

**Henry Steele Commager**

# 1918—1968:

## Is the World Safer for Anything?

Fifty years after the armistice that was to make the world safe for democracy, men “who could control the great globe itself” are unable to control themselves. “Is it too much to hope,” asks a historian, “that we will return to our traditions and rediscover our true character?”

“THE anniversary of Armistice Day should stir us to great exaltation of spirit because of the proud recollection that it was our day, a day above those early days of that never-to-be-forgotten November which lifted the world to the high levels of vision and achievement upon which the great war for democracy and right was fought and won.” So wrote the dying Woodrow Wilson on the fifth anniversary of that day which had concluded the war to end war and to make the world safe for democracy.

Surely the world had a right to exult when this greatest and most terrible of wars dragged to its weary end. Militarism had been crushed, aggression frustrated, tyranny ended, injustice rectified, democracy vindicated, and peace assured; for now, after centuries of yearning and striving, men of good will had

set up a league to preserve peace. No more wars, no more tyranny—mankind had at last sailed into the safe harbors of peace.

Rarely in history have such high hopes been dashed so low, and Wilson added to his tribute the bitter lamentation that the glory of Armistice Day was tarnished by the recollection that “we withdrew into a sullen and selfish isolation which is deeply ignoble . . . cowardly and dishonorable.” So we did, but we were not alone in selfishness or dishonor. Even before the guns fell silent over the stricken battlefields of Europe, the great coalition that had won victory had come apart. Russia, defeated and desperate, had plunged into Communism; and the other partners, each with its own fears and ambitions, glared at each other over the conference tables; while Germany, embittered by defeat, plotted vengeance; and the most ancient of empires fell apart. “Authority was dispersed,” wrote Winston Churchill, “the world unshackled, the weak became the strong, the

sheltered became the aggressive, and a vast fatigue dominated collective action.”

Nineteen-eighteen did not usher in the millennium, it ushered in a half century of conflict—turbulence, war, revolution, desolation, and ruin on a scale never before seen or even imagined. It was a half century that leveled more cities, ravaged more countries, subverted more societies, obliterated more of the past, endangered more of the future, cost more lives, and uncovered more savagery than any time since the barbarians swarmed over Western Europe. Ancient nations were overthrown, empires fragmented, principles of law subverted, and traditional standards of morality repudiated. The era which was to have seen the end of war ushered in instead the most terrible of wars, which rose to a climacteric in the most terrible of weapons; the era which was to have seen the triumph of democracy saw instead the triumph of tyranny; the era which was to have witnessed the tri-

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umph of science over inveterate ills heard instead the hoofbeats of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Once again the blood-dimmed tide was loosed, and the world was sucked into war. Once again the "freedom-loving" nations triumphed; once again men of good will came together to set up a league that would preserve peace; once again major powers were excluded from the new organization — China, Japan, Germany—while those who controlled it used it as a stage on which to indulge their rivalries and voice their grievances. The great powers glared at each other with ceaseless animosity. Soon the hottest of wars was succeeded by the coldest, and we had Robert Frost to remind us that "for destruction ice is also great and would suffice." During the whole quarter century after the fall of Italy, Germany, and Japan, war and violence were continuous: in India and Pakistan, in Israel and the Arab lands, in Greece and Turkey, in Algiers and Tunisia, Hungary and Berlin, Cuba and Haiti, Argentina and Bolivia, the Congo and Nigeria, Laos and Indonesia. If the great powers did not grapple with each other in global wars, they consoled themselves, as it were, with local wars in Korea and Vietnam, and with arming themselves for Armageddon.

How can we explain this long succession of blunders and tragedies almost without parallel in history? How could men whose resolution and courage had triumphed over mortal peril, whose skills and resourcefulness had enabled them to master nature, fail so greatly? They

could control the great globe itself, but not themselves; solve infinite problems, but not finite; penetrate to the stars, but neglect the earth on which they stood. Noble in reason they doubtless were, infinite in faculty, like a god in apprehension, but in action more like a dinosaur unable to adapt to an unfamiliar environment than like an angel. The contrast between intellectual talents and social accomplishments seemed to make a mockery of free will; the contrast between expectations and realities threw doubt on the theory of progress.

There were, no doubt, particular and immediate causes for the collapse of order after the first war. That war had bled victors and vanquished to exhaustion; it had killed off potential leaders of the new generation; it had left a heritage of confusion for victors and bitterness for defeated; it had launched Communism in Russia and revolution elsewhere; it had fatally weakened Britain's hold on her empire; it had left Americans baffled and disillusioned and prepared to embrace isolationism.

**T**HE Second World War had wasted even more human material, and moral resources than the First, and had shattered, even more violently, the existing pattern of political life. But these are excuses rather than explanations. After all, Europe had been afflicted by previous wars, but had recovered and returned to her traditional position. And after all, the United States had been exempted from the wrath of both the great wars and had emerged from both

with her resources unimpaired, yet she too suffered the malaise that afflicted the Old World. We must seek deeper causes for a change in the currents of history so great that it resembles rather a change in the tides of Nature herself. Nor are these hard to find.

First, and most fundamental, among the causes of our malaise is one that we stubbornly refuse to recognize: the emergence of the forgotten, the neglected, the disparaged, the impoverished, the exploited, and the desperate; one-half of the human race came out of the long dusk that hid it from our view and into the bright light of history. Here is not only the greatest revolution of our time but, by almost any test, the greatest revolution since the discovery of America and the shift in the center of gravity from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and beyond. "The peoples of Europe," said Woodrow Wilson at the close of the first war, "are in a revolutionary state of mind. They do not believe in the things that have been practiced upon them in the past, and they mean to have new things practiced." That proved to be true of Russia—a truth even Wilson failed to recognize—and it proved even more true of the vast, heaving, turbulent peoples of Asia and Africa.

**S**TIRRED by the Wilsonian principle of self-determination after the First World War, and released by the breakup of the great empires and colonial systems after the Second, these peoples threw off their ancient bondage and struck for equality. Now they are determined to close, in a single generation, that gap of centuries which separated them from the peoples of the West—to close it peacefully if that is possible, otherwise through revolution and violence. They are determined to wipe out the century-long inferiority, the exploitation, the bondage which the West imposed upon them; to conquer poverty, ignorance, disease that afflict them disproportionately; and to take their equal place among the nations of the world. No wonder the whole globe is convulsed by this prodigious upheaval. The failure of the West, and particularly of the United States, to understand and cooperate with this revolution is a greater blunder, by far, than the earlier failure of Europe to understand the significance of the American Revolution, or of the West, including the United States, to understand the significance of the Russian Revolution. It is a failure of global dimensions.

This was a revolution of two large continents—three if South America is included—against two smaller. No less ominous, it was a revolution of the colored races against the white. The exploitation, the inferiority, the bondage which the West had imposed upon Asia



and Africa was racial as well as geographical. The subjugation of colored peoples by white had gone on for centuries until Europeans, in Old and New Worlds, came to assume that it was part of the cosmic order of things. White Europeans committed genocide against the native races of the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, destroying ancient civilizations, wiping out, by war and disease, perhaps ten millions of Indians—one of the great holocausts of history. White Europeans filled the ranks of labor in the New World by enslaving millions of Africans—a business in which all the civilized nations of Europe engaged. White Europeans invaded Asia, imposed their will on old and proud peoples, and ruled over them with arrogance and violence. Nor was racial exploitation confined to Asia and Africa: It was carried to the New World and flourished for two centuries as slavery and for another as social and economic subjugation.

Here, then, is the second great cause of our current malaise: the racial revolution—a revolution which takes protean form in different countries and continents but has, almost everywhere, two common denominators: the refusal of all colored peoples to wear any longer the badge of inferiority which whites have fastened on them, and the inability of most whites, in America and in Europe, to acknowledge their responsibility and their guilt or to realize that this long chapter of history is coming to an end.

One of the great paradoxes of history is that the revolt of the non-Western world against the West is being carried on with tools and principles fashioned by the West. The tools are science and technology; the principles are those of modern nationalism. Here is a third fundamental explanation of the crisis of our time: the ravages of nationalism. For ours is, indubitably, the great age of nationalism: Within the past quarter century, some sixty nations have been “brought forth” while older nationalism has been given a new lease on life.

In its earlier manifestations—in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—nationalism tended to consolidate, to centralize, to mitigate particularism and parochialism, and to encourage administrative efficiency and cultural unity, especially in the United States, Italy, and Germany. But almost from the beginning—in the Old World and in Spanish America—nationalism stimulated fragmentation along racial, linguistic, and religious lines; almost from the beginning it exacerbated chauvinism, imperialism, and militarism. Whether in the long run the advantages of political efficiency and cultural self-consciousness will outweigh the disadvantages of national antipathies and cultural chauvinism still remains to be decided. But it



—John A. Ruge.

*“I don’t expect the Chinese to behave exactly as we do here in Wilton—but there must be a happy medium.”*

is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the nationalism of our own time is profoundly dangerous.

Alas, the new nations that have emerged from the disruption of empires have imitated, or adopted, all the worst features of the old. Small, they yearn to be large; weak, they pile up armaments; vulnerable, they seek alliances; insecure, they develop into police states; without political traditions, they hover constantly on the brink of civil war or anarchy; without viable economies, they are dependent on richer neighbors; without cultural unity, they manufacture an artificial culture and impose it by force; striving convulsively to be independent, they become increasingly dependent and threaten the peace of their neighbors and of the world. How many recent crises have been precipitated by their ambitions and quarrels—quarrels exploited, all too often, by the great powers: the crisis of Berlin and East Germany, the recurring crises of Arab-Israeli relations, the crises of Cyprus, of the Congo, Algiers, Nigeria, Rhodesia, the crisis of India and Pakistan, of North and South Korea, of Indonesia and Laos and Vietnam.

These new countries, it will be said, are but following the bad example of the older nations of the West. This is true enough, but with two fateful differences: first, the new nations are committed to ideologies that involve them with fellow believers everywhere and engage them in larger quarrels; and, second, that they are operating in a world shadowed by nuclear clouds.

For the triumph of malevolent over benevolent nationalism, the great powers—and most of all the United States and Russia—bear a heavy responsibility. Far from curbing competitive nationalism, they have abetted it. To the new nations of Asia and Africa they pro-

vided lavish military aid—the largest portion of American aid after the war, for example, was military. They interfered high-handedly in the internal affairs of these new nations. They built up networks of alliances designed to bring small nations into the orbit of large; they tried to divide the world into two armed camps with no room for neutralists. Nor did they for a moment curb their own chauvinism, their own commitment to military solutions of world problems, their own traditional nationalism and traditional sovereignty.

CLOSELY related to the revolutionary upsurge of underprivileged peoples and the equally revolutionary impact of the new nationalism was the revolution precipitated by science and technology, and the rising expectations which it nourished. For the first time in history, science and technology seemed to bring the good life within the reach of men and women everywhere—the end of hunger, the wiping out of contagious diseases, the prolongation of life, security from the elements, the preservation and development of natural resources, the pleasures of learning and of the arts. In the twentieth century, it was at least reasonable to hope that the burdens which had for so long afflicted mankind would be lifted.

Once again, expectations were to be disappointed. The gap between what men imagined and what they enjoyed had always been deep; now the gap between what men were taught to expect and what they actually received seemed intolerable. The machinery of life grew ever more elaborate, but the products of that machinery became less and less gratifying. At the end of a generation of unparalleled advance in science and technology, mankind found hunger more widespread, violence more



ruthless, and life more insecure than at any time in the century.

Nor was this disappointment confined to the backward peoples of the globe: Even in America, which boasted almost limitless resources and the most advanced technology, poverty was familiar in millions of households, white as well as black; cities decayed, the countryside despoiled, air and streams polluted; lawlessness, official and private, was contagious; and war and the threat of war filled the minds of men with hatred and fear.

**T**HE symbol—more than the symbol—of this failure of science to bring expected rewards was the discovery and exploitation of nuclear energy. To release the energy of the atom was assuredly one of the greatest achievements in the history of science, and one that held out possibilities almost limitlessly benign. Instead, the United States and, after her, competing powers, concentrated their scientific talents on harnessing atomic energy for war. As Churchill wrote prophetically in 1929: "Without having improved appreciably in virtue or enjoying wiser guidance, mankind has got into its hands for the first time the tools by which it can unfailingly accomplish its own extermination. That is the point in human destinies to which all the glories and toils of men have at last led them." Nor was there any assurance that those who stood at the levers of control would refuse to use these weapons of infinite destruction if they thought their own survival was at stake. After all, Americans had used them in 1945; after all, Americans, Russians, Chinese, and

Frenchmen were carrying on continuous experiments to achieve even greater destructive power. And after all, prominent statesmen, not least those in the United States, did not hesitate to shake the raw head and bloody bones of nuclear destruction at intransigent opponents elsewhere on the globe. And if it could be said that only madmen would actually carry out such threats, the inevitable reply was that two madmen, Hitler and Stalin, had fought their way to power in the recent past, and that as yet the resourcefulness of mankind had not devised any way of preventing a repetition of this monstrous situation.

Finally, consider one of the great paradoxes of our day: at the time of the triumph of the experimental method in science, we should abandon it in the realm of politics. Clearly, one of the causes—and one of the manifestations, too—of our malaise is the rejection of the practical, the relative, the organic view of society and politics, and the embrace of the doctrinaire, the absolute, and the static. The substitution of ideological for realistic policies is the hallmark of much of modern political philosophy, but it has not heretofore been characteristic of the American. In the name of doctrinaire notions of Aryan superiority, Hitler was prepared to bring down a Götterdämmerung upon his own country and the world; in the name of doctrinaire Marxism, the Soviet was prepared to subvert all other governments; and in the name of "containment," the United States seems prepared to bustle about the globe putting down subversion and revolution. Our commitment, to be sure, has not been wholehearted; and the almost in-

stinctive distaste of the American people for ideological principles has inspired widespread protest against the new departure. But even as the bankruptcy of the ideological approach to the great convulsive problems of the world becomes clearer, we seem to adopt the same approach to the issues of domestic politics.

There is nothing more implacable than ideological enmities or crusades—witness the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—and one explanation of the peculiar ferocity of so many of our modern wars, even the American, is the ideological or quasi-religious character. Ordinary rivalries and conflicts involve interests and issues that can be settled by negotiation and compromise. But ideological conflicts are moral, and honorable men find it difficult to compromise on principles or negotiate about morals. Woodrow Wilson had a more doctrinaire mind than Franklin Roosevelt, but Wilson could call for "peace without victory" while Roosevelt insisted on "unconditional surrender."

**T**HE three great powers that glare ceaselessly upon each other now, and whose conflicts shake the globe, are all committed to ideological positions which they find difficult to compromise. The leaders of all three nations know—as religious fanatics of the seventeenth century knew—that they are the pure of heart, that their cause is just, that they stand at Armageddon and battle for the Cause. Naturally, all three attempt to rally the smaller nations to their side, to enlist them in their crusades; and all are inclined to believe that those who are not with them are against them. None can tolerate deviation from the true faith. The Russians put down Hungarians and Czechs who transgress the scriptures; the Chinese punish dissenters even at the cost of civil war; the Americans will tolerate deviation in Guatemala or Santo Domingo and in Cuba only because they have succeeded in isolating it.

The ideological approach took over even in the American domestic arena—in politics, race relations, education, and elsewhere. It stigmatized the crusade of Joseph McCarthy against subversives, real or imagined; it sustains the ceaseless zeal of the House Un-American Activities Committee through the years in its search for Communists in government or in the universities; it provides moral fervor to George Wallace's arguments for white supremacy and logic to opponents of open-housing who proclaim that God is white. It characterizes, alike, students who think that the universities are all corrupt and fit only to be burned because they do not instantly involve themselves in current affairs, a Vice

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"I still have an irresistible impulse to vote for Wallace."

# The Theater

Henry Hewes

## Paradise Later

THE LIVING THEATRE is not allowed to bore us without our permission. And indeed a lot of people departed the premises of the Brooklyn Academy of Music long before *Paradise Now* had completed the opening-night performance of its four-hour marathon to Nirvana. Some of those who sweated it out may have done so because they hoped something sensational might happen, such as someone getting arrested. But a number of theatergoers simply gave The Living Theatre their permission to bore them, because they sensed that out of the proceedings and their free response to them might come something more valuable than entertainment.

The intent of the evening is perhaps best expressed in a statement one of the actors chants while dancing with the fury of an Indian on the warpath. "If I could turn you on, I would drive you out of your wretched mind," he shouts angrily. And the anger could stem from the simple and frustrating fact that *Paradise Now* cannot turn us on the way it would like to, and therefore must settle for making a beginning.

The evening begins with fully clothed actors roaming up and down the aisles to complain to various members of the audience about restrictions on their personal liberty that most of us accept without strenuous objection. If we choose to respond to their complaint with either a challenging remark, a joke, or even an expression of sympathy, the actor merely repeats the complaint, and we assume from this that nothing short of the removal of these restrictions will affect the actor's grief. On opening night in Brooklyn, one aisle-sitter, Richard Schechner, critic and editor of *The Drama Review*, offered a less tentative response. When a fully clothed actor told him lugubriously, "I am not allowed to take my clothes off," Schechner stood up and matter-of-factly removed every stitch of clothing. His gesture seemed to say, "Of course you are allowed to take your clothes off. Haven't I just done so?"

A moment later, all the performers do take their outer clothes off; and for the remainder of the evening, the women perform in bikinis and the men in abbreviated loin cloths. If they are not quite as liberated as critics, they are at least moving toward such freedom.

Some of their rites are marvelously simple. For instance, a girl will approach a man in the audience and, looking at

him with love, touch him gently, saying, "holy person." And if the man responds, there will be a short exchange of blessings and love between them.

Other activities are somewhat more demanding. For instance, in "the rite of universal intercourse," the entire company forms a pile of writhing bodies in the middle of the stage, which is joined by a few adventurous souls from the audience. However desirable such free intermingling of bodies may be, everyone appeared to be using the utmost care not to do anything which might arouse an embarrassing amount of sexual excitement. After all, the company still had a show to give.

A good deal more thorough is something called, "The Vision of the Magic Love Zap." In this action, several members of the company take a girl and subject her body to a variety of sadistic onslaughts. She is spit on, blown on, massaged, wrenched, and given a sort of mass artificial resuscitation. But at the end of this five-minute ordeal, the tormented girl magically emerges smiling.

Another kind of audience response is to join the company in an act of liberation. On opening night, one man suddenly appeared completely naked onstage and danced with the company. And after a while, one of the women in the company removed her bikini and joined him. However, the dance was not erotic for them or for us. More than anything else it was like watching a volleyball session at a nudist camp.

All of these actions produce considerable heckling from the audience. But this heckling, which is generally vulgar, cheap, and insensitive, is perhaps the first step in the audience's liberation. For it is The Living Theatre's view that we are living in a state of emergency, which we make all the worse by refusing to recognize it. The Living Theatre believes it is showing us the nonviolent way to change into something better. And it is a kind of drama when we confront their stated, unassailable, idealistic goals with a practical cynicism.

Contrary to reports, The Living Theatre does not inflict physical violence on theatergoers. On some occasions, it is true, actors will come as close as possible in an attempt to transmit to us what it is like to be threatened with such violence. But we in the audience, knowing that it is all part of the show, can respond to these threats in ways we would never dare to, if we were really being assaulted.

The question every theatergoer must decide for himself is how much tediousness he is willing to suffer in order to experience what The Living Theatre has to offer. For instance, in one of their evenings, titled *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces*, we are asked to watch a man standing absolutely still alone onstage for fifteen minutes. The Living Theatre maintains that just as we might be willing to look at a fine portrait painting for fifteen minutes, so should we be willing to watch this man for an equal period.

Unfortunately, our conventional theater has conditioned us to plays in which actions are sustained only long enough for the playwright to make his point; we then expect a new action or, at the very least, a complication of the point that has been made. It is therefore difficult for us to adjust to such a radical violation of our expectation.

Will the theater of the future move in this direction? The successes of Tom O'Horgan (*Hair*, *Tom Paine*, and *Futz*); Lawrence Sacharow's staging of *The Concept*; and the Performance Group's *Dionysus* in '69 suggest that there is an audience willing to lose itself in the ritual of extended isolated action, and that this audience feels so rewarded by its experience that it no longer cares very much about the plot. Collaterally, there is an increasingly large number of actors who find that yoga exercises and group improvisations permit them a more gratifying total involvement in an artistic experience than does conventional acting.

At the very least, one would expect that playwrights would write more and more plays designed to use these performance techniques so shrewdly that we will never be bored. But until that particular paradise is reached, I accept The Living Theatre, for its memorability, its imagination, and its commitment; and in retrospect, I am glad that I gave it permission to bore me.

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