

12-1-1949

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: A MID-WAY
ACCOUNT OF THE WESTERN WORLD. By
Hans Kohn. New York: The Macmillan Company,
1949.

J. Ben Stalvey

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.law.miami.edu/umlr>

Recommended Citation

J. Ben Stalvey, *THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: A MID-WAY ACCOUNT OF THE WESTERN WORLD*. By Hans Kohn. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949., 4 U. Miami L. Rev. 128 (1949)

Available at: <http://repository.law.miami.edu/umlr/vol4/iss1/23>

BOOK REVIEWS

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: A MID-WAY ACCOUNT OF THE WESTERN WORLD. By Hans Kohn. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949. Pp. ix, 242. \$2.75.

It is an extremely difficult, one might say presumptuous, undertaking for any individual to attempt to appraise the twentieth century. Yet, within the brief space of slightly more than two hundred pages of text, Hans Kohn has done an unusually commendable job of summarizing the most significant developments of the Western World in the first half of the century; at least as regards those subjects to which he addresses himself—nationalism and pacifism, racialism and imperialism, communism and fascism, individualism and collectivism, isolationism and world order.

Actually, a more apt title for this book might be "The Western World, 1848-1948" and a more apt subtitle might be "A Century of Retrogression." Certainly, although not accepting the Spenglerian analysis, Mr. Kohn paints a somewhat gloomy picture of the course pursued by peoples and governments in the Western World (and frequently in other areas of the globe) during the past hundred years. He describes the purpose and scope of the study as "the challenge to Western civilization which is not so much a challenge from without, though it has become increasingly so, but from within, a weakening of the very foundations on which Western civilization has been built." (Preface, p. ix). With qualification, Mr. Kohn holds out hope that the second half of this century may witness as great an advance in progress toward the achievement of the ideals envisioned a hundred years ago as the past half century has in the destruction of these ideals. "If resolve will turn into intelligent and courageous action, then the half-century ahead may realize some of the hopes for individual liberty and civilized peace which inspired the Western world in the nineteenth century. Its naive confidence, however, will not return; the years of mortal crisis have taught us much about the inhumanity of man and the vulnerability of civilization." (*Ibid.*)

At times the author appears to be the victim of a nostalgic longing for "the good old days that never were." It is easy for even the careful scholar, when perturbed, and justly so, over the contemporary scene, to develop the "heavenly city" complex in viewing the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One may legitimately question whether there actually existed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the "liberal humanitarianism" and "the dignity of the individual" to the extent often suggested. Certainly an Emerson, a Thoreau, a Walt Whitman in this country, viewing the scene a century ago,

could not point with pride to the achievement of these ideals. It should be noted, however, that the author demonstrates an awareness that the nineteenth century did not measure up to the ideals which induce his nostalgia. He makes it clear that "nationalism and socialism changed in the nineteenth century from liberal humanitarianism to aggressive exclusivism, from the emphasis on the dignity of the individual to that of the power of collectivities." (P. 7).

The general organization of this book is such as to make for easy reading. There is a development and continuity, both topically and chronologically, which, together with a smooth-flowing style of writing, make the subject-matter readily understandable to the casual reader as well as the specialist. The theme is developed under four main divisions. In the first division, designated "Disintegrating Forces in Nineteenth Century Civilization," the author discusses the questions of "Nationalism and the Open Society," "The Cult of Force," "The Dethronement of Reason," and "The Crisis of the Individual." The second division, which appears to this reviewer to have the least importance in a study of this type, is labeled "The Challenge of Tradition." The only apparent importance of an historical summary of pre-Hitler Germany and pre-Lenin Russia under the titles, respectively, "Germany: Prussianism and Romanticism" and "Russia: The Permanent Mission," is to demonstrate how a new type of authoritarian government could emerge in those countries in recent decades, in the "enlightened era."

"The Challenge of Old Myths and New Trends," treated under the third division, with chapter headings titled "Imperialism," "Racialism," "Fascism," "National Socialism," and "Communism," merely attempts to point up the factors which have intensified the problems of the twentieth century. Nothing new is presented on these much-discussed forces. But they are summarized succinctly, enabling the general reader to get a clear and largely objective picture of their nature and effect. The concluding section offers the one really hopeful analysis under the heading "Forces of Reintegration and Reaffirmation." Although not overly optimistic about the likelihood of an early recovery and application of these forces, Mr. Kohn sees the possible reintegration and reaffirmation being achieved only through "Democracy" and "Cooperation and Federation."

In view of the great variety of definitions of democracy and the loose way in which we are inclined to toss that word around, it is worthwhile to note Mr. Kohn's description of the term.

Democracy is a form of government based upon self-rule of the people and, in modern times, upon freely elected representative institutions and an executive responsible to the people. It is a way of life recognizing and protecting by the majesty of law the equal right of all individuals to life, liberty (including liberty of thought and expression), and the pursuit of happiness. It presupposes an attitude of tolerance, of patience and willingness to compromise, based upon respect for the freedom and the convictions of others.

. . . Its end is the recognition of each individual as an end in himself, not as material or a means for the purposes of the group or the progress of history. (P. 185)

Above all, it is the method of discussion, of open-minded critical inquiry, and of mutual regard and compromise that distinguishes democracy from its twentieth century caricature, the "new" or "true" manipulated democracy of the totalitarian mass states. Democracy presupposes the existence of opposition as a legitimate partner in the democratic process; it accepts a pluralistic view of values and associations, and it rejects any totalitarian or monolithic identification of the state with one party or with one dogma. But discussion and tolerance must always be held within the framework of the democratic faith, and that means the recognition of the fundamental values of individual liberty and of the freedom of the inquiring mind. Tolerance toward elements which deny the fundamental assumptions of democracy, and even its right to existence, would not only be theoretically inadmissible, but also practically most dangerous to the existence of democracy. (P. 192)

One cannot but wonder when reading the closing sentence of the immediately preceding quotation just how much Mr. Kohn has been influenced by recent efforts to suppress free speech by persons branded by the Un-American Activities Committee and others as members of the Communist Party or Communist sympathizers. Likewise, one cannot but wonder just how far the author would go in suppressing freedom of inquiry and expression by enemies, even avowed enemies, of what we choose to designate as democracy. We are reminded of the view expressed by Archibald MacLeish (in "Freedom to End Freedom," *Survey Graphic* [February, 1939], Vol. 28, pp. 117-119) that democratic government has the obligation to extend freedom of expression even to those who would, if they could, destroy freedom. And we hear the solemn pronouncement of the late Mr. Justice Holmes that, so long as it does not take the form of overt action, as long as it does not produce a "clear and present danger," freedom of expression is not to be curtailed even to those who advocate the violent overthrow of our institutions.

Mr. Kohn has a word of sane and solemn warning in his concluding pages for those who are convinced that even the beginnings of international cooperation are impossible as long as there exists in the world two such diametrically opposing ideologies as Soviet Communism (or, better, Stalinism) and western democracy.

Americans will have to learn that various civilizations and traditions can coexist even in this one world. The wealth of diversity is one of the great elements of history and progress. . . . For in the present stage there can be neither agreement nor must there be war. For some time Western mankind will have to live, without agreement and without war, side by side with a closely knit communist world. This demands strength, patience, and a long-range view, but there are no quick solutions, no short cuts, no panaceas. Peace in diversity is only possible under the reign of tolerance, of the "live and let live" of the pretotalitarian period. (P. 218 f.)

He is confident that "if the democracies remain united, strong, and vigilant, the totalitarians will lose their fanaticism" and that "with tact and tolerance, with an open mind and a helpful hand, with firmness and strength" the United States, "having learned the lessons of history, . . . can steer the ship of state and the ark of Western civilization through the dangerous waters of the unsettled period, which came as the result of the demoralization and devastation caused by warfare and totalitarian revolutions on an unprecedented scale, . . ."

No one can accuse Mr. Kohn of viewing the recent past or the immediate future through rose colored glasses. He is neither unduly pessimistic about the future nor naively optimistic. Perhaps, to use a greatly overworked term, he is "realistically optimistic." He most certainly makes it clear that the emergence of reintegration and reaffirmation in the second half of the twentieth century is dependent upon how well we in the more fortunately situated countries meet the challenge. While he favors most strongly a supplanting of present-day concepts of the mass mind by the return to individualism, his is not a selfish, isolationist type of individualism. He would establish instead the spirit of cooperation among individuals and nations. By this means alone, he is convinced, can the second half of the twentieth century "realize some of the hopes for individual liberty and civilized peace which inspired the Western world in the nineteenth century."

J. BEN STALVEY

PROFESSOR OF GOVERNMENT
UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

CASES AND MATERIALS ON LAW AND ACCOUNTING. By Donald Schapiro and Ralph Wienshienk. Brooklyn: The Foundation Press, Inc., 1949. Pp. 935. \$8.00.

THE law student without at least some knowledge of accounting vocabulary, principles and techniques finds himself at a disadvantage in the competition with his colleagues in many of the ordinary courses in the usual law school curriculum. For example—Corporations, and the other courses in the "business unit" group; Bills and Notes, and the allied subjects in the "commercial law" field; Trusts and Estates; and particularly the course for which accounting is more obviously a prerequisite than for any of the others: Taxation. Administratively, it is still not finally agreed whether it would be best (a) to require some accounting as a condition of entrance into law school, (b) to offer a minimum course in law school, or (c) simply to continue to overlook the difference in the preparation of the prospective law students while regarding it as unfortunate.

Cases and Materials on Law and Accounting is the outgrowth of