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Mann, Thomas

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Mann, *Thomas*

Novelist and essayist

Born 06 June 1875 in Lübeck, Germany

Died 12 August 1955 in Zürich, Switzerland

In contrast to his brother Heinrich Mann, Thomas Mann shared the widespread support of the war by the literary and academic elites. He even defended its atrocities as part of a defense of German culture, and demonstrated in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* how patriotism, nationalism, and conservatism were constitutive for German society.

Table of Contents

[1 Position on the First World War](#)

[2 Publications](#)

[3 Conclusion](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Position on the First World War

During the war years, Thomas Mann (1875-1955) took political and aesthetic positions that were diametrically opposed to those of his brother, [Heinrich Mann \(1871-1950\)](#). From the beginning, Thomas Mann justified, praised and celebrated the war, and repeatedly focused on the special condition of the German psyche which, in his view, explained the German readiness for war as well as his own intellectual background. In November 1914, he published his *Gedanken im Kriege* ("Thoughts in War"), followed in 1915 by *Frederick the Great and the Coalition*, and shortly thereafter by *Gedanken zum Kriege* ("Thoughts about War").

Publications

The basic concepts of these early texts (which led to a long and lasting period of estrangement between the brothers, who had until then entertained a close artistic relationship) are summed up in a very lengthy, and almost obsessively defensive essay titled *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* ("Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man"), published in October 1918. "Thoughts in War" appeared only a few weeks after the "Manifest of the Ninety-Three", in which leading German literary and academic representatives addressed the international "world of culture" ("*Kulturwelt*") and tried to [justify the violation of Belgian sovereignty](#) by advancing German troops, as well as the brutal [massacre](#) and retaliation against alleged partisans, and the burning of the famous university library of Leuven. Explicitly, they defended German militarism as an indispensable guarantor of culture.

In his own text, Thomas Mann, who had not signed this manifest, went even further by 1) praising the war as a purifying and necessary experience, and 2) by claiming that the German position was the reflection and defense of a higher culture. According to Mann, Germans had to defend themselves against a shallow Western civilization, which stood for "reason, enlightenment, moderation, moralization, skepticism, dissolution – and mind" as well as affluence and acquiescence, while German cultural values were concerned with "a certain organization of the world." War is thus celebrated by Mann as a highly welcome departure from the lures of civilizational affluence, a return to mystical life values, and a preservation of national characteristics.^[1]

The scope of the "Reflections" is even broader, while continuing to follow the same ideological goals. Thomas Mann emphasizes the special geographical situation held by Germany, which did not share "Western" values, the tradition of Protestantism (with its religious and political connotations) and, finally, German cultural traditions, especially in [music](#) and philosophy, for example Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Richard Wagner (1813-1883). As a "spiritual people", Mann considered Germans to be apolitical or even anti-political, which is also how he self-identified. According to Mann, this made Germans conservative proponents of monarchy, which Mann argued, included many freedoms in its modern form.

Mann vehemently attacked the concept of the so-called "*Zivilisationsliterat*", namely, a proponent of literature advocating progressive or democratic values, as an unpatriotic or anti-German concept. This was because it betrayed the very foundations of truly German [art](#). Thomas Mann referred to Heinrich Mann's essay entitled *Zola* throughout, quoting his brother consistently without explicitly mentioning his name. Thomas Mann also critiqued his brother's novel *Der Untertan* and calls it a "distorted portrayal without a realistic base" ("*ein Zerrbild ohne Wirklichkeitsgrund*").^[2]

Conclusion

Thomas Mann's essay *Betrachtungen* was published in October 1918, and influenced the positions

of the so-called “conservative revolution” during the early years of the Weimar Republic. While the author ultimately changed some of his views, including those on war and monarchy, most of his philosophical and aesthetic concepts had an impact that carried far beyond the war years.

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Section Editor: [Frederik Schulze](#)

Notes

1. ↑ Mann, Thomas: Gedanken im Kriege, in: Thomas Mann. Essays, volume 2, Frankfurt 2002, pp. 27-54.
2. ↑ Mann, Thomas: Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen, Frankfurt 2009, p. 643.

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