The berghof as a symbol of decadence in european society prior to world war i

The International Sanatorium Berghof is the setting where the entire story in Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain takes place. Here, high in the Swiss Alps, the sanatorium houses a broad representation of medically ill Europeans from different countries. This setting allowed Thomas Mann to use the Berghof as a microcosm of European culture and its societally diseased condition that would explode in full transparence with the outbreak of World War I.

Mann presents different aspects of national and civilizational decay through an assortment of patients at the Berghof, the fact that they are sick thus requiring a stay and care at the sanatorium, and their own personal and philosophical peculiarities. These combinations overlap and complement each other to give a panorama of Europe's insidious and spreading pre-World War I decline.

The main character of Magic Mountain is a young German man named Hans Castorp. He goes to the Berghof for a 3-week visit of his cousin Joachim, who has been a patient there for months, and ends up staying. Mann gives an indication that a central theme of Magic Mountain is illness when he writes about Castorp's cousin Joachim:

" Joachim Ziemessen was ill-not ill like Hans Castorp, but in all seriousness, critically." (Page 36)

Near the end of chapter four in the section named " The Thermometer," Castorp realizes that he has come down with a cold and slight fever.

“ Hans Castorp said carelessly that he had a little fever-really minimal: 99. 6” (page 171)

In the same chapter, both Castorp and Joachim are given a health exam by Hofrat Behrens, the head doctor of the Berghof. After examining Castorp he tells him regarding the air at the Berghof: “ It’s good for the disease; it begins by speeding it up, in that it revolutionizes the whole body; it brings the latent weakness to the surface and makes it break.” (Pages 181, 182)

Behrens comment is indicative of metastasizing social pathologies in European society that World War I would fully expose, bringing in their wake even more virulent political and social diseases such as Bolshevism in Russia and fascism, notably in Germany, Italy and Spain.

Interestingly, the Berghof sanatorium is located in the Swiss Alps and not in Germany or another Alpine country. Switzerland pursued a policy of armed neutrality and maintained her neutrality throughout both World Wars I and II. It was therefore an appropriate location as a neutral, objective laboratory to house and examine Europe’s prewar cultural and social malaise.

The Berghof was also a microcosm for the fine living that much of European society enjoyed while the continent was slouching towards total war. An example of its great wealth and luxury contrasted with terminal decline, is the meals that Castorp receives after he realizes he will be at the sanatorium indefinitely: “ Even on weekdays this was sumptuous meal. Hans Castorp banqueted like the tailor’s son in the fairy-story.” (Page 190)

The sanatorium contained a cross-section of Europeans, indicating the civilizational deterioration across European society: A Russian couple that flaunts accepted norms without shame; an Austrian noble in an advanced state of disease, much like the Austro-Hungarian empire he represents; a Jewish-Polish intellectual; an Italian man of letters; a Dutchman living on the island of Java, and the central German character, along with his diseased cousin, among others in the novel.

It begs the question why? Why did a culture and civilization at the zenith of its achievement, influence and power choose to commit collective suicide beginning with the cataclysm of World War I? The reasons, of course, for a subject of such breadth and consequence are numerous and varied, but it must be asked if the extended period of European peace and prosperity contributed to the disaster of 1914.

For 100 years, since the end of the Treaties of Paris of 1814 and 1815 which ended the Napoleonic Wars, Europe had avoided a continental war. Peace and prosperity, achievement and expansion, discovery and progress, had all been the dividends of this extended peace. Europe had had revolutions, such as in 1848, and localized conflicts between 1815 and 1914 but nothing had ruptured continental concord. Several European generations had thus avoided the horrors of war until the generation of 1914 eagerly and excitedly marched off to it.

Mann does not provide answers to these questions in Magic Mountain. While he is not a diagnostician of the disease, he is an expert observer, analyst and artistic chronicler of it, and the Berghof is his inspection shop. Try as they

might, the patients and residents of the magic mountain can only seem to degenerate, both physically and in spirit, as if the mountain will not release them once it has them. Some patients seem in fact to surrender to their inexorable permanence at the mountain and stop seeking a release, much as most of Europe did not seek a way out of the cultural malady that led to the nationalist psychosis of World War I.

“ The center cannot hold,” wrote poet William Butler Yeats in his poem published in 1919, “ The Second Coming.” While Yeats ’poem allegorically described postwar Europe, Thomas Mann’s novel does so of prewar Europe, demonstrating through the eyepiece of the Berghof, the cultural decline that could not prevent, and would in fact lead to global, industrial war.