

December 17, 1932

The Inquisition of Einstein

“WHAT'S THIS, AN INQUISITION?”

After being catechized like a schoolboy for forty-five minutes, the quiet, mild-mannered, middle-aged man, who is widely accepted as the greatest living scientist, had begun to lose some of his habitual kindly poise.

And when his inquisitor asked: “Are you a Communist or an anarchist?” his face flushed, the bewildered expression in his dark brown eyes changed to anger, and he reached for his hat and coat, bringing the catechism to a close with the indignant counter-question quoted above.

The interview thus abruptly terminated took place in the United States consulate in Berlin, between our Consul-General there and Prof. Albert Einstein, eminent author of the theory of relativity, who on a previous visit to America was honored with the freedom of New York City. The occasion of the inquisition was the Professor's application for a visa—a formality attended to without any hitch or embarrassment when he visited us before.

But in the meantime the Woman Patriot Corporation, under the leadership of Mrs. Randolph Frothingham of Brookline, Massachusetts, had

awakened to its responsibilities and petitioned our State Department to exclude Professor Einstein as an undesirable alien—a Communist. And the State Department had forwarded this petition to our consulates in Europe.

Let us quote more fully the Professor's indignant outbreak in the Berlin consulate, as reported by the Associated Press:

“What's this, an inquisition? I don't propose to answer such silly questions.

“I didn't ask to go to America. Your countrymen invited me, yes, begged me. If I am to enter your country as a suspect, I don't want to go at all. If you don't want to give me a visa, please say so, then I'll know where I stand. But don't ask me humiliating questions.”

PROFESSOR EINSTEIN and his wife left the consulate prepared to abandon forever their journey to America, altho he had been sent for to fill a life post as head of the school of mathematics in the new Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton.

The next day, however, the visa was granted, the Einsteins were deluged with cables from America deploring the incident, and their original plans for the American journey were resumed.

But the grilling seems to have been even more upsetting to the American public than it was to Professor Einstein.

He, his sense of humor quickly restored, pictured himself as a monster “devouring capitalists as the Minotaur devoured the maidens of Crete,” confessed to “opposing all wars, even the inevitable conflict with one's wife,” and conceded that our patriotic citizenesses should remain watchful, for is it not true that “the capitol of mighty Rome was at one time saved by the cackling of her faithful geese”?

But Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler, President of Columbia University, declares himself, as an American, “humiliated and dis-



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Yet the visit of the Einsteins so alarmed the Woman Patriot Corporation that it asked our Government to deny them admittance.

graced by the action of the State Department." And Heywood Broun, in the New York *World-Telegram*, thinks the episode "marks a new all-time low for official stupidity." The Philadelphia *Record* deplores this "asinine inquisition," and the Hartford *Courant* says our officialdom has acted in a manner "so churlish as to give sensible citizens reason for deep humiliation."

NEVERTHELESS, an Associated Press dispatch from Washington informs us, our official procedure in the Einstein case was technically correct:

"The action taken by the State Department, it was explained, was to familiarize American consuls abroad with the accusations lodged against the German professor for their own information in event he should apply at any of the consular offices in Europe for a visa. State Department officials said this was the customary procedure in a case of this kind, and that the responsibility of granting a visa under the immigration law rests entirely with the American consular officials themselves."

But "this is bureaucracy frozen stiff in its own formalism, left without a trace of the emollient of civilized international amenities," declares the *Springfield Republican*:

"The technical correctness of the State Department's handling of the protest of the Woman Patriot Corporation may be conceded. But technical correctness means that any distinguished foreigner, however unimpeachable, can be subjected to the discourtesies of an official inquisition as to his alleged sympathy with Communism or Anarchy or free love if some American fanatic or clown files with the State Department an allegation that the expected visitor is hostile to our institutions. The most nutty among us, by filing a protest, can force the consul-general in London to ask the Archbishop of Canterbury, before granting him a visa for an American tour, if he is a Red and if he favors the forcible overthrow of established Governments, particularly the Government of the United States. That's the logic of this technical correctness of which our State Department is a starched devotee.

"Technical correctness be blown! Let's have a little lubricant in our diplomatic machine."