

ON A NOTE OF TRIUMPH



By Norman Corwin

So they've given up.

They're finally done in, and the rat is dead in an alley back of the Wilhelmstrasse.

Take a bow, GI.

Take a bow, little guy.

You had what it took and you gave it, and each of you has a hunk of rainbow round your helmet.

And how do you think those lights

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look in Europe after five years of blackout, going on to six?

Brother, pretty good. Pretty good, sister.

There's a hot time in the old town of Dnepropetrovsk tonight,

And it is reasonable to assume the same goes for a thousand other cities, including some Scandinavian.

It can at last be said without jinxing the campaign:

Somehow the decadent democracies, the bungling bolsheviks, the saps and softies,

Were tougher in the end than the brownshirt bully-boys, and smarter too:

For without whipping a priest, burning a book or slugging a Jew, without corralling a girl in a brothel, or bleeding a child for plasma;

Far-flung ordinary men, unspectacular but free, rousing out of their habits and their homes, got up early one morning, flexed their muscles, learned (as amateurs) the manual of arms, and set out across perilous plains and oceans to whop the bejeepers out of the professionals.

This they did.

For confirmation, see the last communique, bearing the mark of the Allied High Command.

And now listen to the voice of the Conqueror

The men of the hour, of the past ten years and the next twenty.

I'M A PRIVATE FIRST CLASS IN AN ARMY OF ONE OF THE UNITED NATIONS. IF YOU DON'T MIND, THERE ARE SOME THINGS I'D LIKE TO ASK.

His name and rank and nationality don't matter much: could be a Tommy or a Yugopartisan: a Red Army pilot: could be a GI.

FIRST OF ALL, WHO DID WE BEAT? HOW MUCH DID IT COST TO BEAT HIM?

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED? WHAT

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DO WE KNOW NOW THAT WE DIDN'T
KNOW BEFORE?

Who've you beaten?

Well, let's get hold of him and see.

Lead him in and prop him up like
a tomato plant before your eyes.

Now: Look at this rubble of a man:
ragged, broken, blond Nordic hair
matted with pure Aryan blood,
deaf from blast and blind from
smoke, chin down, tail between
his legs.

*I'm a soldier. I'm a little man. I merely
obeyed orders.*

Whose orders?

The party's.

Who elected the party?

I did.

He's meek now. He answers ques-
tions.

He stands before you gunreft,
palms empty, steel whip confiscated;

Wounded, defenseless, thrown upon
your tender mercies,

The quality of which, he trusts,
shall not be strained.

Now:

If you spin your memory about, so
that it picks up the winter of a not-
long-bygone year:

It was the year Broker's Tip won
the Kentucky Derby,

And Cal Coolidge was found dead
on his bathroom floor,

And 3.2 per cent beer was pro-
claimed morally fit for Americans
to drink.

It was 1933.

Fine. Go back to it:

Look at our German now:

Fat and sassy, swastika on his arm-
band, cobblestone in hand, ready
to advance the cause.

This has been a good week for the
little man who obeys orders, and
prosperity fills his jowls and biceps,

For his Fuehrer was appointed
Chancellor last Monday,

And on Wednesday . . .

Open the door! Open!

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. . . raids on the homes of leaders of the opposition parties.

And on Thursday . . .

You are forbidden by decree to publish any further editions as of today!

. . . suppression of the opposition newspapers . . .

And on Sunday . . .

Henceforward it shall be deemed a crime against the state, punishable by law, to make any criticism whatever of Reichschancellor Hitler.

Heil Hitler!

All this in the first week they were in the saddle.

Every week thereafter, for twelve inbreeding years of 52 weeks each year, week in, week out:

The looking-around-carefully before speaking:

The leather heels on the doorstep, and the bell ringing insistently at three in the morning:

You're under arrest. Put your clothes on and come with me.

Tear his beard out by the roots! If his face comes off with it, all the better.

Last week, pillage; this week, murder; next week, burn the books, don't overlook the Bible.

The men who were masterless but free, now have a master but no freedom.

Hunger and poverty and a couple of big industrialists were enough to get them started,

And fancy treasons, foreign and domestic, kept them going:

Also, cruelties to make skin creep on the sweating scalp:

Now spit out your teeth, pretty one, and tell us—who else was in your trade union?

The conscript children: putrescence in the classroom: scum injected in the growing arm:

My father last night said to my mother that he hates Der Fuehrer.

Good boy. Where do you live, Hans?

Last week, purge; this week, putsch; next week, break a treaty, form an Axis, give a hitch to Franco.

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This week and every week, the staggering lie:

Nations stripped and tortured like a captive girl, while sidewalk superintendents stand by, around the world, and look on, fascinated.

Even as they watch, of course, death warrants issue to themselves and to their sons.

Extra: double feature: Austria and Anschluss:

And the corpses of the suicides of gay Vienna are sanitarily disposed of.

Next week, umbrella dance at Munich—Salome bearing the head of John, the Czech.

And coming soon, too soon, Lavish Spectacle: Millions in the Cast: Curtain Going Up:

POLAND DEVoured BY LIGHTNING AND LOCUSTS IN 18 DAYS!

Eastward, look, the land is bright! You can read an occupational order by the flare of the burning church

(Sixteen hundred of the townspeople are locked in there, but their screams have sizzled out, the children's being the first to cease).

Now if you will step along, this way, please, being careful not to trip either over the rubble of treaties or the ruins of Rotterdam,

We will have a word with the same little man who last month pasted Denmark and Norway in his scrapbook:

Heil!

Will you explain why Rotterdam was bombed and thousands of its people killed *after* the city had surrendered?

Ja, sure. Schrecklichkeit.

Frightfulness?

Ja. That was our plan.

You mean Schrecklichkeit is an official policy of the German High Command?

Ja.

Mm. You seem to be feeling pretty chipper.

Holland fell to us in four days. Denmark in one.

And France?

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We will be in Paris before the end of June.

And war was glorious,

And the best champagnes of France were poured on the tables of the schutzstaffel,

The finest grades of Danish bacon sputtered in the skillets of loyal party workers,

Paintings from the Louvre hung tastefully on the walls of Berchtesgaden,

And the iron ore of Sweden alloyed well with the bauxite of Spain.

The music was but stimulating and the performance but continuous,

With a minor fanfare for the push-overs in the Balkans in the month of April,

A flourish for the Isle of Crete in May,

And in June, the sound of another broken treaty:

Bryansk, Odessa, Rostov, encirclement of Leningrad, siege of Moscow, Russia staggering under the bulletins of D.N.B.

And the sale of Russian-German dictionaries boomed in Leipzig, city of books and culture,

At about which time the little man took another swig of captured vodka, stripped another carload at Lublin, herded naked men, women and children into hot showers to open their pores for the gas chamber,

And then sat back in his barracks and listened to waltzes on the loudspeaker in the prison yard.

Later, in conformity with the predictions of seasoned military observers, the Russians were crushed at Stalingrad, and that was the deciding blow.

Hitler, the giver of orders, said so himself: said no power on earth could push the Wehrmacht back from Stalingrad: and who could doubt the word of him in whom God hath manifested Himself?

What Hitler hath put asunder, no man could join.

And that was that,

And the Century of the Uncommon Aryan opened up ahead,

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And Germany was promises.

The little man no longer was a little man.

He was a Colossus who stood with one foot in Rhodes and the other in Finland.

He clapped his hands, and a tanker went down off Atlantic City, aflame. He blinked his eyes and there ensued mighty thunder, and Tobruk was his in a day.

He inhaled, and a million slaves trembled in his galleys.

Nothing like him ever was.

His brand was on the soul of his victims,

And the planet fitted in his palm.

THIS IS THE MAN YOU HAVE BEATEN.

We return you to the Conqueror,
To the boy with the questions on his mind,

To the man of the hour, the man of the year, the man of the next twenty years:

SO THAT IS THE MAN WE HAVE BEATEN. HOW MUCH DID IT COST TO BEAT HIM?

How much did it cost?

Well, the gun, the half-track and the fuselage come to a figure resembling mileages between two stars:

But these costs are calculable, and have no nerve-endings,

And will eventually be taken care of by the federal taxes on antiques, cigarettes, and excess profits.

However, in the matter of the kid who used to deliver folded newspapers to your doorstep, flipping them sideways from his bicycle,

And who died on a jeep in the Ruhr,

There is no fixed price, and no amount of taxes can restore him to his mother.

His mother sits in a room with a picture tonight, and listens to the clock ticking on the mantelpiece, and remembers, among other things, how he struggled with the barber

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when he was getting his first haircut, and how she tried to calm him.

And the thoughts of the mother are tall, straight thoughts,

And they burn like candles, quietly and slowly,

And they trail into smoke and are lost in shadows.

And if you wish to assess the cost of beating the Fascists, you must multiply the number of closed files in the departments of war, by the exchange value of sorrow, which is infinite and has no decimals.

And the reasons for mourning in Denmark are the same as they are in Ohio,

And the cost is not figured in krone any more than it's measured in dollars.

There are, of course, the lesser entries in the book:

The amputated leg and the artificial eye have cost somebody something:

Shall the balance sheet be balanced?

By whom? How?

No combination of savants and learned cogs, holes punched in cards and electric motors,

No brow containing Euclid could be else than baffled by the simplest problem of the cost of hunger in a baby's bones.

Have you paid something of the cost?

Well, you're not through paying and the bill's not settled,

For in this way and that, for the rest of your days,

The cost will appear—it will present itself in the form of deductions from the paycheck;

In a surplus of widows and fatherless children;

In the tubercular lung of the stunted girl;

In babies never to be conceived on lovebeds never lain in;

Again we return you to the Conqueror, man of the text-books of millenniums ahead:

BUT WHAT DO WE KNOW NOW THAT WE DIDN'T KNOW BEFORE? WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED OUT OF THIS WAR?

For one thing, Evil is not always as

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insidious as advertised

But will, upon occasion, give fair warning, just as smoke announces the intention of flame to follow.

Never has disaster had so many heralds as this war:

Cassandra spoke from every lecture platform, and the notices were posted high and low:

A cabinet minister resigned at Downing Street, protesting;

A President cried, "Quarantine!"

Moscow sent food and guns to Barcelona;

A housewife of Duluth boycotted German goods;

It was no furtive tapping on the window sill at night,

But clamorous pounding in the public square,

Blow after blow, like a monstrous dropforge,

Beating into shape the time to come.

And the time came, and the prophecies matured:

Fire and brimstone, dropping from the sky, were educational:

There were tongues in torpedoes; sermons in bombs; books in the running battles.

Whatever was learned, was learned the hard way,

Between blood transfusions and last rites.

Each lesson fell trip-hammer hard, with a bang that killed a citizen or two somewhere:

WE'VE LEARNED OUT OF WORLD WAR II THAT WE'D LEARNED NOTHING OUT OF WORLD WAR I.

WE'VE LEARNED THAT NATIONS WHICH DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY WANT WILL GET WHAT THEY DON'T WANT.

WE'VE LEARNED THAT OUR EAST COAST IS THE WEST BANK OF THE RHINE, AND THAT THE DEFENSES OF SEATTLE BEGIN IN SHANGHAI.

WE LEARNED AT MUNICH THAT A SOFT ANSWER DOESN'T TURN AWAY WRATH: THAT IF YOU OFFER YOUR OTHER CHEEK TO A FASCIST YOU'LL GET YOUR HEAD BLOWN OFF.

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WE'VE LEARNED THAT A NEWSPAPER RIGHT AT HOME CAN LIE WITH A STRAIGHT FACE SEVEN DAYS A WEEK, AND BE AS FILTHY AND FASCIST AS A HANDOUT IN BERLIN.

WE'VE LEARNED THAT THOSE MOST CONCERNED WITH SAVING THE WORLD FROM COMMUNISM USUALLY TURN UP MAKING IT SAFE FOR FASCISM.

WE'VE LEARNED THAT THE GERMANS CAME CLOSE TO WINNING THE FIRST TIME, EVEN CLOSER THE SECOND TIME, AND MIGHT DAMN WELL WIN IF WE GIVE THEM A THIRD TIME.

WE'VE LEARNED THE VALUE OF ALLIES IN A WORLD WHERE ANY WAR IS SOONER OR LATER A WORLD WAR.

WE'VE LEARNED THAT FREEDOM ISN'T SOMETHING TO BE WON AND THEN FORGOTTEN. IT MUST BE RE-NEWED, LIKE SOIL AFTER YIELDING GOOD CROPS; MUST BE REWOUND, LIKE A FAITHFUL CLOCK; EXERCISED, LIKE A HEALTHY MUSCLE.

These and many more—

These are the lessons our sons and brothers have turned to dust to teach us:

And whether Victory will stick, and the dead be not made fools of,

Depends on whether what we learn is held close and constant as a catechism,

Come summer and prosperity, come winter and the wolf, come ebb tide and come flood.



On a Note of Triumph is Norman Corwin's first experiment with the translation of a radio work into a form expressly intended for the eye. At 35, he has long enjoyed a reputation as radio's most creative artist. In this special V-E Day program his original talents have devised a literary form that blends elements of the essay, the play, the novel, the epic poem. In one sense he has written a celebrational piece—the "Triumph" referring to our victory over the Germans; in another, it is a kind of super-questionnaire, asking the sharpest questions of the day and answering them. Like all of Mr. Corwin's works, it is a magnificent, turbulent and beautiful piece of writing.