

The Lessons

al-Balagh, 29 April 1945

Perhaps the clearest feature of people's own lives, since the war was declared, is that this life has simply outrun the human mind's capacity for understanding and comprehension, and its capacity for investigation and inference. Events have multiplied and followed one upon another, their own divergence and convergence growing as intense as their own agreement and disagreement, until the ordinary mind has become incapable of grasping more than a few scattered fragments of them. And no sooner has it grasped even these fragments, and begun to set them before itself for reflection and thought, than other events occur, different yet related, diverging yet aligned, distracting it from the first events entirely. It goes on this way, grasping great events only to be distracted from them by other great events, until it becomes one of the hardest things imaginable for it to form any comprehensive view of the circumstances surrounding it, or reach any sound general judgment on the trials enveloping it.

The truth is that the sheer abundance of events, their variety, their succession, and their differing degrees of gravity, have all together forced human beings to live a fleeting life, and think fleeting thoughts, until their whole existence becomes, in the most precise sense of the word, a mere flash. It is one of the hardest things imaginable, for anyone these days, to give himself, or anyone else, an accurate, comprehensive account of the events of even a single month — let alone an account of everything that has happened since this war first broke out.

The very least of the results all this produces is that some of these events pass by without people ever managing to reflect on them as they ought to be reflected on, or drawing from them whatever lessons and warnings might be drawn. Events lose their own value in this respect, their occurrence and passing becoming closer to those familiar truisms people cite as examples of things not worth thinking about or discussing at all. They speak of the collapse of the German defence in Italy, and of the Allied armies meeting inside Germany itself, the way they speak of the weather and the rain — scarcely profiting from such talk, scarcely drawing from it any lesson or moral, since they have hardly begun this conversation before other news arrives, sweeping them violently away from it.

I am not imagining this, nor philosophizing about it — it is simply a fact on the ground. We were speaking, only yesterday, of these very great events, but had scarcely begun the least part of that conversation before news arrived that the German command was offering unconditional surrender to the English and Americans, but not to the Russians, and that the Allies would accept no surrender except one made to all of them together, not to some without the others.

It is entirely clear that this latest news has distracted us from whatever news preceded it, distracted us from San Francisco's own news, and whatever disagreement and accord is occurring there, and distracted us, too, from other news that might well have deserved a great deal more of our own reflection and thought.

The truth is that this latest piece of news well deserves to distract us from every other: the war has ended, or has decided to end. It is enough to reflect on this to summon up, from the depths of our own hearts, terrible images of those terrible days we lived through, when the war seemed on the verge of beginning in 1938, and when it finally decided to begin, in the summer of 1939.

In those days, people looked toward the future with eyes filled with fear and dread, summoning up within themselves the catastrophes of the last war, imagining this new war would drag them into other catastrophes no less terrible — indeed, more likely still to provoke real panic and terror. No sooner had the war been declared, though, than it began advancing slowly, hesitantly, and people came to expect no good from this slowness, this hesitation, but only every conceivable evil, every conceivable horror. And they were right: April 1940 had scarcely arrived before this slow, hesitant war transformed itself into a rapid, relentless series of horrors, striking Norway and Denmark. The year had barely advanced another month before it struck Holland, Belgium, and France — and the world found itself witnessing something it had neither imagined nor reckoned with, something too vast to be measured, too enormous to be calculated in advance. These three countries collapsed, and France collapsed too — France, whom the world had believed the strongest power on earth, the most capable of confronting the Germans and standing firm against them in this war, exactly as she had confronted them and stood firm in the last one, until her own allies were able to send her reinforcements, and help her overcome the enemy and secure victory. But this time, she could not stand firm at all — she collapsed with an astonishing speed whose true causes and explanation history will one day

reveal, and it will become clear whether its source was weakness, or treachery, or both weakness and treachery together.

Events then followed one another, black and grim, filling the world with a dense darkness, until hope itself became scarcely more than a faint ray, barely illuminating people's own hearts at all. Hitler declared his war on Russia, after Great Britain had already been forced into a terrifying position of her own. His soldiers pressed ever deeper into Russian soil, until they reached the very gates of Moscow — and people shook their heads in disbelief, one day, when a Moscow radio announcer declared that the Germans would never enter their own sacred city.

Then the fires of war broke out in the Far East too, and Japan began pouring catastrophe down upon the United States and the British Empire, effectively erasing the Dutch Empire altogether, and gravely threatening India. The East looked about, and found itself threatened from both flanks at once: Rommel drew ever nearer to Egypt, the Germans reached the Caucasus, and it became perfectly clear the plan drawn up was to close a pincer around the East, seize the Suez Canal, and strangle the British Empire — cutting the route between Great Britain and the East on the one hand, and disrupting communications between Britain and America through submarine warfare on the other.

There, people were shaken to their very core, their eyes grew wide with terror, their hearts leapt to their throats, and they fell into every manner of doubt about themselves and about God — and only those granted a measure of faith greater than every horror, deeper than every terror, vaster than every catastrophe, and more enduring than every calamity, managed to stand firm. There, Hitler was speaking of reshaping the entire world, and drawing up its own new life for the thousand years to come. There, Hitler stood undecided over which city he would dictate his own peace terms in — would it be London, would it be Moscow, would it be Paris?

There, too, Mussolini was preparing to enter Cairo in victorious triumph, and to declare there that the old Roman Empire had been reborn anew. And there, the Allies were standing firm against calamity with real dignity, meeting catastrophe with real defiance, seeking whatever ingenious way out of their own predicaments they could find — treating their friends with kindness, their allies with tenderness, offering promises with genuine generosity, showing real affection without any affectation, and calling for an unlimited freedom: the freedom of

individuals to live secure from fear and hunger, and the freedom of peoples to live secure from injustice and aggression.

The events then continued, one following another, tangled and uncertain, hope scarcely rising before being swallowed again by thick darkness of despair. Some remained faithful to the Allies; some turned away from them; some wavered between faithfulness and betrayal. We ourselves were among the faithful, who neither faltered, nor weakened, nor doubted, but stood firm against the horror from the very first moment. When matters grew truly grave, when the crisis grew severe, and the Germans reached the very gates of Alexandria, and foreigners began fleeing Egypt in droves, light and heavy alike, seeking to place themselves beyond the reach of these dark horrors, these looming calamities, and that death which, though it seemed to bide its time, was, as the ancient poet says, hastening toward us all the while — we ourselves remained calm and steadfast, showing no sign of terror, no panic, no wavering; only earnestness, and steadfastness entire, and faithfulness entire, and resolve entire. It was then that Nahhas Pasha and his own colleagues showed friend and enemy alike that Egypt, once she has pledged, keeps her pledge; that when she gives her word, she speaks truly; and that when matters grow truly grave, she stands firm against events, and awaits whatever trials come, exactly as a person of true dignity and honour awaits them — never accepting disgrace, never seeking safety through betrayal, through breaking one's word, or through abandoning a friend.

The events then continued on their course, hesitant for a while, then advancing without looking back at anything — and the enemy was defeated in Egypt, then in Africa, then in Italy herself; Mussolini was captured once, escaped, and was captured again only days ago; the war crossed the sea to reach Hitler himself, driving him from France and from Belgium, exactly as the Russians drove him from their own soil and from Poland. Germany found herself invaded from both East and West at once; the Russians liberated Eastern and Central Europe, exactly as the English and Americans liberated Western and Southern Europe; the Russians entered Berlin, at a time when the Germans had never managed to enter Moscow; and yesterday evening, the telegraph brought us word that Germany was offering surrender to some of the Allies without the others, and that the Allies would accept nothing but a surrender offered to them all together.

The war, then, has willed itself toward its own end in Europe, and may well end within the hour, one way or another. Those very stars that once cast their own terrible, dreadful light across the world are now falling, one by one: Mussolini has already been taken; Hitler, it is said, lies dying; the others will be taken in turn, until surrender is complete; and Marshal Pétain now awaits his own trial, in one of the fortresses of Paris.

So humanity has lived through terrible years, years unlike any it has ever known in the sheer evil and horror that filled them, and now stands on the verge of emerging from these years — but into what, exactly? Into a life filled with right, justice, goodness, faithfulness toward those who were faithful, fair redress for those who acted fairly, and gratitude toward those who gave generously? Or into a life resembling the one humanity has always known, built on the domination of the strong, the injustice of the powerful, the tyranny of the victor, and the weak forced either into abject surrender or into rebellious resistance? Or into a life of waiting for opportunities, and lying in wait for one's own turn to strike?

This is the question that presents itself to every living conscience, every sensitive and perceptive heart, every thoughtful and discerning mind.

It is certain that people can profit well from lessons, at times. But it is equally certain that people are, by nature, tyrannical — hastening toward arrogance the moment they find themselves in comfortable circumstances once more, and hastening toward it, too, the very instant they escape their own problems and overcome their own trials.

It is equally certain, too, that people's own hearts thirst deeply for this justice they have craved until craving itself exhausted them, aspired to until aspiration itself wore them down, and been promised until those very promises wearied them. And they wait for justice, confident they will attain it, even as the omens of politics speak to them with anything but a smiling, radiant face. For events have already occurred, in both East and West, suggesting humanity remains just as heedless and oblivious as ever, still leaving its own affairs to self-interest, still building them on immediate advantage, still making promises the moment it needs help, only to forget those same promises the instant it no longer needs it, denying whatever aid was given it, and imagining it has already arrived at a victory beyond all fear or anxiety.

Yes, events have indeed occurred in East and West suggesting humanity has not changed at all, and has profited nothing from these harsh, violent lessons, exactly as it profited nothing from the lessons of the last war — and the results of that are well known, without any doubt. For just as the policy built, in the aftermath of the last war, upon self-interest, harshness, and broken promises, stirred turmoil throughout the entire world, and led, in the end, to the Second World War, so too will the policy established in the aftermath of this war produce these very same results — unless it establishes itself upon some foundation other than self-interest, harshness, and broken promises.

I find myself rejecting what I hear, rejecting what I see; I want to disbelieve events, and believe hope instead, and I want to believe the modern world too intelligent, too enduring, to be bitten twice from the very same hole. And who knows? Perhaps hope will prove true, for once; perhaps events will prove false, for once; perhaps the victors of this war will actually profit from the lessons the victors of the last war never paid heed to at all!

All of this is possible — but it is equally possible that things will proceed, after this war, exactly as they proceeded after the last one. The resolute man is the one who neither surrenders to despair, nor lets himself be deceived by hope; he remains, instead, shrewd, cautious, composed, master of his own affairs and in full command of himself, accepting or rejecting nothing except through deliberation, insight, genuine conviction, and real certainty.

How I wished the news from San Francisco would come satisfying and reassuring, announcing that our own hopes were not deceiving us, and that our own aspirations were not lying to us. But I see Poland still standing far from the conference, not yet even invited to it; and I see the Arab world has worked to form the committee guiding the conference's own proceedings. And yet Poland remains the very first martyr among this war's own martyrs, just as Egypt remains the truest of all those who stayed faithful to the Allies, when they were tested by this war's own horrors, and faithful friends grew few and far between.