

OPINION

On Living

In a Great Time

It is easy to say that we live in a time of world-shattering events. It is not so easy to probe into what this means for everyone of us as people, and for the future of the democracy we care about.

Consider the events and their pace. Do you remember when, only a few years ago, the landing of Rudolph Hess's airplane in England captured the headlines and our imagination for days and weeks? Or what a sensation was caused by the assassination of a second-rate French politician called Darlan?

Compare that with what has assaulted our eyes and minds in the last few weeks. The steel and concrete of the most-vaunted army in history, the German Army, has been shattered. The Nazi will which Hitler took two decades to build has collapsed. The greatest democratic leader of our time died in the death of President Roosevelt. The two big fascist leaders in whose shadow our whole generation has lived—Mussolini and Hitler—are now lying dead (one certainly, the other probably) amidst the ruins of their empires, one following the other in the space of a few days.

Berlin, the citadel of Nazi power, has fallen to the Russians, and the hammer-and-sickle banner floats over the Reichstag and the Chancellery. The men around Mussolini are dead, and Gen. Graziani a prisoner. The men around Hitler soon will have a similar fate. Himmler and Doenitz are the new heads of what is left of the Nazi state. The French fascist leaders are scurrying about to find some safe exit off the stage of history: Petain has given himself up to the French; Laval and Marcel Deat have sought the shelter of Franco's lingering fascist power in Madrid. The whole Nazi Army in north Italy and western Austria has quit, a million weak. The von Rundstedt whose drive through the Ardennes Forest made military history this Winter is now a prisoner. The long-awaited meeting of the American and Russian armies has taken place. New governments have been formed in Poland and in Austria. The complete surrender of the Germans is expected every day. A constitutional convention for a new world security organization is meeting at San Francisco.

a Great Time

Any one of these events would be grist for headlines, analysis, speculation, day after day. Together they make a newspaper office at once Paradise, because of the richness of the events, and Heart-break House, because of the ruthless wasteful pace of events.

This is, in Thomas Hardy's phrase, a "time of the breaking of nations." What happens to the individual who is living in so great a time, whose senses and imagination are battered by such events? Hardy in his poem describes the European peasant in World War I "harrowing clods . . . though Dynasties pass." That is the poet's view of life's continuity whether the events are small or big, and it is a valid view. But Hardy's peasant was the material the dynasts used, the anvil on which the hammers beat. If we are all to be only that, the new Hitlers of this world will arise and triumph.

The dangerous thing about living in a great time is that the events outrun the imagination, and finally both our senses and our imaginations are dulled. When events are small the individual gets no feeling of the heroic quality of history, when they become big he does, but when they become too big he is overwhelmed. And this is almost as true in the times of victory when the events are on our side as in the times of catastrophe when they are against us. It is almost as easy to be enervated by triumph as by defeat.

The individual always measures himself against the bigness of the things outside himself. A man can feel big in a village, he feels dwarfed by skyscrapers—unless he owns them. A man can feel big with a rifle, he feels dwarfed by a tank—unless he is running it. A man can feel big in an ordinary time, he feels dwarfed in a time of huge events—unless he has a sense of having a hand in them. Andre Malraux has said, in *Man's Fate*, that "we hear the voice of others with our ears, and our own with our throats." All the time that we are watching the immensity of events with our eyes and mind something is happening inside our will which is an appraisal of how big or small we are in the face of them.

And here the great danger is that we feel that the events are taking place without the individual. That is not true. Berlin did not fall, like the walls of Jericho, at the blast of seven rams' horns by seven priests. The Russians took Berlin at the end of an incredibly costly three-year march from Moscow. The expenditure of millions of lives was the cost of Berlin's

a Great Time

fall, and the fusion of millions of wills was its means.

The same is true of Hitler's death, whether real or only political. It was not just a bullet that did it, nor a bloodclot in the brain, nor a random impulse to suicide. The collapse of Hitler and his power comes as the climax of a long war waged by a Three-Power coalition that we were able to build only after a decade of blindness.

We are part of these events—every one among us. If we remember that, the events will not bewilder or dwarf us.

Another danger is that we will become smug over the events, and conclude that since they seem to operate by themselves they don't need us any more. We may come to feel that since everything is crumbling in the houses of Italian and German fascist power, it also will crumble in the house of Japanese fascist power without our having to do anything about it. Which would be fatal, if we thought it. And even more fatal if we thought that a new world security structure will arise of its own accord out of the chaos of the old world.

We are not only the anvil. We are also the hammer. To know that is to grow in stature in a great time. —**MAX LERNER**

PM

THURSDAY, MAY 3, 1945

OldMagazineArticles.com