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AFTER THE ATOM

SUPPOSE there should be another world war, what will be the destiny of Western civilization? I am not predicting that there will be another world war. It is too early for positive assertions in this matter. But few people will deny that it is a real possibility. In view of the uncertainty of coming events speculations based upon the worst may seem a piece of irresponsible scare-mongering. But *if* the worst happens, there may be scant opportunity for contemplation after the event. With wide-open eyes and knowing the stakes, we are facing the possibility of ultimate disaster coming to us in perhaps less than a score of years. Is it not our duty to do our best to think out the implications while there is still time to think, to try now to find an orientation for the worst case? In smaller matters it may be wisdom to let an emergency come, and to trust nature to find a remedy. In supreme issues such as these, indifference, not foresight, is the final capitulation.

Trying to visualize the shape of the world after a supposed atomic war, we must first register the foreseeable elements in such a clash. Assuming that the Western democracies are at present still sole possessors of the secret of the atomic bomb, these Western powers would find their military advantage in striking now, in making preventive war. No eighteenth-century cabinet and few nineteenth-century cabinets would have shrunk from such a decision (they had no atomic bombs at their disposal, of course, and the stakes were infinitely smaller). But it is certain that neither America nor Britain will go to preventive war now. The struggle against Hitler has amply proved that no Anglo-Saxon democracy of our age ever fights a war except under direct threat of extinction; and the present trend towards military retrenchment in both countries, in the midst of growing international tension, confirms this forecast. There will never be war unless a totalitarian power goes to war. As the twentieth century proceeds the story about capitalist imperialism inevitably going to war has become complete nonsense and vicious demagoguery. The only problem is whether totalitarian dictatorships can be prevented from going to war in the long run. I am not going to try to answer this query at present.

But if Russia, the one big remaining totalitarian power, should at some time go to war, we should not imagine that she will walk in Hitler's footsteps. Germany was quite unsuited for the task of world domination, and only a maniac with an hysterical following could make the attempt—apart from the invitation to try proffered by Chamberlain, Daladier and the rest. Next time, if there is to be another time, there will presumably be no such attempt at abject surrender on the part of the democracies, but also the aggressor will not go to war with such hectic and fundamentally inadequate preparation as Hitler did. It is, among other things, quite unlikely that Stalin himself wants war or will make war. No man of his age would after such ordeals. If, at some later time, Russia goes to war, she will have tested the ground well in advance, and thoroughly, and will feel sure of success. The *present* high state of international tension is largely, though not exclusively, bluff.

Now, it is one thing for the Russians to feel sure of victory and quite another thing for them to win. I am convinced that for the most deep-seated reasons no totalitarian power is capable of correctly assessing the balance of strength between its own power and that of its democratic adversaries. Dictatorships cannot understand the intrinsic strength which lurks behind the surface weaknesses of democracy. And a totalitarian dictatorship cannot even correctly assess the various technical factors affecting the overall balance of strength, because no country, in an atmosphere of propaganda and terrorism, can properly assess its own defects and its adversary's advantages. Not for a moment do I doubt that the democracies will win in the end, though a dictatorship always feels sure of victory in the beginning. All dictatorships overrate themselves; also all democracies tend to underrate their own strength. The West is immensely ahead of Russia in industrial potential, and that means in the power of its weapons. Russia, despite all the blustering arrogance of the Communists, takes a very low place on the list of those countries which might catch up with America. If a Russian leader should cross the boundary line between peace and war, he would doubtless destroy a great empire, but it would be his own.

Unfortunately, that optimistic forecast does not exhaust the problem. Should Russia go to war, she would first make good all damage done by the last war, she would certainly have carried

political permeation of her enemies to the highest obtainable degree, and she would also certainly have the atomic bomb and far-distance missiles to hit directly across the ocean. In the meantime, undoubtedly, the Western world would not have lost its present advantages in the race of scientific warfare, and would have developed weapons still more terrible. That would give her victory. But Russia would not go to war without possessing weapons capable of working terrific destruction in the heart of the territory of her enemies. That is the position from which to start any argument about future civilization after an atomic war.

It is exceptional for civilizations to disappear in one crash. It has happened, in the case of the Aztecs, of the Incas, of the Assyrians, though in the last case only after a preliminary period of decline. It is not likely to happen with a structure as big as Western civilization. But at the same time, it would be a gross mistake to expect our civilization to issue from every disaster with renewed vigour. The continent of Europe, the heart of Western civilization, is already in a process of decline so obvious, so penetrating and so rapid, that the most serious doubts about the possibility of full recovery are justified. If the Anglo-Saxon countries receive a similar blow in a future world war, the chances are that they will go the same way, though perhaps not so fast. The disproportion between tasks and means would probably become too large to be overcome. After victory, the Anglo-Saxon countries would find themselves in virtual control of our planet, but their resources, reduced by terrific destruction, would hardly be adequate for shouldering the task. Yet peace could only be preserved by maintaining Anglo-Saxon world paramouncy. Every great war increases the dependence of the ruling classes, whatever their structure, upon the masses. Yet, amidst general destruction, the demands of the masses for a higher standard of living could not be fulfilled, and it is not likely that the normal mechanism of production could be made to work again while these demands remained unfulfilled. The great conflicts in the political field would be resolved, the road to an Augustan age would be open, but, as after the end of the Roman civil wars, there would be few people to enjoy it, the recovery would be largely fictitious, promise and meaning would have gone out of life. The new world empire would rest on universal exhaustion rather than on strength, and, in view of the terrific destruction preceding its

creation, it would presumably be more short-lived than were other world empires.

The flaw in this whole argument is that it is too mechanical, or, if you will, too pragmatic, meaning by 'pragmatic' too much tied to the chain of cause and effect, neglecting the vast basic general trend, which will find its way whatever the details of future history. It might be argued with considerable justification that a healthy civilization always overcomes the worst disasters, as Western civilization overcame the death, within two years, of a third of Europe's population during the 'black death' epidemic in the fourteenth century. Conversely, a declining civilization might fade out even without a major catastrophe, or, more exactly, would find any normal conflict developing into a major catastrophe because it is no longer able to cope with normal problems. It is also possible to point up the links between the evolutionary and the pragmatic point of view. If our Western civilization were still healthy, would it show our present high social tensions? Would it have tolerated, and still tolerate, the repeated challenge by alien totalitarian forces, refusing to strike at them up to the moment of supreme necessity? Is the totalitarian menace really so strong intrinsically? Is it really the case that Germany, under a madman's rule, and Russia with half her population still living in straw-covered huts, were bound to become serious threats to the West? Is it not rather fatigue and inertia in the Western world, reluctance to make sacrifices in time, which has made the challenge so serious? No doubt Churchill was right in calling the war against Hitler the most unnecessary of all wars.

Only against this wider background is there an answer to the query about the future. We may ask ourselves whether it is worth while defending a civilization showing so much intrinsic weakness. But once already in our generation, when the ultimate challenge came, the West proved itself less weak than it appeared to be. Only, in the event of a third world war, the alternative will be different. The real alternative will not, as in the case of the anti-Nazi war, be surrender without a fight or survival through a terrific fight. It will be submission to totalitarian slavery or a war which *must*, inevitably, mark the beginning of a sharp decline of the Western world, even *after* victory has been won. The nature of this specific challenge is not yet clearly realized. As

usual, we are thinking in terms of last time's danger, while, by our goodwill and our retrenchment policy, we busily prepare an entirely different challenge to ourselves. We think in terms of a possible hard struggle to preserve freedom. We should think in terms of a struggle where, indeed, we may preserve freedom, but at the price of remaining maimed for the rest of our existence as a civilization. Only when this true character of the challenge will become apparent will the real temptation to give in arise. Yet, in view of what has happened since 1914, and of what is happening now, I am convinced that the West, if challenged, will take up the challenge and win. This, I do not doubt, will be the decision of the West if the worst happens, whatever the consequences.

But why is a relapse into barbarism, with all the dreadful things it means for the individual and for the community, preferable to enslavement to a totalitarian power? The answer can be found in a comparative analysis of various types of decaying civilization.

As far as I can see, the decay of civilizations invariably takes place along one of two alternative lines of development, two alternative trends which lead to either slavery or barbarism. To some extent, these two types are mutually exclusive.

I can think of no better illustration of my thought than the story of the Struldbrugs in the third book of *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift, as my readers remember, speaks of a race of men enjoying eternal life on this earth, men who are blessed with the exemption from life's most bitter ingredient, from death; men who cannot die, the most happy, nay, the most unhappy of all men. For it would be asking too much of the Creator, so Swift says, to endow them not only with immortality but at the same time with eternal youth. All they achieve is the unbearable dotage of an eternal old age, of bottomless melancholy, of boundless hatred of all life. It is a vision, intended successfully to cure men of the desire to avoid death. It is only a vision—where individuals are concerned. In the case of civilizations it is a reality. We are surrounded by Struldbrug civilizations, and a very unpleasant sight they are.

Amidst the nations of the West, the Jews present the clearest case of such a Struldbrug civilization, and the whole Jewish tragedy really comes down to this fact. The individual members of the Jewish community can perhaps individually, with great difficulty, escape the curse of cultural Struldbrugism, by

intermarriage with Gentiles, by total cultural assimilation, by cutting their ties with their community and blending into their surroundings. But a Jewish community, as long as any exists, will be a Struldbrug community.

Swift speaks of the moment when individuals, so far normal, though singled out by a mark on their heads as future Struldbrugs, become aware of their Struldbrug existence, and cease to be normal men. In the emergence of Struldbrug civilizations, there are such moments, too, moments when a civilization stops both growing *and* declining, becomes impermeable to any transformation from within, so as to remain identical to itself, unchanging for all times in its inner structure, changing only as the result of favourable or destructive interference from without. In the Jewish case, which is perhaps slightly more marked and paradigmatic than other similar cases to be mentioned soon, this moment of turning from normal growth and ageing to Struldbrugism can be named and dated. It is the year A.D. 69, when the destruction of the Temple appeared inevitable to all except a few maniacs, and when, in view of the inevitable fall, Rabbi Jokhanaan ben Sakkai made his own private peace with the Romans, and in exchange got leave to found the university of Jabne. On the day of the fall of the Holy City, Rabbi Jokhanaan gave his disciples the watchword that, now that the centre of the cult was destroyed, the 'law' must be the only binding tie of Judaism, and that hence a final, unambiguous fixing of the content of the law was a life-and-death question for the survival of Jewry.

I have experienced few things more tragic than watching young Jews (in internment as 'enemy aliens' during the war) hotly discussing the rights and wrongs of that decision, and of the political lines of the various Jewish parties involved in the rising of A.D. 66-70 as if they discussed the rights and wrongs of Churchill *v.* Chamberlain in 1939-40. The timelessness of that debate, the irrelevance of nearly two thousand years of history intervening between the founding of Jabne University in A.D. 69 and the internment of young Jews as enemy aliens in Britain in A.D. 1940, made a ghastly impression upon me. Yet their attitude was perfectly apposite. For though there have been significant developments in the field of theology, metaphysics and law in the Jewish community since, these developments only led to the expulsion of their standard bearers from the Jewish community.

The community as a whole has since stuck to Jabne lines, and in the sense of real historical time—as distinct from abstract chronological time—the problem of Jabne *v.* Jerusalem—rabbinic religion *v.* Jewish State—was more immediate to these Jews, than the fight of Churchill *v.* Chamberlain, already well outdated by events, could be to any reasonable Englishman during the blitz winter of 1940–41. Admittedly Zionism, as A. J. Toynbee has pointed out, is an attempt to organize Jews as a Western nation and to break with the tradition of a purely rabbinic community. As far as this attempt succeeds, it will inevitably lead away one section of Jewry from their own culture, and, by a more or less clean break with the past, will make them part of the Western world. But this is not inner development, as little as the parliamentary representation of West Indian Negroes is an outcrop of African culture. Any part of Jewry which remains fixed upon its own foundations, rather than going over wholesale to an alien civilization, will remain tied to the Jabne tradition, without change or alteration. As likely as not, in the end, the Zionist movement will split into one section completely adopting Western ways and another one returning to Jabne. At any rate, even if this should not be so, Jewry, for eighteen hundred years, has remained timeless, unchanged and unmovable. That is the exact meaning of cultural Struldbrugism.

We have chosen the Jewish case merely because it is obvious to everybody's eyes and can be understood without much reference to historical and anthropological material. But once the basic facts of this case have been pointed out, other similar cases come to mind. There are, in the first place, a number of small cases structurally parallel to the Jewish case to such an extent as to be practically identical. What about those Parsees who, in the beginning of the seventh century A.D., fled before the Arab onslaught and have lived on in India ever since? Their vernacular, but not their sacred idiom transformed—as is the case with the Jews—but not identical with the idiom of the population surrounding them—also as with unassimilated Jews; the parallel could be carried much further. What about those so-called 'Assyrians'; in fact, the last remnant of the once great and mighty Nestorian civilization? What about the Copts, the Armenians, the endless variety of religious and cultural residues complicating the structure of modern Syria, and making it so thoroughly archaic in type?

Our planet is strewn with Struldbrug civilizations, with cultures neither growing nor decaying, cultures no longer changing in time, cultures which can only remain what they are or disintegrate and perish under outside pressure—civilizations timeless, invertebrate, ossified.

I do not intend to go into too much detail, important though a discussion of details might be in a different context, for I do not want to go beyond what is necessary to illustrate our present problem. It needs stating, though, that, in contrast to Swift's poetical vision, Struldbrug cultures are in reality not absolutes, that, in contrast to Swift's Struldbrugs, they can die, if only by outside interference, and also that there are transitional cases. I do not think it is quite impossible, even for civilizations which seem totally ossified, to undergo a transformation and, instead of falling to ashes, to come alive again under the life-giving impact of other, younger civilizations. I believe it is even possible to evolve a casuistry of such possibilities—but here is not the place to do it. Before studying shades, main types must be clearly defined. There exists an opposite type of decline, which is typified by the decline of Rome.

To an amazing extent, Roman civilization did not ossify, and never stopped developing. It is true that this statement is only partly true. The Greek provinces of the Roman Empire did partly ossify into Byzantine civilization. Byzantine civilization is one of those border cases where it is as impossible to speak of complete ossification as of full and complete natural growth. That part of the Empire became finally ossified only in an alien shell, as part of the Turkish Empire. The case is relevant to our own problem, for obviously the ossification of our modern Western civilization within the shell of Russian rule would provide a close parallel. But the Western part of the Roman Empire 'relapsed into barbarism', and, after the 'dark centuries', evolved into another more powerful civilization, pregnant with immensely bigger achievements. It would be easy, again, to point to other historical parallels, which we shall leave aside. One element of the situation working, in this case, for relapse into barbarism rather than Struldbrugism was the belatedness of Roman civilization, the fact that Rome only half belonged to the higher civilization of classical antiquity, that its more important growth belonged to the latest phase of that civilisation, that, originally at least, it was

on the fringe of that civilization geographically. The parallel with the position of modern America is striking, and I should not shrink from drawing the obvious inferences about the future.

For the Roman citizen of the fifth century it was no doubt greatly preferable to inhabit Byzance rather than Rome. The Life of Byzance may have been oppressive in many directions, but its citizens enjoyed the benefits of law and order, of learning and manners, of cults and arts proper to a higher civilization. The inhabitants of Rome were helplessly exposed to the murdering, looting and raping of the hosts of Alaric and Genseric, and watched the city falling into ruins and the countryside becoming deserted. But, looking backwards, we can see that the devastated provinces of the Western Empire became the cradle of the most creative civilization mankind has so far produced, whereas Byzance, which never experienced a catastrophe of this kind, not even through Turkish conquest, produced no more than a second-rate aftermath of the grander civilizations which had preceded it. The argument may seem abstract, too abstract. But for this one time I wish to argue the case on the broadest background available, and I see no other background as broad as this one.

Clearly, the case is closely related to the survival of freedom, of independence, and of the West. It is related to freedom, though not in the sense that during the five centuries of the Roman Empire the West would have been less autocratically ruled than the East. As autocracy developed, it took its symbols and methods more and more from the East until, from the time of Diocletian onwards, no difference was left between an oriental kingdom and the Roman Empire. At the same time the West, by way of disintegration, broke loose from autocracy. The Germanic States arising in the West were not autocracies. Though the political rights of the Germanic freeholders declined, feudalism checked the power of the ruler and of the State, and out of feudalism grew the representation of the subject and all modern political liberty. While the West, after a terrific and long-lasting crisis, moved towards liberty, Byzance, maintaining order and civilization, moved deeper and deeper into autocracy.

The moment came when it was no longer important whether this autocracy was exerted by a national dynasty or by foreign conquerors—a moment which must come in the history of every autocracy. By its own choice Byzance preferred the Turk to the

Latin. The loss of freedom within had led to subjection from without. The West, starting from the same roots but developing in the opposite direction, had by that time evolved into a welter of free and independent national units.

And it should not be forgotten, in this context, that the geographical layout then presented an exact parallel to our present geographical situation. As between Hellenes and Persians, as between Western feudalism and Byzance, so today between the Anglo-Saxon powers and Russia it is a question of West *v.* East. This is not incidental. The history starting in Ionia in Homeric times, and leading to modern London and Washington, is a history of growing freedom. The history starting, much earlier, in Sumer and Egypt, and leading through Assyria, Persia, Byzance to Moscow, is a history of lasting and basically unchanging autocracy. The clash remains the same, the controversy over thousands of years remains the same basic, decisive controversy, the red thread of the history of higher civilization. Only the border between West and East has moved to and fro.

Under Alexander the Great the West, which had started so late, moved deep into Asia. Under Diocletian the East had reached Britain. In the later Middle Ages the West extended up to Kiev. Today, Germany, not only politically but also spiritually, is largely a prey to the ways of the East. Also, the geographical centre of the controversy has constantly shifted northwards, both in West and East. But there is no difficulty in recognizing in the antagonists of today the same forces that fought at Salamis in 480 B.C.

We westerners may well take deep comfort in our troubles, with perhaps much worse in store for us, in the thought that while the East has not progressed much since the days of the Assyrian Empire, the West has progressed immensely. It was, in all its phases, a creation of Northern barbarians who had been touched by Eastern influences without submitting to them. At every stage of their development, the Western nations and civilizations were threatened not so much with conquest by the East, but with assimilation to its civilization. The Asiatic wave which nearly engulfed Hellas in the seventh century B.C. was much more dangerous than the ten years between Marathon and Salamis. But it was precisely the reaction against the Eastern permeation which led to the final self-assertion of Hellenic civilization towards

the end of the sixth century and which, apart from all its intrinsic glory, enabled the Hellenes to withstand the onslaught of the hosts of Xerxes. The East reasserted itself against Alexander's conquests. But the East itself could exist only within the shell of the Roman Empire and, when within its borders the civilization of the East became paramount, that involved the escape of the West from the bondage of the East. There is no need to carry the account down into modern times.

The East cannot understand the intrinsic strength of the West. Eastern autocracies always thought it an easy task to conquer the West, and always failed. Today we are confronted with a new onslaught whose peculiarity it is that Russia has borrowed so much of Western technique. But Western technique cannot adequately function in an Eastern context. Clearly, looking at our present woes in so large an historical context, we have every reason to be cheerful—not cheerful for our personal destiny, which is not likely to be pleasant, but cheerful for the destiny of the values on which we live.

But how does all this relate to the respective effects of Struldbrugism and barbarism upon the future of civilizations? There exists an obvious affinity between ossification and autocracy. Effective autocracy excludes genuine development. Yet it would be a great mistake to think in terms of crude, simple alternatives. Eastern civilization, autocracy, ossification, are not one and the same thing. It may be argued that the oldest civilizations of the East had the germs of both autocracy and liberty in them, and that not before Assyrian times had the decision fallen in favour of absolute autocracy. More important, there are many Struldbrug civilizations without political autocracy. The Jews are a classical case.

But there seems to be good reason, nevertheless, to relate these apparent exceptions to autocracy. For they have all happened within the geographical region of the autocracies. Is it not that groups deprived of their secular rulers have instead submitted to the absolute rule of an absolute law? It certainly applies in the case of the Parsees. And in India we can see the political autocracy of Rajas and later of Sultans exist side by side with the absolute tyranny of the caste Dharma. The relation between Sultanism and Moslem law is also a case in point. Political autocracy and unchanging custom really seem to belong together, and to part

company only, in case of inescapable necessity. The West never knew either.

Again, admittedly, our Western constant change is nearer to chaos, and that is the objection of the East against us. It is true that there exists as little stringent connexion between chaos and the West as there exists between autocracy and ossification. Absolutes are always wrong in the interpretation of history. But affinity between the West and chaos is not smaller than between the East and rigidity. The East, too, has known chaos, a very great deal of chaos. It happens where autocracy and unchanging custom are sapped from within to the point of collapse. Then, after a longer or shorter transition, there happens a return to the older forms. In the West, we have so far had only one big transition, that from classical to Western civilization. That one transition seems to prove that the West is incapable of real rigidity without leaning upon Eastern models and forces. The law of the West, so far, has been to develop, to grow, and to disintegrate when growth is no longer possible. In the East, the periods of chaos are short lived; rigidity predominates. In the West, autocracies are short lived, and mainly borrowed from the East. Prediction is, of course, dangerously difficult. But, so far, everything seems to point to the conclusion that we have again, for the second time in Western history, reached one of the great turning-points. The tendencies towards autocracy, rigidity and Strulldbrugism are flowing strong again, but the forces of resistance will again be stronger.

It is a sad and tragic thought that the victory of these forces of resistance may involve, not, as we all wish, further growth, but simply disintegration. As I have tried to show, disintegration is the only possible prelude to further growth. The interlude may well last for centuries and be gruesome. But it is the only road leading further on towards the intrinsic goals of human development.

The lure of submitting to a world autocracy with its prospects of order, security and avoidance of disaster, is only the temptation to sell the right of the first-born for a dish of lentils. It is more than doubtful whether Western civilization can continue in its present shape. In all probability we are at the beginning of a transition, long, painful and uncertain, to another civilization. This is not a matter for our choice. But it would be our choice to submit to a world autocracy and, thereby, to cast away the

possibility of further human development. Whether the challenge will materialize we cannot know now, but we shall know within a decade or two. If the challenge materializes, we shall be able to fight it and to ward it off—if we have the right spirit. Whole nations cannot be sustained in such a struggle by far-flung hypotheses about history past and future. But those inclined who ask for ultimate justification of their actions should know that they cannot undertake that struggle in an optimistic belief in linear progress.

The course of the struggle itself would belie their optimism; they would collapse under disillusion. If the struggle comes, the hardest, most bitter, most pessimistic assumptions are in place about the future in store for us. And yet, not since Salamis, and not since the days when Charles Martel defeated the Arabs at Tours, was there a struggle so full of meaning. For such is the paradox of human affairs that men, by walking with open eyes towards the disintegration of their own civilization, may yet serve and experience the fullness of life, whereas those shrinking from the catastrophe may work for ultimate death, and experience it in their own souls. In times such as these there is only one upright attitude: *Amor fati*.

HERBERT READ

THE FATE OF MODERN PAINTING

'I WRITE poems for poets and satires or grotesques for wits. . . . For people in general I write prose and am content that they should be unaware that I do anything else.' This opinion, expressed by Robert Graves in a foreword to *Poems 1938-1945*, is one which most poets will be found to share; and even if they have not dared to express themselves so frankly, their activities suit Mr. Graves's words. Their work has no appeal to people in general, and never could have had such appeal.

Painters, for reasons which can perhaps be explained historically, but which are not logical, still maintain a different belief, and a