

REVIEW

Revolution and
Resignation:
Ernst Troeltsch's
Correspondence
1918-1923

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Troeltsch, Ernst (2020) *Briefe V (1918-1923)*. Herausgegeben von Friedrich Wilhelm Graf in Zusammenarbeit mit Harald Haury. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter. *Ernst Troeltsch Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Band 22.

Aber, Not und Liebe brechen Eisen.
(But necessity and love break iron)

—Troeltsch, 6.December 1922

Ernst Troeltsch is remembered primarily in the English-speaking world as one of the most famous Protestant theologians in Germany. He taught systematic theology at Heidelberg between 1894 and 1915, the year he moved to Berlin. There, he was a professor of philosophy and wrote primarily on various cultural issues. But after the war, he was also engaged in politics and for a number of years was the undersecretary for education in the early post-war government. This collection of letters is the final volume of Troeltsch's correspondence and covers the years between the end of the war in November 1918 and his untimely death in February 1923. This volume contains much about Troeltsch's philosophy of culture, his changing political beliefs, his academic duties, and about his colleagues, friends, and family. Together, these letters provide a sense of what it was like to be a professor in Berlin during the months of revolution and the years of deprivation. It reveals Troeltsch's struggle between faith and darkness; that is, between hope and resignation. This volume is valuable in that it not only provides an account of Troeltsch's ideas, but also helps to fill out the conception of Troeltsch not just as a theologian, but as a philosopher, a political thinker, and as a human being. As such, these letters inform us of what it was to live and work a century ago and how one particular person attempted to confront numerous crises.

Writing on November 11, 1918 just after the Kaiser abdicated, Ernst Troeltsch wrote to his former student and friend Gertrud von le Fort: "Thus, the end is here! Worse than I had thought in my most earnest estimation!" ("Also, das Ende ist da! Schlimmer als ich bei ernstester Einschätzung gedacht habe!") (p. 61). What Troeltsch could not have anticipated was that it would get much, much worse over the course of the next four years.

First, there was the political situation in Germany between November 1918 and February 1923. In that first letter

to le Fort, Troeltsch wrote about the abdication of the Kaiser, Prince Max von Baden's resignation as Chancellor, and about the chaos in the streets. He and others finally realized that they had been duped by the former government's propaganda and that the secret had finally been revealed. Most likely he spoke for many when he admitted that he was totally shaken (pp. 62-64). Writing to his English friend Baron von Hügel at the end of January 1920, Troeltsch was still rather pessimistic: he was fighting for reason and order during these "evil days" and he complained about illness and death (pp. 222-223). But he also did not have much hope that the current generation would live up to the moral and spiritual challenges and he warned of the continual plundering and the "pure anarchy" (pp. 98, 120). These problems caused him to be overly nervous, eternally uneasy, and to suffer psychologically (pp. 121, 155). Despite this, Troeltsch was not content to remain on the sidelines and he engaged in politics. Troeltsch was elected to the parliament in January 1919 and was appointed Undersecretary of Education. He complained that he was endlessly involved in speaking engagements, reading letters, and writing replies (p. 222). He admitted that he was not suited for that position: "I am only a simple teacher and no politician." ("Ich bin doch eben ein simpler Gelehrter u[nd] kein Politiker.") (p. 121). Yet, he continued in that political capacity until March 1921, and he wrote that he was now finished with politics and would concentrate on his scholarly work (p. 312). That included not only finishing his massive work *Historismus und seine Probleme* but also his numerous book reviews (pp. 353-455, 358, 367, 394, 407). And, he was beginning to plan the projected second volume.

Troeltsch was relieved that he was no longer Undersecretary and later in June 1922 he wrote that no one wants anything from someone who lacks influence (p. 400). Nonetheless, he was still overworked. He often turned down invitations to lecture or to contribute to various editions. He complained often of being overburdened and to feeling "half-dead" (pp. 100, 178, 206, 210, 252, 284, 321, 323, 424, 435, 450). That did not hinder him from being elected Deacon of the philosophical faculty at Berlin in August 1922. He understood that it would be strenuous, but he also knew it would improve his finances. Unfortunately, he underestimated the burden of being in charge of 80 professors and 5,000 students (pp. 407, 445). The burden of being Undersecretary and then Deacon were not the only burdens. His wife was often unwell and always nervous.

Troeltsch had married Marta Fick in 1901 and their marriage was mostly a happy one. However, it was clouded because of Marta's nervous temperament and frequent bouts of illness as well as his own precarious physical health. Their lives seemed to have improved after 1913 when their son Ernst Eberhard was born; however, that period was short-lived. Whatever nervousness Marta had experienced before the November 1918 revolution, the situation in Berlin served to magnify it. Marta's letters are not included in this collection but they are cited in the introduction. Writing to le Fort in mid-January 1919, she complained about the gun battles raging in the street just below their windows (pp. 3, 6). Troeltsch wrote to le Ford in early March and announced that they had a "household catastrophe"—not only was the cook hospitalized because of a severe case of the flu, but their son had an infection in one ear. More disturbing was that Marta was suffering from chronic sinusitis (p. 124). In a December letter to one of his sisters Troeltsch indicated that everyone was in relatively good health but their house lacked sufficient heating (p. 211). At the end of January 1920, Troeltsch wrote to Baron von Hügel and admitted that they were having to make do with old clothes and were often going hungry (p. 222). But by March things appeared to have improved—both Marta and the son were in good health (p. 245). It seems that Troeltsch began to make excuses for Marta: in an April letter to le Fort, he noted that since she had no time, he was writing. He mentioned that they had no cook and complained that the household suffered from continual nervousness (pp. 256-257). Troeltsch continued to have financial problems: in August he thanked von Hügel for his generosity, but in November he wrote to his friend Paul Wernle that their financial situation was terrible (pp. 330, 345). In a letter to le Fort from April 1922, Troeltsch was far more forthcoming about the problems with his wife's health. He reported that she was ill the entire year—she felt weak and was easily tired. In fact, she was unable to do much of anything. Her physician came and was able to calm her some but was unable to do much. In October she suffered even more debilitating attacks so Troeltsch chose another doctor who promptly performed a two-hour operation. The doctor later explained that if he had waited even a half an hour, it would have been too late and she would have died. Marta then spent almost a quarter of the year in a clinic suffering from inflamma-

tion of the veins and thrombosis; and she was not released until eight days before Christmas. She was still unable to walk but was beginning to recover. Troeltsch sent Marta and their son north to her relatives in order to rest and recuperate. They did not return to Berlin until April. During their absence, Troeltsch was again forced to take care of the household as well as doing his academic and political work (pp. 368-369). In June, he wrote to von Hügel and recounted Marta's health issues and around the same time he wrote to le Fort. There, Troeltsch complained that the servant girl had stolen from them and then disappeared. And, he noted that many girls had chosen to emigrate and if they did return, they were filled with revolutionary thoughts and did not want to work. He added that shortly after Marta and the boy returned from the north, she suffered another illness. This time it affected her kidneys and she was still ill (p. 393). Troeltsch sent von Hügel another letter in October and thanked him for sending twenty-four English Pounds. Because of the high rate of inflation, he needed it. Yet, not everything was bad; Troeltsch was proud of his son and he sought refuge where he could. When he found time to escape Berlin, he would head south to his home area in Bavaria and would often find comfort along the shores of some of the area's numerous lakes. There, he would swim, boat, and walk, which help bring strength to his body and some peace to his mind (pp. 333-338, 405-406, 409, 411). But what he was really looking forward to was his trip to Great Britain. Von Hügel had arranged for Troeltsch to travel in March of 1923 and to give lectures in London, Oxford, and Edinburgh (pp. 405-408, 413, 434). In an early December 1922 letter to von Hügel, Troeltsch noted that he was generally in good health and as was his family. He was also pleased that his *Historismus* book was in print and that fifty copies had already been sent to colleagues, friends, and scholars (pp. 420-422, 430, 448). He wrote again how he was working on his lectures and was concerned that the translations were going to be too difficult for von Hügel—not because of any problems with von Hügel's perfect German but that Troeltsch's nuances would be hard to convey. Troeltsch indicated that he was going to spend a few days in January resting up and was eagerly looking forward to meeting von Hügel after an almost twenty-year gap. However, on January 13, 1923, he contracted the flu and had to cancel his lectures and then he suffered a heart attack. However, he believed that he would recover and he had his assistant send a letter dated January 23 to von Hügel. In it, Gertrud Jung conveyed Troeltsch's desire to give the lectures and especially, to see him again. Jung also suggested that Troeltsch was convinced that he would regain his health no later than mid-February and that he would be able to make his British trip (pp. 466, 468). Unfortunately, he suffered an inflammation of the lungs and he died on February 1, 1923.

During the years 1919 and 1923, Troeltsch had endured much and suffered more. First, there was the revolution which was followed by on-going political unrest. Then there was the Kapp Putsch in March 1920 which was followed by Max Weber's death in June. There were the many months of rapid inflation and Walther Rathenau's assassination in June 1922. Despite all this, Troeltsch insisted that he still had hope, because "without it one cannot live" (p. 252). But in the end, misery and darkness overcame hope and light. Need and love may break iron, but it was fate which finally broke Troeltsch.

This volume of letters provides a portrait of Troeltsch in his public and private life and it helps us to understand why Troeltsch was regarded so highly during his life. If one wants an even fuller portrait, one can recommend the other four volumes of correspondence or each of the already published volumes in the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. The best biography remains the one written by Walther Köhler. Although it was published in 1941, Köhler was one of Troeltsch's students and shared much of his theological and philosophical outlook. Hans-Georg Drescher's biography is more recent and has been translated into English. However, Drescher approached Troeltsch from the historian's point of view, just as Köhler had done from the theologian's point of view. Thus, what is lacking is a fuller account of Troeltsch's social-philosophical writings. Moreover, we still await the Troeltsch biography which will do justice to the theologian-philosopher-sociologist-political thinker.

NOTES

- 1 Troeltsch 2020: 443. Ernst Troeltsch's concluding words in a letter to the English theologian and community organizer Arthur Wilford Bonsey. Bonsey had studied with Troeltsch at Heidelberg in 1912-1913.
- 2 The editors of this volume pointed out in one of the hundreds of informative footnotes that during the period between the end of June 1922 and January 1923 the Pound went from being worth 56,000 Marks to being worth 950,000 Marks! The editors' point about the tremendous inflation is well-taken, but they overlooked the fact that in this particular instance that the rate of exchange was actually to Troeltsch's benefit. Troeltsch 2020: 425 and note 2.
- 3 Von Hügel had spent several days in conversations with Troeltsch in Heidelberg during a 1902 trip through Europe.
- 4 *My Ernst Troeltsch and the Spirit of Modern Culture* provides a critical examination of many of Troeltsch's cultural issues. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021. (*Troeltsch-Studien*. N.S. 6).

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