even Berlin had enthralled him (at least the people whom he met there had enthralled him, not the scenery). «Only a definite – though not political – *Anschluss* with Germany can save Switzerland»¹, he had written to his sister in his native city of Basel from Brunswick on September 25, 1841. The reservation – «not political» – is, however, characteristic of the writer and of his hard-headed countrymen of whom he was to be distinguished a representative. By 1842, Burckhardt was seeing through the contemporary German revolutionary movement. He did not have to wait for the fiasco of 1848. Indeed, he was already seeing beyond 1914; for he was foreboding the advent of a new barbarism and a new servitude that were going to be the Nemesis of a premature and superficial democracy.

De Tocqueville, representing in France the generation before Burckhardt's generation in Basel, had foreseen the Welfare State of mid-twentieth-century Britain, Scandinavia, and New Zealand. Burckhardt foresaw the satanic State of National Socialism and Communism.

¹ *The Letters of Jacob Burckhardt*, cit., p. 65 (T.T.).

His personal counter-move was to retreat upon Basel and dig himself in there. In 1872 he was offered the Ranke's chair of history at Berlin and declined it (Treitschke got it, in consequence).

If Burckhardt had ever left Basel permanently, he would indeed have been pulling up his roots; for, on both sides, his forebears had been eminent there, since the fifteenth century, as men of business, city fathers, and scholars. These deep roots in fertile soil were one of the sources of Burckhardt's acumen. As he looked out from his ancestral Basel upon the contemporary world, he could see the past in perspective and peer into the future with prescience. By family tradition, as well as by personal temperament, he was a liberal-minded conservative.

For Burckhardt, by 1855, as for the Turkish pasha in Kinglake's *Eothen*², the nineteenth century was an age of whirring wheels. The pasha professed to admire the whirr; Burckhardt made no secret of his aversion. These letters are shot through with flashes of almost uncanny foresight. In 1872 he writes: –

«I have a suspicion that (...) sounds completely mad: (...) that the military State will have to turn "industrialist"»³.

In 1881 he writes (to a friend who is a civil servant in Baden): –

«I feel deep down inside me that something is going to burst out in the West, once Russia has been reduced to confusion by acts of violence. That will be the beginning of the period when every stage of confusion will have to be gone through, until finally a real Power emerges based upon sheer unlimited violence»⁴.

This feeling was not shared – or, at any rate, was not avowed – by many Westerners in that year. Most of them were then taking for granted that the age of violence was behind them,

² Alexander William Kinglake, *Eothen; or Traces of Travel brought Home from the East*, London, Ollivier, 1844 (T.T.).

³ *The Letters of Jacob Burckhardt*, cit., p. 151 (T.T.).

⁴ *The Letters of Jacob Burckhardt*, cit., p. 202 (T.T.).

and that they were seeing the dawn of a quiet and comfortable millennium. The Baseler historian, however, was not deceived.

Burckhardt was directly aware of the living tradition of Western civilization. He himself, like his ancestors, was a bearer of it. It was something that he was able to feel from within; he was no mere observer, looking at it from outside. This perhaps partly accounts for his sensitiveness to the forces that, during his lifetime, were sweeping the West out of its historic course. He was as sensitive to them, of course, in his personal field of scholarship as he was in his family fields of public affairs and business. On his lips the phrase *viri doctissimi* was not a term of praise – and he uses the phrase very often.

By 1872 he finds specialization making younger scholars deaf and blind. He takes pleasure in insisting that he is an amateur, and he deftly parries Nietzsche's advances by protesting that he, Burckhardt, is no philosopher, and is therefore not competent on the embarrassing presentation copies of Nietzsche's works. The encounter between these two contemporaries is strange; so far are they apart. Yet they did, after all, have something in common: they both expected to see the house of Western civilization pulled down about the next generation's ears.

Burckhardt consciously and willingly paid the price of his aloofness. He deliberately persisted in living in semi-retreat – rejecting the successive opportunities for honour and glory that were thrust upon him by his steadily and justly increasing reputation. His reward has been a posthumous one. He does not "date". His message is as fresh for us as it was for his own generation. Indeed, we epigoni are better attuned to receive it. For Burckhardt's forebodings have been our generation's experiences.