

THE VICTORY of 40 years ago? Yes, the memories erupt among the old and in due course drift down drearily upon the young. My stepfather, as I can still recall, had memories of the Boer War and its climax of 1901; told in the late 1920s, they summoned for me an irrelevant past of deplorable hatreds and of sentimentalities still worse. My father, having died in 1915, had to keep a decent silence on the First World War; and why should I, born at the outset of that catastrophe, now hold forth on its successor? I do this with no slightest wish to argue warlike virtues, much less to celebrate the gravities or even the buffooneries of military enterprise. I do it because the facts persuade me that all of us, of whatever age, are still contained within the historical arena - the moral and ideological arena, as the matter seems to me - of what was achieved with the necessary victory of 1945, and of what then, with fearsome speed, was forthwith lost: but also, in large degree, forgotten. The size and meaning of that loss are what have traced the route along which we have been dragged, still are being dragged and even faster than before, to the brink of a third and ultimate precipice of ruin.

This is not a fashionable view. An otherwise healthy anti-militarism of the British Left has generally connived with orthodox and official silence - above all, no doubt, a silence in the schools curricula of modern history - to prevent any continued perception of the meaning of the victory of 1945 and of its subsequent denial. Thatcherite attempts to smuggle this meaning out of sight, and to present the whole affair in terms of NATO jargon and the 'defence of the West', have found unhappily a useful if unintentioned partner in the Left's customary indifference to the subject. Why for god's sake hash up those old unhappy far-off things and battles long ago: the dead on those dim hillsides surely cannot help us now? It is an attitude that is easily understood, and yet one of consistent advantage to a Right which is always eager to present itself as the natural guardian of any good that the traditions of a people's patriotism may contain: even when, as in the case of our 'historic' Right, it has so often and so regularly sold the patriotic pass.

The Thatcherite view

The Thatcherites and all their tribe wish us to forget the meaning of the Second World War, as this meaning actually developed in its politics and political attitudes, because these, being intrinsically democratic in radical content and even in revolutionary

implication, were and have remained offensive to the Right, just as they are bound (in the measure of their rescue from oblivion) to reinforce the standpoint and self-confidence of the Left. We are told that we must not celebrate the victory as one over nazi-fascism in all its forms, indirect as well as obvious - we should certainly, if we did, give pain to every conservative government in Europe (not to speak of the Americas) - but merely wave respectful flags in such a way as to draw upon us still more tightly the bonds and perversities of Conservative or para-Conservative policies of 'defence'. The truths that illuminated 1945 must be doused or else reduced to serve the right-wing subversions of today. Reaction, having closed in with its Cold War and found its necessary foil and helper in Stalinism wherever present and in whatever form, must be sheltered from inconvenient memories. It could not face them then; it cannot wish to meet them now.

Let me get into this a little further. What in fact was this development of the politics of the Second World War: the politics, that is, not of governmental declaration or diplomatic intrigue, but of the shift and movement in judgment and expectation among countless millions of Europeans who strove in one way or another for

And the probable war became a dead cert

survival and success? The shift and movement were sometimes plain to see, as for one clear example in the case of Italy, which entered the war as a fascist dictatorship and emerged from it a pluralist democracy. Plain enough, again, in Yugoslavia, which ceased to be a 'neo-colony' of Germany, France and Britain, and became an independent republic; plain too, if in another sense, in Greece which had to be invaded by Britain in 1944 before the democratic gains of that time could be annulled and the path made smooth for another dictatorship of the Right. No doubt this shift and movement were less decisive in other European countries, including our own; and yet even here they were undoubtedly present. So what was the war about, and by what process was it won?

What was it all about?

The war began when the British and French governments, each in strong possession of the Right, preferred not to

The Thatcherites would have us forget the meaning of the Second World War. But what did it mean?

1945 & All That

Basil Davidson

challenge the ambitions of Hitlerite Germany because these, as our Right supposed, would eventually be 'restrained' by the right-wing German interests which had done so much to lever the Nazi party into power. All would be well, seen from the then Thatcherite perspective, since the common capitalist interests of Germany with those of Britain and France would always be less dangerous than any of the rivalries involved; and a war, if it were not averted, would usefully face eastward and eventually against the USSR, rather than anywhere else. It might be necessary to yield some imperial concessions, such as handing back a number of former German colonies in Africa; but all such 'readjustments' would be readily absorbable within the framework of an underlying capitalist consensus. So a Czechoslovak army of comparatively great power and efficacy was thrown away in the British and then French surrender to Hitler at Munich in 1938, and, soon after by the same logic, a potentially decisive offer of alliance by the USSR was similarly rejected. Whereupon Stalin, with an understandable but fatal cynicism, thought to turn the tables by an alliance of his own with Hitler; and the probable war became a dead cert.

The Germans then got entirely out of hand, viewed from the then Thatcherite perspective; and the then Thatcherites, having most horribly backed the wrong horse, found themselves helplessly facing the consequences. France was easily overrun against hesitant generals and politicians who were still living in the traumas wrought by the October revolution and its various sequels, and against a people determined never again to accept the bloodlettings of the Western Front. Running for cover, the bulk of British Conservative opinion turned at last against Neville Chamberlain, their erstwhile 'hero of Munich', and brought in Churchill. They had bitterly disliked him for years but were now content with the decently patriotic

alibi which they hoped that Churchill would provide. Not unreasonably thinking that he could still pull off a deal with Conservative Britain, Hitler failed to press his huge advantage after the debacle of Dunkirk and the Wehrmacht's final destruction of the French army; and Britain was able to win the air war that ensued. Yet it was touch and go. All of Europe lay in Hitler's grasp. With the USA still far from inclined to fight the Nazis, with the USSR an almost complacent partner in the East and now with Fascist Italy joined against us, the prospect of any kind of victory over nazism was strictly nil. Britain might still make peace without being actually occupied and subject to the gas chambers; but

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the peace would be on Hitler's terms.

The transformation of the war

Peace on Hitler's terms was rejected; and here, I think, one may begin to see the onset of that political development, however complex it became, that was long afterwards to lead to the landslide election of a (nonetheless totally astonished) Labour leadership in 1945. The media presentation of Churchill as 'the man who won the war for us' has long concealed the fact that rejection of Hitler's terms for peace, of any terms that the Nazis might offer, was a response which came from the guts and vitals of mass opinion. Meanwhile, of course, the Conservative leadership was left to clear a distance between its attitudes and opinions of 1938 (or earlier) and those with which the nation now faced bombing and worse.

Then came incredible news. Having



1945: VE-DAY celebrations in the streets of London.

previously destroyed the Czechoslovak and Polish states, the Germans invaded their quiescent partner in the East. I happened myself to be in Gibraltar on that June day of 1941 (being a military escapee from Fascist Italy: another story, another time), and a temporary guest of the exiguous garrison who composed the only British troops anywhere on the continent of Europe. The BBC news told us that Hitler had turned against Russia; and we could not believe it. Why ever should Hitler give us a major ally - an immensely powerful one, as it seemed - when perfectly unprovoked by Stalin: while the rest of Europe writhed at his feet and America was coining money from neutrality? As it transpired, the immensely powerful ally in the East was shattered for many months by its own heritage of terror and dictatorship, so that even the central argument for Stalin's pact with Hitler - the winning of time to build stronger defences - proved void of any value.

Huge Soviet armies were engulfed in ruin, and vast areas, before Russian courage and the Russian winter stopped the German armies in front of Moscow, and an eventual turning of the tide became thinkable. But here again one has to mark the fact that this stopping of Hitler's armies was no virtue of Stalin's (subsequent myths apart), but of a people's will to resist and take revenge. That will prevailed. And then the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour, the USA came into the anti-Nazi alliance, and the war ceased to be a lost cause. Millions were still going to die, whether on the battlefields or in bombed cities or in concentration camps and gas chambers; yet the distant prospect, even in face of gross disasters such as the British loss of Singapore and the Soviet loss of lands as far as the Caucasus, was entirely different from the prospect of a year earlier.

The USSR's role

Turning points followed in the latter part of 1942. One was the British defeat of the Afrika Corps at Alamein in the Western Desert; the other was the monumental Soviet victory at Stalingrad. The first proved decisive in that it enabled British and American armies to throw the enemy out of North Africa and achieve Allied domination of the whole Mediterranean theatre. The second proved decisive on a vastly bigger scale, for it settled Hitler's hash on the Eastern Front in 1943 and 1944. Once the Soviet armies had overwhelmed the Wehrmacht in and around Stalingrad, their westward advance went from strength to strength with a daring,

drive, and willingness for self-sacrifice which did indeed tear the guts and sinews out of Hitler's legions and crush them to defeat. Our Thatcherites would like us to forget this, too; but we should not forget it. Whatever else may be said or thought upon the subject, the Soviet armies were then and later the absolutely decisive and indispensable force in securing the victory of 1945. Without their stubborn heroism the war must still have ended in some kind of stalemate, and there could have been no serious reduction of Hitler's Nazi Reich. As it was, the victory became complete.

But what, meanwhile, was all this doing to that elusive, even subterranean, but real and motivating force: the development of political attitude and opinion? Few British historians have cared even to attempt a serious answer, and we are left with little more than guesswork and symbolic anecdote. Here is one of mine of rather more than symbolic value, but still strangely unknown: the brief but instructive story of the 'Cairo Parliament' of late 1943 and early 1944. Promoted by authority as a means of amusing troops who were still in the Western Desert theatre but on leave in Cairo, this 'mock parliament' consisted during the three sessions it was allowed to hold of several hundred soldiers and airmen who set themselves to debate the British postwar future. After division on

There came, in 1945, regimes and governments of 'resistance coalition'

'mock party' lines (King's Regulations forbidding any formal politics), Labour was found to have a huge majority. With the Conservatives a pitiable rump, this majority of early 1944 began to do all manner of terrible things and moved finally, in its third session, to introduce a Bill 'to make provision for the Establishment of a National Banking Corporation', at once passed into 'law' by a large and enthusiastic majority. Whereupon an outraged authority, amazed at such subversion, destroyed the 'parliament' and dispersed its spokesmen.¹ Yet the general election of 1945 was thus foretold, even if Attlee, Morrison, Bevin and co failed to take notice; and I dare say that this may be an anecdote with a widely characteristic meaning.

The Cold War

Within Hitler's 'Fortress Europe', however, the meaning was really in no doubt at



The stark contrast: Nazi Germany mass rally.

all. Great movements of democratic resistance sprang to life in several of the countries occupied by the Nazi-fascists; smaller but still important movements of the same kind erupted in others. These movements were all led by the Left or, at least, were strongly powered by the Left, while the Right had joined Hitler's camp and any organised Centre had vanished from the scene. It could be said without exaggeration that 'occupied Europe' (in the jargon of then) had found the basis for a moral and political unity of action, for an alliance against Nazi-fascism on behalf of a democratic future, which reached in varying but real influence all the way across the political spectrum from communists at one end to republicans and liberals at the other. Out of this extraordinary community of thought and action there came, in 1945, regimes and governments of 'resistance coalition' which, for the valuable two years in which they were allowed to operate before the Cold War crawled in and downed them, were at work in building a

Europe of large potential unities of attitude and approach. It was too good to last? Never mind: it happened.

The gang who govern us now blame the Yalta 'share out' for dividing Europe into grotesque and self-destructive 'halves'. Certainly, Yalta laid down spheres of military command. But these were still not politically decisive in 1945-47: it was the Cold War, beginning in 1947, which dug the trench and installed the barriers and 'curtains' from which Europe has brutally suffered ever since, and may yet suffer far worse. It can be convincingly shown that the American and British governments were the prime culprits for launching that Cold War; but it will in any case remain that Stalinism played directly into their hands, and made the Cold War as 'inevitable' as had the events of 1939 for the bloody battles of the fighting war. But let this pass; the subject here is another one.

Decolonisation

To understand the victory of 1945 in its contemporary reality we have to force our minds back behind the Cold War and whatever of evil that has flowed from it. For the Cold War marked the consistent and ruthless success of all those influences and interests which set themselves to re-

capture the politics of popular initiative from the anti-nazi alliances of wartime resistance, and to subject that initiative to new and eventually right-wing controls: in which I am including, in their degree, Stalinist controls in all those parts of Europe where the USSR emerged as dominant. Yet this initiative achieved a remarkably long range. Consider only the ways in which an initially nationalist conflict became, increasingly, anti-racist but also anti-imperialist. The ambiguities may have been many; the substantial issue is clear.

In August 1940, bidding for Roosevelt's more active help, Churchill felt obliged to sign with him a document called the Atlantic Charter. It contained a promise which ran like a river of hope through the wide colonial world of empire. The Prime Minister and the President engaged their governments, when the war was won, to 'respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them'.² Churchill subsequently tried to confine the promise to peoples overrun by nazi-fascism but Roosevelt, having American reasons for welcoming the demise of

So am I arguing that the war somehow became 'worthwhile'? I am not

European empires, insisted that it must and did apply to colonial peoples as well. As things fell out, Britain by the end of the war could no longer hold India; and others quickly took the point. Why not? British propaganda in East Africa, for a single example among many, presented the great conflict as *vita vya uhuru*, war for freedom: and there is plenty to prove that anti-nazism could not in any case be stopped short of anti-colonialism or, of course, anti-racism.

Was it worthwhile?

Such were the gains of popular initiative, real and potential: a bid for markedly progressive regimes of democracy where dictatorships or reaction had stood before, a challenge to colonialism as a means of government and exploitation, a rejection

¹ The story may be found at some length in my *Special Operations Europe* 1980.

² The best account of all this, so far as I know, is in W R Louis *Imperialism at Bay* 1977.

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of racism; and a lot more besides. So am I arguing that the war somehow became 'worthwhile'? I am not. The war was an irredeemable catastrophe brought upon us by the incompetence and greed of ruling groups and powers, and the consequences of their incompetence and greed: nothing could ever render it worthwhile. Yet the liberating loyalties and understandings which came from resistance to nazi-fascism nonetheless made it possible to extract some good from evil; even, in many cases, a great deal of good for those who were still alive. If the gains were rapidly overtaken and cut down by the Cold War, they were still not cancelled out.

And the road from our present miseries of European division and thus the threat of war are again, it seems to me, plainly there before us, however complicated by time and its inversions: not in any necessarily futile endeavour to 'get back' to the coalitions of 1945, for their components and enabling circumstances have changed or vanished, but in finding ways to move forward to a new embodiment of what was undertaken then. This was to build a consensus such as could enlarge the good that was extracted from catastrophe, and approach a peace across frontiers, suspicions, and the pressures of external pow-

The Cold War marked the consistent and ruthless success of all those influences and interests which set themselves to recapture the politics of popular initiative

ers. 'Neutralism'? No: it is a concept which has no useful value in the politics of today. I am talking about a process of disarmament: essentially and above all, of a process of disarmament of the Cold War in all its instrumentalities. Without this process of political disarmament - a mutual process, need it be insisted? - no degree of military disarmament is going to ensure peace, or even prove obtainable.

I find this to be the meaning, today, of the victory of 1945. The events that led up to that victory can offer no *lessons* for today, theoretical or practical. What they offer, and in spite of all the years between, is a most topical subject for meditation: just how topical, but also just how valuable, may perhaps best be seen in the efforts of the Right to subvert the victory

over nazi-fascism into another scenario for Thatcherite arguments about the 'defence of the West'. That victory was possible for manifold and purely military reasons, the hurling of armies against the enemy, the toil in plants and mines and workshops, the warlike contribution of non-combatants. But it was also possible, and this in a most substantial sense, because the politics of the Second World War ceased to be the politics of reaction and grew into the politics of coalition and co-operation between major strata of whole populations, taking their lead from the Left but within 'popular fronts' built to a scale and power never before imagined or even imaginable. In the years since then the Right has worked to re-legitimate itself in terms of humane and patriotic values; and it has done this with repeated success because it has repeatedly shattered the working unity of left-led coalitions of aim and interest. Perhaps it is more than time that we set aside our doubts and dogmatisms, *in extremis* and yet still at peace, and moved to create new unities of action capable of mastering the dangers that we all face now, and of winning at the earliest opportunity. If so, we might do worse than start with celebrating the victory of 1945 for what it really was.

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