

Ideas, Men and History

Cosmopolitanism and the National State, by Friedrich Meinecke; translated by Robert B. Kimber, with an introduction by Felix Gilbert, *Princeton, N.J.: The Princeton University Press*, 1970. *xv + 388 pp. and index. \$12.50.*

THIS FIRST APPEARANCE in English translation of a classic by one of the greatest historians of the twentieth century must be regarded as a significant publishing event. Originally published in Germany in 1907, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State* represented both a new approach to the history of ideas and a challenge to the then conventional concept of political history. The subject of the book is the development of German thinking on the state and the nation during the crucial one hundred years before 1871. It was during this period that Germany departed from the mainstream of European political thought, which had always centered around the doctrine of natural law. German thinkers developed a new philosophically revolutionary concept of history and the state, which ultimately pointed Germany's development in new directions.

Professor Kimber's excellent translation conveys the beauty and power of Meinecke's literary style. It is particularly welcome at a time when "the medium is the message" has become a prevalent cliché. Meinecke believed that one can arrive at a real understanding of modern German history only if one grasps the meaning of the spiritual, political, and social transformations that have shaped modern German thinking. He was concerned with man as the medium through which ideas work in history, but he was less concerned with ideas in the abstract than the manner in which ideas are transmuted through their application to reality. He concluded that

ideas had to be considered within the historical framework which surrounded them. The grasp of the interaction between ideas and reality was essential to an understanding of the political world. "The entire history of the world is a unique process," he reminds us in his introductory chapter, "a massive interweaving and crossing of national and universal developments," and historical research "moves on the highest level of its jurisdiction and enjoys the purest air, the clearest view, when it confronts this relationship and attempts to elucidate it."

Although Meinecke admired the humanitarianism and idealism of thinkers like Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Schiller, and Novalis, a certain Wilhelmine spirit pervades this work. Meinecke concluded that German thinkers at the end of the eighteenth century were caught up in excessively idealistic fantasies in their penchant for seeing the state and nation as primarily moral agents. Such a view was inadequate for the harsh and interest-dominated world in which later nineteenth century thinkers came to see the state as a kind of individual personality, which asserts itself in the world and seeks to fulfill itself in history. This transformed idealism was the creation of a particular social stratum, whose representatives formed their views against the background of their political environment. The nexus of relationships that made up German society shaped the character of this transformation.

Less speculative historians like Treitschke and Sybel believed that history is made by men and that, if they are great and strong enough, they will always succeed in shaping reality to their wills. Lamprecht on the other hand assumed the primacy of the collective mind over the individual and saw the individual as the carrier of supra-individual mentalities. In a sense, Meinecke united these two approaches, for he saw objective circumstances and subjective individual wills as interacting on one another in the historical process. In the Rankean concepts of state and nation

Meinecke found "the finest quintessence of the entire development of [German] thought over the previous four decades transformed into a highly personal view," and he noted the "striking similarity" between this view and "Bismarck's mode of political thinking."

Meinecke's approach, simultaneously empirical, philosophical, and artistic, was deeply influenced by the late nineteenth century intellectual movement called *Lebensphilosophie*, which stood close to the ideas of men like Wilhelm Dilthey. Meinecke regarded the study of history as more than merely an exercise of the human intellect. Rather it had to be an experience of the total personality. He believed that the historian failed, if he provided only an exact record of what had happened in the past, for history never moves smoothly and definitely but always from uncertainty to uncertainty—a process which demanded the utmost subtlety of analysis. Accordingly "objectivity" in the positivist-mechanical sense was impossible. *Cosmopolitanism and the National State* is a difficult book but one which yields new riches with every reading. Professor Gilbert's brief introduction to this splendid translation perceptively reminds us that, though this early work of Meinecke breathes a certain nationalist spirit, its demonstration that the guiding principles of the political world originate in the world of thought implied a criticism of Imperial Germany, which believed so fervently in the primacy of "politics" and "power."

Reviewed by EDWARD H. GLAS