

The Last of Wars and the First of Peace

al-Balagh, 3 May 1945

The whole world has become, in these days, a vast cinema house, screening its own tremendous events in rapid, fleeting succession, allowing the audience no time to think, no time to reflect, let alone any explanation or commentary. On Saturday evening, it was announced that Himmler was offering the British and Americans Germany's unconditional surrender, and that they would accept no such offer unless it was extended to Russia too, and that they were giving Germany until Tuesday evening to accept this ultimatum.

On Sunday morning, it was announced that Mussolini and his own companions had been captured while attempting to flee toward Switzerland; on Monday morning, it was announced that Mussolini had been killed, along with the details of his own death, and the details of the horrific mutilation the crowd inflicted on his corpse in one of Milan's public squares. On Tuesday morning, the legend of Hitler's own death was announced, followed immediately by disagreement over how he had died: Himmler and some of his own associates said Hitler had died of a cerebral haemorrhage, while Hitler's own successor told the German people, and the world, that Hitler had died fighting, killed in defence of his own people.

And while the world was still reflecting, in equally fleeting fashion, on these fleeting events — wanting to draw some lesson from the shameful, hideous end that closed Mussolini's own life, wanting first to confirm Hitler's own death, and second the cause of it, wanting to know when the war's end would finally be announced, or when Germany's surrender would be complete — while all these thoughts still occupied the world, evening fell yesterday, and with it came yet another piece of news, no less grave, no less significant than all the others, one that turned people's thoughts to nothing else, and their reflection to nothing but its own grave consequences, near and far.

It was announced yesterday that the German armies fighting in northern Italy, and in part of Austrian territory, had surrendered unconditionally to Field Marshal Alexander, Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean theatre. People learned that negotiations for this

surrender had been proceeding, behind closed doors, for days already, and had concluded at midday last Sunday — the very same moment Mussolini's own killing, and Himmler's own surrender offer, were occupying people's minds.

People learned, too, that fighting had ceased on this front at midday yesterday, Wednesday, and heard, or read, Field Marshal Alexander's own congratulations to his soldiers, who had liberated Italy after a long, gruelling struggle, and who had just received the surrender of the largest German army to surrender unconditionally so far — a surrendering army numbering a full million soldiers, who laid down their arms, handed over their men and their equipment, and submitted entirely to the command of the victorious high command in this theatre.

I do not know whether people still recall, or whether events have made them forget, that the Allies first began liberating Italy at the beginning of September 1943, that they met with tremendous horrors in that liberation, suffered grievous losses in it, and faced a great many difficulties arising from nature, from politics, and from the necessities of war itself — and that they have now completed the liberation of the whole of Italy, or, to put it more accurately, the liberation of the entire Mediterranean. Yesterday's surrender is, then, simply the natural conclusion of this long, gruelling campaign, which began at El Alamein.

What is certain is that this surrender is a decisive step in the history of this war — indeed, a decisive step in the history of the new world itself; it has now become an easy matter for the victorious armies in Italy to advance without obstacle, until they join the armies fighting within Germany itself. Who knows — they may not even reach Germany before final surrender itself becomes an established fact.

The most important lessons this tremendous victory stirs in the heart are two. The first is that steadfastness, resolute determination, and genuine self-confidence are qualities that, however complex the problems facing them, will always overcome them, triumph over them, and prevail against them. How many problems and difficulties arose and grew complex before the Allied commanders in Africa, Sicily, Italy, Greece, and the islands of the Mediterranean! At certain moments, these problems and difficulties reached a point genuinely capable of stirring despair in the heart, forcing Mr. Churchill himself to avoid answering questions about them in the House of Commons. And yet the Allied statesmen and commanders overcame these problems, worked their way through these

trials, and secured, yesterday, this tremendous victory — because they never faltered, never weakened, never grew agitated, never hesitated, and because they trusted themselves, and trusted the cause they were fighting for.

The second lesson is that this tremendous victory has finally and permanently removed the war from the Mediterranean region — this region now has every right to breathe, and to breathe in an atmosphere possessing some real measure of freedom, now that everything on this front has settled. Nothing remains, for the peoples who have emerged from the war's own tumult, but to resume their own lives — to mend what was corrupted, straighten what was bent, and heal whatever wounds they suffered. This tremendous victory was magnificently captured in the order Field Marshal Alexander issued to his own troops yesterday — one entirely capable of filling the victors' own hearts with pride and wonder, and overwhelming them with that same intoxication which throws a victor off his own balance for a time.

The truth is that the victors have every right to rejoice in the victory they have achieved, and are right to rejoice. But it is equally incumbent upon these rejoicing victors — having now crushed their enemy — to win another war as well, one whose own outward signs go unseen, and whose weapons are neither of land, nor sea, nor air, but a war fought between the soul and its own inclinations. Rejoicing at victory is a right; rejoicing at victory is a good thing — but the victor must never let this rejoicing distract him from the future, and whatever events it still conceals, nor let himself be carried away by rejoicing until it ends in arrogance. The middle course is always the best course, as the old human proverb has it, and moderation is the very essence of virtue. Perhaps yesterday's victory, and whatever further victories follow it today, tomorrow, and the day after — victories that will force this war to lay down its own burdens at last — will serve as a prelude to the victors' own triumph over themselves, once their triumph over their enemy is complete; a prelude, too, to a new world built on moderation rather than excess, on restraint rather than extravagance and unruliness, on fairness rather than injustice and arrogance.

And while these events were unfolding in the Old World, filling the whole earth and occupying every mind, other events were unfolding in the New World too, equally wishing to fill the earth and occupy every mind — yet never quite managing to achieve what they wished. These are the events that occupied the conferees at San Francisco these past few

days. Is it any wonder San Francisco's own events failed to command the same share of people's attention that Europe's events commanded? The war at San Francisco is a war of words, no more and no less; the clashes at San Francisco are clashes of opinion, no more and no less — yet they remain, all the same, well capable of depicting the very directions that will govern the shaping of the new world.

The new world, it seems, is a hope that will be fulfilled to exactly the degree hopes are ever fulfilled in this world — which is to say, gradually, bit by bit, little by little. This also means the old world's own institutions will not collapse all at once, but will grow unsettled — indeed, have already begun growing unsettled — then weaken and decay, then collapse, one part here, another part there, the world remaining in a constant state of demolition and reconstruction, until people look up one day to find everything around them changed, and find themselves, gently and gradually, pushed into a new world — arriving at it almost without realizing, or scarcely realizing, they had done so at all.

The clearest proof of this is that the events occupying the conferees at San Francisco were themselves a struggle between a new order most conferees did not actually want, and an old order they remained eager to preserve. The old order prevailed — though it should not be said the new order was defeated, for it was not defeated; it simply did not win, but managed, all the same, to impose itself upon world thinking. And that, in itself, is a first kind of victory. The conferees disagreed over the conference's own presidency: should it belong to the foreign minister of the country hosting the conference, as tradition dictates, or should it rotate among the heads of the great delegations? Tradition suffered half a defeat, and the new order won half a victory: the conference's own presidency became something rotated among the delegation heads, while the American Secretary of State retained the chairmanship of two significant committees.

The conferees then disagreed over inviting Argentina to the conference. The advocates of the new order — the Russians and their closest allies — rejected this invitation, since Argentina had aided the enemy, forcing the Allies to sever diplomatic relations with her, and had changed her own stance only once Allied victory had become self-evident, and the Allies had already begun preparing to convene this very conference. But the champions of the old order preferred to avoid conflict, satisfied American solidarity instead, and expected good to come of cooperating with Argentina — so they invited her to the conference,

and had their own way.

The conferees also disagreed over labour representation at this conference: Molotov called for it, while others opposed him, and our own representative appears to have been the voice of the opposition. This is, in truth, a genuinely significant issue: Molotov could not afford to neglect it, and his opponents could not afford to accept it, since labour is the very foundation of Russia's own official system, and undoubtedly the foundation of her war effort too. Had Molotov succeeded in what he wanted, his success would have amounted to formal recognition of exactly the kind of political entity capital fears most deeply, and one moderate democracies fear just as deeply — so Molotov's defeat was, in a sense, inevitable. It seems certain he raised the issue fully confident he would lose it, but raised it anyway, since raising it was itself a kind of gain.

The conferees disagreed, too, over the Polish problem, which refuses to be solved, and grows only more difficult and complex with each passing day: should the Lublin government be invited, or not? Russia said yes, and insisted upon it emphatically; the others said no, and refused just as emphatically — and the matter did not end there. No one knows when, or how, it will end.

The Polish matter grows still more complex with reports that the Lublin government is persecuting her own opponents within Poland herself, in a manner described in the British House of Commons as savage and violent — some killed, others made to disappear — while the British government finds itself unable to confirm any of this, since it cannot ask the Lublin government directly, having never recognized it, and since asking the Russian government instead brings no answer at all.

And so we look, and see two magnificent scenes before us, though they differ from one another as sharply as scenes can differ. The first is the scene of war herself, a beast grown weak and faltering, her own claws clipped, her own end hastening toward her, on the verge of collapsing from sheer exhaustion, with the Allies on the verge of finishing her off entirely — and the world looks on, happy, content, and joyful, because fathers will return to their children, children will return to their mothers, husbands will return to their wives, and the earth herself, choked for six long years on all this abundant blood, will drink of it no more.

The second scene is that of peace herself, seen approaching from a distance, moving slowly and heavily, walking as if hesitant, faltering, and unsettled — and people look toward her, scarcely able to see her clearly at all, scarcely able to make out, in her own features, anything that might tell them whether she carries happiness and security toward them, or misery and fear instead.

People have known, since the most ancient of ages, that they may feel secure or feel anxious, feel safe or feel afraid, and that none of it changes anything at all: what cannot be avoided cannot be avoided. The truest good lies in enduring, and standing firm, and meeting the days ahead with hope and expectation, with a genuine desire for good, and a genuine eagerness toward it. Who knows? Perhaps the days ahead will yet grant them some part of what they hope for.