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“Intelligentsia” from the German “Intelligenz”? A Note

The word “intelligentsia,” according to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, entered the English vocabulary in 1920. Its source was undoubtedly Russian, where it first became current in the early 1860s and a decade later acquired the status of a household word. The Russian etymology of “intelligentsia” has long been a subject of controversy. The question recently acquired additional interest when a young American scholar, Mr. Alan Pollard, demonstrated that the novelist P. D. Boborykin, who liked to take credit for introducing the word into Russian, had no right to the claim.¹ Without going into this complicated matter, I should like to call attention to evidence indicating that the German word *Intelligenz* was used as early as 1849 to describe the same phenomenon as “intelligentsia,” namely, a group distinguished from the rest of society by its education and “progressive” attitude. The fact that this usage antedates the Russian by more than a decade suggests that *die Intelligenz* may have been the direct inspiration for the Russian concept.

In February 1849 the Austrian and German parliaments, convoked during the revolution that had broken out the previous spring, had on their agenda drafts of constitutional projects for their respective countries. In Austria these discussions took place within the Constitutional Committee which met at Kremsier; in Germany they came before the plenary session of the National Assembly held in Frankfurt. In both instances the sharpest controversy was aroused by the question of the franchise. The radical deputies demanded that the constitution institute the universal vote. The conservatives preferred to weigh the vote in favor of the cities and the educated classes, whom they viewed as carriers of enlightenment and progress—or, as they put it, of *Intelligenz*. In the course of these discussions, *Intelligenz* imperceptibly acquired a double meaning to denote not only a superior quality of the mind but also the groups of the population characterized by it.

The Austrian usage was first noted by Louis Namier in 1944.² Indeed, in the protocols of the Constitutional Committee of the Austrian Parliament,

1. Alan P. Pollard, “The Russian Intelligentsia: The Mind of Russia,” *California Slavic Studies*, 3 (1964): 1–32.

2. L. B. Namier, *1848: The Revolution of the Intellectuals* (London, 1944), p. 22.

under February 11, 1849, the word *Intelligenz* appears a dozen or so times, mainly in the speeches of conservative members, to refer to those qualities of culture and liberalism which in their opinion the urban population possessed and the rural one did not. In all but one case, however, the word as here employed meant “intelligence,” not “intelligentsia.” Only in the remarks of Deputy Lasser can one detect a shift toward the latter meaning:

I seek democracy in the rule of the rational will of the majority, and for this reason I desire that intelligence [*die Intelligenz*] should be able to count on being elected to the Reichstag. When Leitomischl has recently elected as its Deputy a member of the intelligentsia [*eine Intelligenz*] then this makes me happy for Bohemia. . . . In Upper Silesia, by contrast, instead of [the lawyer, Dr. Alois] Fischer, a peasant was sent to the Reichstag.³

Here the contrast between “a peasant” and “*eine Intelligenz*”—meaning a professional man—clearly indicates that the latter term is to be rendered as “intelligentsia.”

It is, however, in the debates held in Frankfurt six days later (February 17, 1849) that the word *Intelligenz* was unmistakably used in the modern sense. The issue was raised by a leading constitutional monarchist, Frederick Bassermann, a deputy from Mannstein. Arguing against radical deputies who extolled “labor” and “the people” but identified them exclusively with those engaged in manual work, Bassermann insisted that professional men, business people, and intellectuals—in effect, the whole middle class—also had a right to be counted as workers and to be included in the *Volk*. Why, he asked, should industrialists, inventors, civil servants, scholars, and artists be excluded from the ranks of those who labor? And on what grounds should the giants whose achievement was Germany’s glory—the priest Herder, the minister Goethe, the professor Schiller—be denied membership of the German *Volk*? Here were the very leaders in the fight for freedom, and this fact ought to be given due weight in the electoral law:

There will have to be those who carry forward the banner of intelligence and provide leadership, and there will always remain a mass which instead of leading itself will have to follow the leaders. And this is the reason, gentlemen, why I believe that they who appeal to the lower orders saying that the more intelligent, the upper orders, are natural enemies which the lower orders instead of following should fight for life and death—they commit the foulest crime against the future of the Fatherland. . . .⁴

3. Anton Springer, ed., *Protokolle des Verfassungs-Ausschusses im Österreichischen Reichstage, 1848–1849* (Leipzig, 1885), p. 178.

4. Franz Wigard, ed., *Stenographischer Bericht über die Verhandlungen der deutschen constituirenden Nationalversammlung zu Frankfurt am Main*, vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main, 1849), fasc. 172, p. 5221.

Bassermann's identification of intelligence with the middle classes was challenged by Carl Vogt, a radical academic who professed disdain for his own kind:

Gentlemen, we were told that in every movement the masses must be preceded by the intelligentsia. One must trust this intelligentsia: the post-1813 liberation succeeded because the intelligentsia had marched ahead of the masses. But of the masses which followed, bayonets and clubs in their hands, of them nothing was said! It is true, gentlemen, one does need the intelligentsia to lead the masses; but one also needs the masses to fashion the intelligentsia, to infuse the intelligentsia with the strength it needs to march forward. When you have no masses behind you, you can sit, deliberate, orate, and discuss, but for all your intelligence and wisdom nothing will come of it. Every day brings proof of this. You must have the masses because in them inheres the force; and when you do not attract them to yourself, when you push them away, as you are doing in your electoral law, then all your intelligence will bear no fruit. Gentlemen! We were told that the liberation of the people succeeded in 1813 because one had confidence in this intelligentsia and the leaders. Yes, one had this confidence—and it was shamefully betrayed! What followed those trusting years from 1813 to 1815? Was it not 1817–1830, when mistrust had to grow because it was sown from above downward and precisely by that intelligentsia which one had previously trusted? You complain of the mistrust, gentlemen, which now too is seething. It is precisely because the people see that even in March of this year [*sic!*] they had placed too much confidence in the intelligentsia [*die Intelligenzen*] and that this intelligentsia [*diese Intelligenzen*] now wants to push them aside and leave them in the lurch—this is the reason the mistrust emerges and grows! This is why the people can have no confidence in your intelligentsia which you praise so much and which probably is so shortsighted it cannot even perceive the cause of this mistrust.⁵

The conditions under which these debates took place suggest why *Intelligenz* acquired in addition to the sense of "intelligence" also that of "intelligentsia," how the singular *Intelligenz* became the plural *Intelligenzen*. In debates over the franchise in which some wanted preferential treatment to be accorded to "intelligence," those who were to receive this preferential treatment naturally became the "class of intelligence." The quality of intelligence made its bearers members of the intelligentsia just as work makes men into workers, or thinking into thinkers. The word "intellectual," which had a fine French lineage, would not serve for this purpose because it described

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 5256–57. Unless otherwise noted, the words here translated, according to their meaning, as "intelligence" and "intelligentsia" appear in the German text as *die Intelligenzen*.

those given to passive study and reflection, whereas the term needed had to connote that dynamic social element which by virtue of superior understanding personified historic progress. It is also worth noting that both in Austria and Germany the concept of an "intelligentsia" was first put into circulation by the conservatives and rather scornfully rejected by the radicals. Soon the attitudes of the two groups toward this concept would be reversed.