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Dorothy Thompson: Withstanding the Storm

BY MICHAEL J. KIRKHORN

The “unremitting terror” of totalitarianism was Dorothy Thompson’s nightmare. She witnessed the atrocities of Nazism, and later, after the Second World War, the cruelty of Soviet communism. The violent will to power that she described for her millions of readers was for her the nemesis of all hope and goodness. It could not be appeased, it could not be satisfied; it had to be resisted. Her profound recognition of that single necessity, and her frustration with the complacency with which this great threat was met at home drew her, one of the great political journalists of the century, into misjudgments that sometimes jeopardized her reputation.

Like all other professions, journalism depends on the daily proficiency of those who practise it. Such proficiency abounds in American journalism, but it is rare to find journalists who are in every way competent at their business and at the same time see with some consistency the meaning of the unfolding events they witness. In this combination lay Dorothy Thompson’s surpassing professional endowment: she possessed both the aptitude and the durable outlook that produce a great journalistic career.

She had the vocation of journalism and a vision beyond vocation. She was an upstart and a pioneer, she was brainy and deeply intelligent, nervy and courageous, headstrong and wise, brash and knowing. She was an observer and a witness. If some of her judgments seem in retrospect to have been wrong—as she was wrong, probably, to try to be both an independent journalist and an anticommunist propagandist after the Second World War—these were the errors of a passionate nature that was not broken by the horrible events of the 1930s and 1940s.

Journalism always has been a refuge for waywardness and heterodoxy, but only to a point. The circumstances of journalism, the relentless daily deadlines, the unshakable routines, the rituals, the

clannishness, all conspire to prevent the emergence of an adventurous and independent temperament such as Thompson's.

Journalism is an occupation governed by a creed of "objectivity" that provides both an opportunity and a restraint. It allows the observer, the reporter, to work freely and independently, but requires that observer and observed be firmly separated. There is nothing unusual here. Scientists, scholars, police officers, and business managers carry out their duties according to their own accepted views of objectivity. But journalism of the kind that Dorothy Thompson practised tends to put at risk the poise necessary for a cool assessment. The journalist who recognizes the danger of being engulfed by his convictions, but nevertheless retains hope and independence of judgment, is the observer that society needs. Thompson tried heroically throughout her career to maintain that professional identity. It was never easy. There were practical demands. Urgency, deadlines, fatigue, workload (Thompson said she wrote 250,000 words one year), travel, correspondence, personal obligations—the odds were stacked against the survival of a consistent, well-reasoned, and resolutely asserted outlook. Her success by these standards made Dorothy Thompson exceptional.

Born in 1894, the daughter of an itinerant Methodist clergyman, Dorothy Thompson graduated from Syracuse University in 1914—*"cum laude* only, because of those math and physics marks"¹—and after working as a woman suffrage organizer, an advertising copy writer, and a social worker, she took her \$175 in savings to London, determined to be a writer.

She sold some reports on the civil war in Ireland and used the fee to move to a hotel room on the Boulevard Raspail in Paris, where she "visited British and American newspaper offices and wangled feature assignments at space rates—\$10 to \$15 a column". Hearing about a general strike in Rome, she jumped on a train to cover it. She used the money from that job to get to Vienna and then to Budapest, where she interviewed the deposed King of Hungary, who had just failed in an attempt to regain his throne.

She recalled: "I consider the many scoops of those first two years

1. Dorothy Thompson to Mrs. C. B. Wade, 23 March 1951, Dorothy Thompson Papers, Syracuse University Library. The subsequent two autobiographic quotations come from this same letter.



Dorothy Thompson with sculptor Jo Davidson, mid-1930s (Photo: Lotte Jacobi).

in Europe as nine-tenths attributable to a run of luck, but they gave me a reputation ‘in the trade’ for a remarkable ‘nose for news’, and in 1922 I was offered a job as Vienna and Balkan correspondent of the Curtis press. For the first time since leaving home, I had a salary.” She was paid \$50 a week to cover nine nations. That summer she became acting chief of the *Philadelphia Ledger’s* Berlin bureau (Curtis owned the *Ledger*). When her position was confirmed in 1924, she became the first woman ever to head an overseas bureau for an American newspaper. In 1922 she married the Hungarian writer Josef Bard. That marriage, the first of three, lasted until 1927.

During her years in Berlin, her reputation grew steadily. It must be mentioned, however, that she, like others, underrated the potential of Adolf Hitler. After an interview with him in 1931, she noted his “startling insignificance” and predicted that he would never rule Germany. It was not uncommon for journalists of the period to look closely at the rising dictators and decide that they could not possibly be worth all the fuss. Stalin and Franco were small in stature, and Hitler’s strutting and strident oratory seemed comic when compared with the solemn dignity and imperial grandeur of the fallen old regimes. As for Mussolini—depending on which newspaper you were reading—he was either the ruler who had brought efficiency to Italian life or a thug, but no titan. Measured against the fanaticism they inspired, the scope of their power, and the suffering they caused, these surrogate humans all seemed to be miniatures. Thompson was not the only correspondent to mistake their potency.

It did not take her long to readjust her earlier sentiments. To her credit, she provoked the Nazis so fearlessly that they finally expelled her from Germany. Back in New York, she made headlines in 1939 by laughing loudly and derisively at a rally of the German-American Bund in Manhattan. The rally, attended by 19,000 supporters of American Nazi leader Fritz Kuhn and protected from anti-Nazi demonstrators by 1,700 police, glorified Kuhn and denounced President Franklin Roosevelt. The uproar of the occasion attracted the attention of Dorothy Thompson as she drove uptown past Madison Square Garden. Using her press pass to get through police lines, she found a seat in the press section. Her response to the anti-Semitic oratory was a series of piercing guffaws. Tempers flared, and she departed under police escort.

In 1936 she began to write a three-times-a-week column for the *New York Herald Tribune*, a job that confirmed her importance as a political observer. In 1937 (the year of her separation from another vivid and troublesome companion, her second husband, the novelist



A versatile journalist, Dorothy Thompson broadcast her views regularly for NBC (photo from the mid-1930s).

Sinclair Lewis) she undertook the writing of a monthly column for the *Ladies' Home Journal*, whose editors allowed her to depart from politics and write essays on whatever topic she pleased. Her magazine features, which she continued to write for twenty-four years, gave her access to such an enormous audience that by the late 1930s only Eleanor Roosevelt was a better-known American woman. The inventory of the Dorothy Thompson Papers in the Syracuse University Library lists more than 500 articles written *about* her.

She recognized that her *Ladies' Home Journal* articles reached an audience of limited experience, but she rejoiced in the personal tone of these articles, worked very hard at composing them, and never talked down to her readers. The manuscripts of these graciously conceived articles are in her papers at Syracuse. Reading them, one has the impression that they were intended to entertain and to fortify other women with the lessons Thompson herself had learned in her travels, her three marriages, her assessment of both the nobility and



Dorothy Thompson's industry as a reporter earned her the admiration and affection of her colleagues (photo ca. 1940).

the treachery of the public figures she had observed. She exuberantly described her experiences as a gardener and as a resident of New York City, with all the perplexities and frustrations that metropolitan living inflicts on the ordinary daily routine. In her magazine columns, Thompson did not impose her authority. She was only herself, engaging her readers with wise and timely commentary.

A published collection of her magazine columns called *The Courage to Be Happy* (1957) was divided into five parts: Art and Artists, On Children, Elderly Reflections, On Public Affairs, and Observations of Everyday Life. Here was Dorothy Thompson in her tranquil moments; and, taken all together, the columns serve as the autobiography that she never wrote. They are true revelations of character, written conversationally as if for friends.

In one of those columns she overturns the sardonic prejudices of her beloved adversary Sinclair Lewis, who in his popular *Main Street* skewered the false heartiness and frowning morality of the midwestern small town. "How does today's Main Street differ from the one described in Sinclair Lewis's famous novel of 1920?" asked Thompson, who, at the height of her career, was addressing attentive audiences in small towns across the country. "I have spoken in towns of 5000 and upward," she wrote, "always rejoicing when my schedule gave me a free day in which to meet people and look around". She continued:

And if there are any small towns without *proportionately* as many civilized, informed, public-spirited and wide-awake people as there are in the great cities, I haven't been in them. Their local civic consciousness, I think, is higher than that of the Big City populations. In the great cities people vote for reforms. In the little towns they *undertake* the reforms. And the old provincial tightness is disappearing.

On children, a knowing commentary:

Probably the greatest injustice we do to children is our contemporary idealization of them. In the modern book if a child misbehaves or is 'socially maladjusted', it is all the fault of its parents or other adults. The child in this picture comes into the world pure as snow and the characteristics it subse-

quently develops merely reflect its environment. There is never the necessity to reform the child. What is needed is the reform of its parents, preferably with the aid of a professional psychiatrist. . . . All this leaves out of account the fact that healthy children are, among other things, little animals, who only slowly evolve (if they ever do) into civilized human beings, and that the process of evolving is painful to them, and to their caretakers as well, even under the best conditions. Children are not naturally 'good', according to any standards ever set by a civilized society. They are natural barbarians.

On tolerance:

But the word 'tolerance' does not suggest that everything is supportable and that any amount of deviation is allowable. It suggests that one's principles and standards should be tempered with patience, and with readiness to subject them to modification, through practical or intellectual tests. But it does not suggest that one should have no principles or standards. In the contemporary world, I find that for many people this is, however, exactly what they mean by tolerance: a vapid openness to the condoning of anything. Tolerance carried to this conclusion is anarchy.

And finally on the consolations and trials of old age:

But the luxury of such late efforts [useful work done in old age], as I contemplate them for myself, is that they are performed without external ambition, without desire for praise or fear of blame. One joy of old age is that in it we lose such ambitions—the ambition for applause, recognition, popularity; the fear of an endangered 'career'; the pain of the slight. . . . In old age we remember our own youth and try to help the young to realize the ambitions we have ourselves abandoned. And this brings a new, refreshing form of freedom.²

2. Dorothy Thompson, *The Courage to Be Happy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 213, 67, 185, and 115 respectively. This book was published at the end of her twenty years of column-writing for the *Ladies' Home Journal*.

The peace after 1945 introduced a crisis for journalists as well as for everyone else. The agony of that harrowing post-war period, the regret that afflicted those who had fought with arms or words against the dictatorships, sprang from the realization that the dictators had not all been defeated. One remained—Stalin.

Contrary to popular belief, the wartime Stalin was not widely considered a friend of the United States. The Soviet Union had been an ally against Germany; but American correspondents in Moscow had decided in the early 1930s, observing the ruthless destruction of independent peasants who opposed collective farming and later Stalin's infamous purge trials, that the Soviet leader was a monster equal to Hitler. That judgment did not change during the Second World War. The appellation "Uncle Joe" dripped irony.

Thompson had equated the dictatorships of Hitler and Stalin before the Second World War began. After the war was over she continued to denounce dictatorship in her crusade against communism. The Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact of 1939 had signalled to most perceptive journalists that it was pointless to make moral distinctions between the two regimes. Thompson undoubtedly agreed with her friend, Max Ascoli, the magazine editor, who wrote her in 1939:

The Soviet Nazi Pact will be the ruin of both. They have thrown away the ideological mask, and show now the ugly face of cynical tyrannical nationalism. Hitler has underestimated human nature. He did not foresee the reaction of the man in the street, not only in London, but everywhere. He (and Stalin) did not realize that there are limits to sentimental allegiance, party discipline, and human idiocy.³

But when the war was over, and the violence had subsided to localized civil and anti-colonial outbursts, then relief was expected—a reward for sacrifice for suffering. But that expectation was thwarted by an ungrateful, dark-minded Stalin, and so betrayal became the spirit of the immediate post-war years. American journalists, continuing their crusade against dictatorship, talked privately and even speculated publicly about the possibility of war against the Soviet

3. Max Ascoli to Dorothy Thompson, 25 August 1939, Dorothy Thompson Papers.

Union. In a long, undated, unpublished column from this period, Thompson expressed a bitterness typical of the time. Because the article is so very nearly a précis of Western resentment against the Soviets, it deserves some attention.

Thompson wrote that the “swiftly growing reaction against Russia” could be explained in terms of the perceived betrayal of “American faith and hope during the war”. Nobody had mistaken the Soviet Union for a democracy, she continued. President Roosevelt had said it was “run by a dictatorship as absolute as any other dictatorship in the world”. But then, the suppression of liberty is not unusual in the aftermath of revolution. American “faith and hope” had been directed to the possibility that the “self-abnegating [wartime] effort of the Russian people would convince Russia’s leaders of their democratic trustworthiness, and lead to the abandonment of the Gestapo terrorism of the NKVD”.

“It was also our hope, and faith that the utter fidelity with which both Britain and America supported the Soviet Union throughout the war would end any justified or unjustified Russian distrust.” Americans were willing to “forgive and forget” the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, which “had actually given the Hitlerites the green light to a world war”.

The West experienced moments of doubt, Thompson wrote, in which the outcome of communist belief and behavior was questioned: “Can communist cultism, organized like a medieval secret order, with a priesthood, a police and an inquisition, reform itself into a modern, liberal, democratic movement?” Why, during the war, did communist propagandists throughout the world demand an immediate “second front”, an attack on heavily fortified Western Europe by the United States and Great Britain? “Did these obedient cliques care nothing for the lives of American boys? Were they listening to any voices but the voice of Stalin?”

“Yet, we said: No”, Thompson continued. “We shall prove our confidence, trust and trustworthiness. We shall hold faith that it will not be betrayed. Loyalty, we said, begets loyalty.” But as Germany collapsed, the Soviet Union began “reversing every war-time pledge and policy. And not only was the quarter of a century of communist despotism to be fastened again upon the necks of the long suffering, heroically-enduring, eternally-hoping, eternally-serving Russian people—but naked and unashamed it was seeking new people to subject.”

“Thus,” she concluded, “we are forced, however reluctantly, again to review developments since the war, and because of these to revise a previous judgment. As the faith and hope were sincere, so is the revised judgment.”⁴

This article probably was written in 1946, and the outlook that produced its judgments did not change appreciably in the ensuing years. A letter to Marc C. de Conti in 1951 expressed her fear of a “German-Slavic world empire” and criticized the United States’ post-war German policy, which she said, “has been greatly colored by Jewish revengism”. The evidence from Eastern Europe, she wrote, “shows the Russians planning for war, and soon”.⁵

To the extent that the article and the letter sound vaguely prescriptive, as though exhorting a change of attitude, they are characteristic of the tendency of conservative American political journalism in the early Cold War period to warn Americans against the possibility of friendship with the Soviet Union. But there is no question that Dorothy Thompson, a student of European affairs since the 1920s, an omnivorous reader of European history, held these views with great conviction.

Her papers in the Syracuse University Library offer ample proof that Dorothy Thompson was speaking her convictions. First, there is the grimness that permeated her judgments. She was not pessimistic by nature, though she might have been. Later in life she married the artist Maxim Kopf, but though the partnership was happy, she never quite recovered from the failure of her marriage to Sinclair Lewis, nor from the loss of her stepson, Lewis’s only son, Wells Lewis, who was killed in the Second World War. Hers was a sturdy character, and those who were weaker did not hesitate to take advantage of her strong shoulders. Friends such as the often-penniless, complaining fellow-journalist Vincent Sheean burdened her with dependency, about which she never complained.

The career of a national political commentator of her stature is demandingly political, requiring speeches, public appearances, and frequent negotiations with syndication services and other agencies,

4. An unused piece by Dorothy Thompson, written for her “On the Record” column, probably in 1946, Dorothy Thompson Papers.

5. Dorothy Thompson to Marc C. de Conti, 14 March 1951, Dorothy Thompson Papers.

as well as correspondence with editors and publishers of some of the hundreds of newspapers who carried her column. She was busy, and beset, but her view of the world was consistently her own, and what pessimism she gave vent to was a philosophical response to what seemed to her to be a decline in conviction and in the moral and political power of the free nations of the West.

Her most profound doubts about the future she confided only to her friends. The concern she had in common with her friend Walter Lippmann, who had been worrying for decades over the “drift” of democratic institutions, was the loss of fundamental belief as the onslaught of modern life cut humanity from its sources of stability and good sense. To Lippmann, however, the issue was a public one—for which he blamed the public. An unmoored humanity he thought useless, offering neither wisdom nor guidance toward a sound public policy. Thompson, who would soon be a mobilizer of public opinion, retained a belief in the ability of people to resist the fanaticism that threatened democracy. Without question, her personal views were at times bleak. In a letter written in 1948 to Vincent Sheean she said, “Personally, Jimmie, I think the whole world is going to go down in chaos, slime, brutality and collapse. In the world in which we live, ruthlessness will triumph, only because there is nothing to oppose it with, except the spirit of a very few. There will be a new dark ages.”⁶ In 1951 she wrote Lippmann: “The sickness of our civilization is too deep to be cured by any therapy of words. The blind are leading the blind—and none of us has good sight. The contemplation of physical destruction is not, however, what depresses me most. It is the terrible intellectual and moral deterioration that shows itself everywhere.”⁷

In a diary entry of 24 February 1945, she had written a note on the Yalta meetings of Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill, which she had glimpsed in a newsreel, and observed: “The world wears a terrible countenance of brass”.⁸

Yet this was a woman capable of transcending in public life her

6. Dorothy Thompson to Vincent (“Jimmie”) Sheean, 28 February 1948, Dorothy Thompson Papers.

7. Dorothy Thompson to Walter Lippmann, 21 June 1951, Dorothy Thompson Papers.

8. Diary entry, 24 February 1945, Dorothy Thompson Papers.

unhappiest private doubts about the future. She observed the seemingly overwhelming totalitarianism, but did not resign herself to it. She continued to hope, and her hopefulness nourished her journalism and fortified her for the work she would do as an organizer against the evil she so greatly feared.

The impetus for organizational work appeared in 1941, when she delivered an inspiring speech at a rally of the Anti-Nazi League in New York City. The invitation to speak had stimulated her to think beyond Nazism—which she had defied and reviled in every way that she could—down to the very core of the human problem, the corruption of civilization.

In a letter to her friend, the New York banker Thomas Lamont, she recounted the birth of the impulse that led to her involvement in the founding of an organization called the Ring of Freedom, which was intended to mobilize support for democratic ideals. The Ring of Freedom later was absorbed by an organization with similar ideals called Freedom House, of which Thompson became president.

“I had long believed”, she told Lamont, “that being anti-Nazi is simply not enough. Naziism is a disease of our times, with more than purely Germanic roots, and it has grown in the soul of an impotent and corrupt century, which has also had great social and economic problems to solve.” Only a “positive philosophy would bring to birth that decent and reasonable world for which peoples everywhere are yearning”.⁹ This philosophy (made up of “banalities”, as she called them: that is, “the long-neglected facts of life”) was expressed as “ten articles of personal faith”. She read them at the rally, where they inspired enthusiastic support for the Ring of Freedom. The ten points proclaimed the value of tolerance, equality, and social responsibility. “The nation or community has a duty to the world of nations and communities”, stated one. Another read: “The individual life finds full expression and happiness only as it is related to a moral and social purpose”. These “banalities” inspired not only spontaneous adherence among her listeners, but also, to herself, an idea that she played out in the last seven pages of her long letter to Lamont.

The principle that she discovered, which would continue to guide

9. Dorothy Thompson to Thomas Lamont, 1 October 1941, Dorothy Thompson Papers.



Dorothy Thompson having a 'cuppa' with local officials, in Jarrow, England, a shipbuilding town notoriously hard hit during the depression of the 1930s. At her left is Ellen Wilkinson, M.P., who led the famous "Jarrow Crusade" to Westminster in 1936.

her public life, was *action*. In wartime Great Britain, she told Lamont, "I saw suddenly and quite clearly, that regeneration does not come through the preaching of abstract truths, but through action along lines that make these truths corporal. People become by doing, not by thinking—that is to say, masses of people do. The community as a whole can only act its way through."

War, then, was the opportunity for spiritual mobilization, and a dimly visible utopia, far in the distance, was the unspoken goal—evident in the fervor of her statement to her admirer, Lamont: "You will say, 'It is hard'. Don't I know it. But we have got to *begin doing things that are hard*. It is very hard for me. It is foreign to my temperament and even my talents. It will cost me enormous work to collaborate with it [her crusade], and money, too. But we must begin living beyond our normal physical and mental means—and by living beyond them, raise them to the level of necessity."

On a reporting trip to Europe at the end of the war, she heard about atrocities committed by the Red army, and these reports confirmed her belief that the Soviets were the barbarians who would succeed the Nazis as enemies of the West. A diary entry for 1946 said, "Nothing will stop the Russians except fear".¹⁰ In 1948 she said in a letter to A. J. Muste: "The essence of communism is violence".¹¹

Impelled by these bitter convictions, Dorothy Thompson became a propagandist. She understood propaganda. In 1935 Thompson had been invited to speak at the annual convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Propaganda was her topic, and she came quickly to a point that she could make eloquently and with authority because it had been on the minds of foreign correspondents of her generation for a decade. She described the potency of terror and propaganda as they were used alternately by totalitarian states for the purpose of forcing acquiescence.

Western journalists, she said, "are trying to represent a theory of journalism, a theory of what journalism stands for, a thesis of journalism, a philosophy of journalism, in countries where this philosophy is fundamentally repudiated. The thing which we are all up against is propaganda. Sometimes I think that this age is going to be called the age of propaganda, an unprecedented rise of propaganda, propaganda as a weapon, propaganda as a technique, propaganda as a fine art, and propaganda as a form of government. I don't think it can be denied today that in most of the dictatorships, actual rule, actual government is today performed largely by two weapons, terror and the written and spoken word, and the written and spoken word doesn't necessarily have any relation whatever to the truth."¹²

How did it happen, a decade after her speech to the editors, that so wary a critic of propaganda, one who so thoroughly understood its blunt purposes as a weapon of dictators, could devote her energies to three organizations that may have retained some vestige of the Ring of Freedom but were, in the main, political instruments and sources of propaganda: The American Committee for the Investigation of

10. An undated diary entry from 1946, from the Dorothy Thompson Papers.

11. Dorothy Thompson to A. J. Muste, 6 April 1948, Dorothy Thompson Papers.

12. Proceedings, Thirteenth Annual Convention, American Society of Newspaper Editors, "Problems of Journalism", 1935, 105-14.

the Katyn Massacre; the World Organization of Mothers of All Nations; and the American Friends of the Middle East? How could an eminent journalist who prided herself on her independence become so broadly involved politically?

The Katyn Committee, with Thompson as vice-chairman, was intended to investigate the Soviet massacre of thousands of officers of the defeated Polish army who had fallen into Soviet hands at Katyn, near Smolensk, in 1940. Among its board members were William Donovan, who had led the Office of Strategic Services, predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency, and Allen Dulles, who would become CIA director. The Mothers of All Nations was a fuzzily conceived, short-lived effort to mobilize mothers for the pursuit of world peace. The organization did not come to much in the United States (it is not even mentioned by Thompson's biographer). Its political identity never emerged, although it endured for a while in Europe, where eventually East German propagandists saw its potential as a mobilizing device. The American Friends of the Middle East, Thompson's most ambitious political enterprise, supported an even-handed United States foreign policy toward the Arab nations at a time when opinion was swinging toward the support of Israel as a bulwark against Soviet subversion.

Thompson justified this political work by saying that she was very careful to protect her independence as a journalist and keep it separate from other activities. This was an impracticable goal, but she seemed to need to be actively involved. She was a crusader by nature. Nevertheless, as a journalist she was required to express her views to millions of people with considered restraint. American journalists, even columnists, are not rilers; shrillness and excessive passion are the qualities of agitation, not journalism. The public should be calmly informed. So Thompson, who subscribed to this code, had to crusade as a sideline, but the point was that she *had to*. We usually think of crusaders as single-minded zealots. Thompson could not afford to be single-minded. As her private pessimism was separated from her judicious analysis of events, and as those events foreshadowed the dark movements of history that she feared, she was obliged to maintain a double allegiance—to responsible journalism and to the struggle against gathering darkness, of which the Ring of Freedom was probably the purest expression.

Her political involvement, especially in the Middle East, threat-



Dorothy Thompson visiting a ceramic workshop in Iran in the early 1950s.

ened her journalistic prestige. Thompson was thoroughly worried about Zionism and Israel's influence in the United States and on American politics. It seemed to her that in the postwar period, elected politicians were unwilling to resist these influences. She restrained her views publicly, but undoubtedly listened sympathetically to accusations such as those expressed in a letter from William A. Eddy, for-

mer U. S. Minister to Saudi Arabia and an employee of the Trans-Arabian Pipe Line Company. American politicians “wantonly have thrown away the friendship of the people of the Near East”, Eddy said, and did it “for a mess of Zionist votes”.¹³

Recalling perhaps how avidly her anti-Nazi oratory had been applauded, and stung by the ungrateful criticism of her pro-Arab views, Thompson wrote to C. S. Freeman of the Holy Land Christian Committee that “systematic intimidation, character assassination, inference of personal scandal, impuning [sic] of motives, organization of boycotts [sic], or threats of boycott, are all among the weapons used by the Zionists”.¹⁴ The energy consumed in fuming invective, which she usually confined to her correspondence and conversations, was not the least of the costs of her political involvement.

Thompson continued to travel to the Middle East, a part of the world that fascinated her. In 1958, shortly after Kopf’s fatal heart attack, she retired from journalism. She never completed the autobiography that every journalist hopes to write. She died while visiting her daughter-in-law and grandchildren in Portugal in 1961. She was 67 years old.

She had lived a successful life, and in moments when confidence faltered she could rely on some consolations. The mastery of craft is a consolation, and Thompson was proud of her skill as a journalist. She had a great career, and its earlier years were spent among the finest generation of foreign correspondents ever seen in the American press. She recognized that fact. When Elmer Davis, a journalistic colleague, died in 1958, she wrote a commemorative column in which she recalled that the correspondents of their day had been “notable for their rugged independence of mind, their outspoken expression, their defiance of regulations imposed by government agencies, their imperviousness to propaganda, and sometimes the breadth, even profundity, of their educational background”.¹⁵

Of all the journalists of her time, she was the most active and determined crusader, and of those who involved themselves in poli-

13. William A. Eddy to Dorothy Thompson, 23 November 1951, Dorothy Thompson Papers.

14. Dorothy Thompson to C. S. Freeman, 9 April 1951, Dorothy Thompson Papers.

15. “On the Record” column, for publication 25 May 1958, Dorothy Thompson Papers.

tics, she was possibly the only one who remained a regularly published journalist, holding onto her profession and her activism—and her double identity.

Thompson's crusading had been an expression of her need for action, which she had discovered so dramatically during the heroism of the Battle of Britain. After that, journalism itself was not enough, not a sufficient response to the evil of Hitler and Stalin. But journalism sustained her, and she stayed with it. One wonders what directions she might have taken if Stalinism had not immediately succeeded Nazism as occupier—as preoccupier—of so much of her interest.

The storms of the twentieth century splintered her career as they did many others. In the end she was a journalist who had much that was valuable to say about the political conflicts she had witnessed and, in her magazine columns, about the qualities of common life that might survive the conflict.

Her generation of journalists was remarkable for its response to evils of an enormity never before imagined. It is impressive to notice how, as they witnessed one awful crisis after another, they were served well by the orthodox journalistic code—objectivity. They were immeasurably, almost intolerably provoked, but they found their own power in their ability to see through their passions, to exercise the intensity of the deliberately unimpassioned witness. One thinks of *Life* magazine photographer Margaret Bourke-White, of her efforts to see the victims of concentration camps as images, so that, having set aside her own disgust and horror, she could better pass on what she had witnessed. That was her job. To all these conveyors of information, observation was not a form of inaction, or uninvolvedness. It was an unflinching exercise—a way of insisting that humanity know the horrors it had perpetrated. Some might say that observation of that kind was redemptive—an acceptance of the burden of evil.

Some journalists of Thompson's generation found that by practising journalism in the most disturbing circumstances, they had come to a stoical form of observation, one offering refuge in the conviction that they had protected their own integrity and that, for what it could count, they had been honest. Martha Gellhorn, a lifelong journalist and correspondent of that generation, had no doubt after the Second World War that journalism was futile. She wrote, "Apparently people would not learn for themselves, nor from others. If the agony of the Second World War did not teach them, whatever

would? Surely the postwar world is a mockery of hope and an insult to all those who died so that we should survive.” Journalism was not a way of informing people so that they could be better, and make a better world. It was, Gellhorn said, “a means; and I now think that the act of keeping the record straight is valuable in itself. Serious, careful, honest journalism is essential, not because it is a guiding light but because it is a form of honorable behaviour.”¹⁶

Dorothy Thompson might have been satisfied with “honorable behavior” in the practice of her craft. But she recognized the enormous moral scope of the challenge presented by the evil of totalitarianism and the irresolute nature of the democratic response. She worried over it, and it carried her beyond journalism.

Politics is the encompassing reality of journalism. But the ambitions of Hitler and Stalin seemed to Thompson to transcend politics. They practised a “metapolitics” against which conventional responses were useless. They were, to Thompson, forces of evil. They compelled her to act outside journalism.

Thompson spanned two generations of journalists—those she admired, her companions from the 1930s, most of whose careers ended with the war’s end; and the generation of Cold War journalists who came out of the war to face the deceits of Stalin. The Cold War generation tended quickly to decide on the evil nature of Stalin’s ambitions and to respond by aligning themselves with the views of the United States government. One question for them is whether their political response to Stalin’s betrayal of the peace in fact betrayed the independence of journalism, by using it to abet government policy. Should journalism have joined the Cold War as an interested party and advocate, or tried strenuously to keep its distance?

Thompson’s career did not resolve that dilemma, but its cloven character suggests how severely the perception of overwhelming evil tested one of the century’s most conscientious observers.

16. Martha Gellhorn, *The Face of War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988), 3.