

'The Ruhr in the new Germany' from Le Monde (21 August 1952)

Caption: On 21 August 1952, the French daily newspaper Le Monde describes the industrial power of West Germany's Ruhr basin.

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The Ruhr in the new Germany

The paradise of paternalism

From our special envoy Georges Penchenier

Essen, August. — Alfred Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach, heir to the title and former war criminal sentenced at Landsberg, amnestied by Mr MacCloy (then American High Commissioner in Germany) was welcomed back to his fair city of Essen if not in triumph, then at least as a prodigal son. Today, another step has been taken. He has just regained possession of the Villa Hügel, an architectural monstrosity on a scale with the tribe that inhabited it. All's well that ends well, and all parties have profited from the occasion: the Krupps, because they have got back what belonged to them; the Allies, because they have turned over a new page in the history of their dealings with the de-Nazified Germany; the citizens of Essen, because every measure taken in this direction demonstrates that the order in which they took such pride is slowly being restored and because, every day, some part of the recent, painful past is being wiped out.

It is, moreover, of little importance that the Krupp family no longer wields the power that it held 20 or 30 years ago. A pretender has no need of troops in order to be acknowledged as such in the eyes of a monarchist. He is who he is, and that is enough. Dethroned, even exiled, his standard still flies, the example remains. In Essen, where the Krupps have reigned since 1642, at first as unremarkable squires of the iron trade before becoming the kings of steel, on all sides the glory is reflected of a family which not only built and developed the city but carried off the feat of incarnating itself in its six hundred thousand vassals. Here they were born Krupp, they lived in Krupp housing, they ate out of Krupp bowls, they relaxed in Krupp cinemas, stadia, swimming pools and foyers, they died Krupp.

Now that the storm has blown over, it is time to renew the tradition. The names of Alfred and of Frederick have been returned to the streets which once bore them. They have also replaced the statue of Alfred (1812–1887), the first to bear the family title, which is opposite the Glückaufhaus, the house of the miners. Lastly, the present heir has had the brilliant idea of inaugurating a commemorative chapel that is to be open to Catholics and Protestants alike right in the middle of the city in order to thank Providence, if not for having restored all of his rights, at least for having released him from prison. People from all levels of society took part in this pious ceremony; retired workers, trade union representatives and members of the City Council flocked to it. It was, as always, a family occasion in the fair city of Essen.

Unanimous awareness

This extraordinary atmosphere is not, however, peculiar to Essen. In all the towns on the Ruhr, be it in Rheinhausen or in Dortmund, in Duisburg as in Bochum or in Gelsenkirchen, you find the same unanimous awareness of belonging to a people that is loyal, hard-working, sound and calm — in a word, German.

In this triangle, its sides barely a hundred kilometres long, where grey, black or red skies bear down on the stranger and make him long for sun and fresh water, seven million beings are forging both steel and the destiny of the country. It is no longer merely work, it is a mission. Not a job: a ministry. Among other nations, the coalfields, the black country, are well outside the concept of the existence that most of their citizens have made for themselves. Which Gascon or Provençal peasant ever thinks of the blast furnaces in Lorraine and the pits in northern France?

In West Germany, the lives of 50 million good Germans follow the rhythm of the beat of the Ruhr. Everything pertaining to the province of Rhineland-Westphalia is of interest to them. Yesterday, they rose up again against dismantling and decartelisation: today they are fired with enthusiasm for the reconcentration of heavy industry. The latest production figures are no mystery to them. What jubilation there was to greet the idea that, for some days now, no allied or interallied authority would be able to stop those blast furnaces in their production, production, production! ... There is a hint of Wagner about it all — it is another epic of the Niebelungen as they escape from their medieval forges, multiply by hundreds of thousands and invade the gigantic steelworks of our own day.

Slav contribution

Would you believe it? This territory — the most German of all Germanies — offered as an example of strength, work and tradition to its people who want to be the strongest, who pride themselves on being the most hard-working, who look to the past for its models of belief, hope and glory ... this region is 50 % Slav! Doubtless it would not be a good idea to say so there. This opulent Germania that rises above the Rhine, the triumphant Valkyrie so dear to the hearts of all Germans, would not want to know that she owes her strength to Slav manpower. It is true that this work force, which is more or less servile — and more rather than less — has been Germanised in the course of three or four generations. Hundreds of thousands of peasants, many more than in the case of France, came from Pomerania, Silesia and the banks of the Vistula to settle and raise families in the Ruhr, and then forgot their origins. Repudiated their origins would be more precise: Slavs are not liked in Germany. They never have been liked. They came because they were needed. They stayed because they were riveted to their mines, to their blast-furnaces, just as serfs used to be tied to the land. The most arduous, the most despised tasks were theirs. They held out. Their children avoided speaking their mother tongue. Their grand-children served the Third Reich, as was their duty.

These were, no doubt, the people who brought to the population of the black country its distinctive mentality, constituting a solid, docile, disciplined and grateful dough. This mixing together of races in a relatively small area, this rubbing together and moulding into shape of the immigrant population, has led to a type of Americanisation; the public authorities, the powerful families, the clergy and the trade union have all profited. There can be no doubt that conformity in the Ruhr can be compared only to its equivalent in the United States. They do not possess the blue-rinsed ladies' clubs yet, but perhaps they are not as necessary here. This people — the most typical of Germany — was inclined by nature to adapt to the paternalist pattern set by the big industrialists. If one needed some lapidary phrase to describe it, one could say that it has accepted its lot and sees no need to change it.

Good shepherds

The genius of a Thyssen, of a Krupp or of a Klöckner is precisely that they understand this and that they know how to be the good shepherds of this flock. They have bound their workers to the business so much that most of those that I met, having spent 10, 20 or 25 years in the same firm, could say to me that they had merely taken over from their fathers. The old-established employers of the Ruhr, the most typical of charitable employers, have spun around their workers a vast web which turned them if not into slaves, at least into dependants, or 'clients' in the Roman sense of the term. It is true that they did not wait for social pressures to oblige them to create everything that was necessary for the existence of their vassals, as was the case elsewhere. Crèches, housing estates, length of service bonuses, dormitories or showers, playing-fields and canteens, summer camps, allowances of various types, presents in kind: they invented everything and gave generously — and in good time — all those benefits that workers elsewhere were to obtain later on only by going on strike.

Today, all that the trade union has to do is to carry on what has become a well-established tradition. The bosses — at least those in heavy industry — have more or less disappeared. Limited-liability companies are run on the lines of co-management. At the heart of each firm, the works managers, appointed to the Supervisory Board (successor to the former Board of Directors) by representatives of the workers, carry on the policies which were inaugurated 50 years ago.

But now comes the best illustration of this argument: just as Alfred Krupp was coming out of prison, one of the journalists observed that a lot of changes had taken place since the end of the war. The word co-management was mentioned. The heir to the Villa Hügel smiled as he said: 'That's nothing new. My grandmother used to say: "When employers and workers work hand in hand, with one will and with the same purpose, then it is that work becomes prayer."'

You have to be a southern European to take that as a joke: Germans take it for gospel truth.

