

## The Arm of Hitler

Ernest Toller

*On May 10, 1933, the National Socialist German Workers (Nazi) Party, a party steeped in anti-Semitism, held book burnings in several German cities; more than 20,000 books were burned in Berlin alone. Two weeks after the bonfires, the international writers' group, P.E.N. (for Poets, Essayists, Novelists), held their first congress in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia (present-day Croatia). A German playwright named Ernst Toller planned to speak. Toller had spent six years in jail for communist revolutionary involvement, and he had been exiled. The German delegation, all Nazis, created chaos trying to prevent the Jewish Toller from speaking. P.E.N. president H. G. Wells held a vote and Toller was allowed to continue; the Germans walked out. After the burning of the German Reichstag, or parliament building, the following February 27, 1934, allegedly by communists (but possibly by Nazis themselves), Adolf Hitler, the head of the Nazi Party, arrested many German writers, most especially communists and anarchists. At the P.E.N. congress the next year, Toller delivered an emotional survey of the treatment of writers imprisoned by Hitler, and he implored the audience to agitate on their behalf. Among political prisoners he mentions: Erich Mühsam was a German-Jewish anarchist poet and playwright who ridiculed Hitler; he was arrested in February 1933, sent to concentration camps, and murdered on July 9, 1934. Peace activist Carl von Ossietzky was imprisoned for writing articles exposing Germany's rearming in violation of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I (1914–18); he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1935. Ernst Thälmann headed the German Communist Party until 1933 when he was thrown in prison, then shot at Buchenwald, one of the largest concentration camps, in 1944. Fritz Gerlich, a journalist who criticized Hitler, was murdered at Dachau, a concentration camp northwest of Munich, on July 1, 1934. Werner Hirsch, a communist newspaper publisher, died in exile in the USSR. Five years later, depressed at hearing of family members sent to concentration camps, Toller committed suicide in New York.*

Permit me first of all to thank you in the name of the writers who have been persecuted and driven from Germany for the kindly welcome that the P.E.N. Club has extended to us.

Although governments may compromise and even conclude alliance with the powers of unrighteousness, the writer obeys only the commands of the spirit of truth and he should never, however much they may threaten, bow down before the powers of violence of the day.

At a time when every day we hear of new outrages, new cruelties, new oppressions, at a time when the misery of millions steadily increases, when tens of thousands of fugitives wander up and down the world without hope and under unjust condemnation, at a time when a new and a terrible war threatens civilization, the conscience of the world becomes dulled and only a few remember the fate of the writers who languish in prison for their faith. These men have already been for seventeen months under arrest. They have never been brought to trial and judged. They have committed no offence against the laws of their land. They are in prison simply because in former years they wrote what displeases the present masters of Germany.

Among these writers are Carl von Ossietzky, Ludwig Renn, Thälmann, Erich Mühsam, Fritz Gerlich, Fritz Küster, Werner Hirsch, Klaus Neudrantz, Carl Mierendorff, Willy Bendel, and several others. And under what conditions—conditions that it is hardly possible for you to realize—do these men live! Abandoned to the hate of tyrants, exposed to the violence of their servile agents, these men live a life of daily

physical, intellectual and spiritual privation, often made the victims of brutal ill treatment.

If one asks their oppressors why and for what purpose these men are in prison, the answer is given that they were dangerous elements in society and must be trained to be useful members of it.

And how are they trained? By many hours of military drill, by meaningless manual labour. Men of fifty and sixty years of age are urged and driven up and down the barrack squares, have to do physical drill until they are unable to rise.

No, the motive for their imprisonment is very different. The real cause of it is the desire for revenge on the helpless, the hate of the idea of freedom, the fear of that power which is given to these men (of pillorying the forces that assail the spirit) by the power of the word.

I could read you reports of eyewitnesses on what happens in concentration camps that would overwhelm you with shame that men could so humiliate men. But there is no need to do so. Enough has been written in books and in the press.

Anyone who wanted to hear what was happening has been able to hear; anyone who is willing to know, cannot but know. He who has not heard, has not wanted to hear; he who does not know, has not wanted to know; he who has forgotten has sought to forget.

Many have heard, many know and yet they forget. But to forget is to sin against the spirit. If it were not for the fact that millions have forgotten the war, the danger of a new war would not be so tremendous, the young would not now be taught that war is a glorious thing.

To forget augurs lack of imagination; to forget augurs lack of heart.

We must never forget these men in prison who stood by our side and lived and worked for a common end, who served the cause of peace and sought to make the world a brighter, a happier, a juster place.

The loud exultation of their enemies cannot drown the dull complaint of these suffering men. Let us think of them, those who will not be allowed to know that we think of them as brothers and share their shame and sorrow.

If we really do believe in the power of the word—and as writers we do believe in the power of the word—we ought not to be silent. Even dictatorships bow before public opinion. If world opinion had not made its strong demand, if numberless people had not shown their sympathy, if great newspapers like the *Times*, the *Observer*, and the *Manchester Guardian* had not waged a brave fight, if men who were true to the great traditions of their nations had not lent their aid, would the innocent Dimitroff have been saved from the scaffold?

Often we doubt of the effect, of the value of what we do. Examples such as that ought to give us strength and confidence and prevent us wearying of well doing.

No, we who are now in exile, we must not become weary. If we do, we shamefully surrender: We abandon that Germany of which you will hear nothing in the official press, the Germany that suffers, the Germany that is greater and stronger than you think.

I speak here as a writer to writers. If I did not, I should feel compelled to recall to you those others who are not writers, those workers, pastors, Jews, who have committed no other crime than this, that because of their convictions they could not become National Socialists.

The dictatorship is not content with persecuting writers and suppressing their books in Germany; it persecutes those who have fled from its wrath to foreign countries. The writers and publishers who are exiles from Germany are threatened by special measures taken by the Hitlerite dictatorship. Pressure is brought to bear on every government in the world if it seems weak enough or complacent enough. The chief object of the pressure is to obtain the deportation of the émigré writer to Germany. If that cannot be obtained, then the attempt is made to get him expelled from the land in which he has taken refuge, after he has been condemned *in contumaciam* to imprisonment and his books forbidden.

I recall to your memory the case in Holland of Liepmann, the author of *Murder Made in Germany*. Not long ago another country decided that all printed matter should be banned if it was likely to endanger good relations with other countries. That goes far beyond any of the requirements of international law, which declares that only libels on the heads of foreign states are punishable.

Why this present care for the welfare of a foreign dictatorship? Why is such care shown only now?

Did Italian, Russian, Spanish exiles never write books as the German exiles do? The reason is that neither Spain nor Italy nor Russia possessed a Dr. Goebbels with unlimited funds for the persecution of exiles in the lands in which they have sought refuge.

Today as a result of the pressure exercised by National Socialist officialdom, many non-German papers refuse to mention or review the works of exiled German writers. As a result of pressure from German diplomatic quarters, one of the big bookshops in Madrid refused to display or sell books published by firms that published the works of the exiles.

After the signature of the treaty between Poland and Germany, Polish booksellers ceased to sell the books of the exiles' publishers. Italian booksellers complain that diplomatic pressure is brought to bear upon

them to stop selling the works of the exiles. In Greece, at the demand of the German consul, the publisher of the translation of *The Brown Book* was hauled to court and condemned.

At the demand of the German government, the public prosecutor in Argentina issued a summons against an Argentine paper, which had printed an essay by Heinrich Mann. In several lands the production of the new play by Brückner, which has had such a success in Paris, has been forbidden.

Caricatures by famous artists have had to be withdrawn from exhibitions because the representative of the National Socialist government demanded it. What would happen to Mr. Low or to his editor-in-chief Lord Beaverbrook if the arm of Hitler could reach them? Even in a land so far away as San Salvador, German diplomacy secured the banning of *The Brown Book*.

The Hitlerite dictatorship shrinks from no method of injuring those writers whom it cannot catch. Their books and their manuscripts have been destroyed. Their goods, their furniture, their savings, their houses have been confiscated. Many have been deprived of German citizenship.

Today the world is a very narrow place for those who do not possess a proper passport. If today they are invited to visit another country for urgent business reasons, they cannot go; the frontier is shut to them. They

must take endless time and trouble to obtain a piece of paper which permits them to travel from the land in which they live and then it depends whether the other country will make an exception and let them enter.

The German writer Klaus Mann wanted to attend this congress but in spite of all his efforts he was unable to come because he did not possess a passport.

The well-organized persecution of authors, publishers, and booksellers who are obnoxious to the present regime in Germany, a persecution carried on systematically and supported by the immense resources of the state into even the most distant lands, constitutes the most dangerous threat to the freedom of the writer throughout the world.

Will you tolerate this threat? You will perhaps answer me: “What can we do; we are too weak. Our voices will not be heard. The spirit of tyranny and oppression gains ground everywhere.” Others again may say: “Isn’t it just a piece of quixotry to protest against the crushing of intellectual liberty in Germany when many German writers publicly proclaim themselves enthusiastic supporters of the system and when even if all the rest of the nation revolts from it, its ‘intellectual foundations’ are still strong.”

A casual glance at German papers is enough to let one see with what enthusiasm many German writers describe themselves as pioneers of the national idea. There is no oppression there; this is voluntary service, joyous submission.

A great contemporary writer has said that the writer's talent today plays the part that reason played in the Middle Ages—to disturb faith. And he adds: “Unfortunately there is very little talent today and that explains much.”

Be these answers, these opinions, ever so obvious, yet we may not keep silent. The Inquisition too was a power that persecuted and caused men to suffer. Yet those who were persecuted and those who suffered did not renounce their faith.

It is not asked of you that you face death at the stake. It is asked of you only that for the sake of goodness, humanity and justice, for the sake of that day to which—despite the present darkness—mankind will in the future turn, you declare your solidarity with men who are unjustly persecuted, that you do not tolerate the oppression of the spirit by the forces of materialism.