

GEORGE

**FASCISM
AND
DEMOCRACY**

ORWELL

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George Orwell
Fascism and Democracy

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Fascism and Democracy

February 1941

One of the easiest pastimes in the world is debunking Democracy. In this country one is hardly obliged to bother any longer with the merely reactionary arguments against popular rule, but during the last twenty years 'bourgeois' Democracy has been much more subtly attacked by both Fascists and Communists, and it is highly significant that these seeming enemies have both attacked it on the same grounds. It is true that the Fascists, with their bolder methods of propaganda, also use when it suits them the aristocratic argument that Democracy 'brings the worst men to the top', but the basic contention of all apologists of totalitarianism is that Democracy is a fraud. It is supposed to be no more than a cover-up for the rule of small handfuls of rich men. This is not altogether false, and still less is it obviously false; on the contrary, there is more to be said for it than against it. A sixteen-year-old schoolboy can attack Democracy much better than he can defend it. And one cannot answer him unless one knows the anti-democratic 'case' and is willing to admit the large measure of truth it contains.

To begin with, it is always urged against 'bourgeois' Democracy that it is negated by economic inequality. What is the use of political liberty, so called, to a man who works 12 hours a day for £3 a week? Once in five

years he may get the chance to vote for his favourite party, but for the rest of the time practically every detail of his life is dictated by his employer. And in practice his political life is dictated as well. The monied class can keep all the important ministerial and official jobs in its own hands, and it can work the electoral system in its own favour by bribing the electorate, directly or indirectly. Even when by some mischance a government representing the poorer classes gets into power, the rich can usually blackmail it by threatening to export capital. Most important of all, nearly the whole cultural and intellectual life of the community – newspapers, books, education, films, radio – is controlled by monied men who have the strongest motive to prevent the spread of certain ideas. The citizen of a democratic country is 'conditioned' from birth onwards, less rigidly but not much less effectively than he would be in a totalitarian state.

And there is no certainty that the rule of a privileged class can ever be broken by purely democratic means. In theory a Labour government could come into office with a clear majority and proceed at once to establish socialism by Act of Parliament. In practice the monied classes would rebel, and probably with success, because they would have most of the permanent officials and the key men in the armed forces on their side. Democratic methods are only possible where there is a fairly large basis of agreement between all political parties. There is no strong reason for thinking that any really fundamental change can ever be achieved peacefully.

Again, it is often argued that the whole façade of

democracy – freedom of speech and assembly, independent trade unions and so forth – must collapse as soon as the monied classes are no longer in a position to make concessions to their employees. Political ‘liberty’, it is said, is simply a bribe, a bloodless substitute for the Gestapo. It is a fact that the countries we call democratic are usually prosperous countries – in most cases they are exploiting cheap coloured labour, directly or indirectly – and also that Democracy as we know it has never existed except in maritime or mountainous countries, i.e. countries which can defend themselves without the need for an enormous standing army. Democracy accompanies, probably demands, favourable conditions of life; it has never flourished in poor and militarised states. Take away England’s sheltered position, so it is said, and England will promptly revert to political methods as barbarous as those of Rumania. Moreover all government, democratic or totalitarian, rests ultimately on force. No government, unless it intends to connive at its own overthrow, can or does show the smallest respect for democratic ‘rights’ when once it is seriously menaced. A democratic country fighting a desperate war is forced, just as much as an autocracy or a Fascist state, to conscript soldiers, coerce labour, imprison defeatists, suppress seditious newspapers; in other words, it can only save itself from destruction by ceasing to be democratic. The things it is supposed to be fighting for are always scrapped as soon as the fighting starts.

That, roughly summarised, is the case against ‘bourgeois’ Democracy, advanced by Fascists and Communists alike, though with differences of emphasis.

At every point one has got to admit that it contains much truth. And yet why is it that it is ultimately false – for everyone bred in a democratic country knows quasi-instinctively that there is something wrong with the whole of this line of argument?

What is wrong with this familiar debunking of Democracy is that it cannot explain the whole of the facts. The actual differences in social atmosphere and political behaviour between country and country are far greater than can be explained by any theory which writes off laws, customs, traditions, etc. as mere 'superstructure'. On paper it is very simple to demonstrate that Democracy is 'just the same as' (or 'just as bad as') totalitarianism. There are concentration camps in Germany; but then there are concentration camps in India. Jews are persecuted wherever fascism reigns; but what about the colour laws in South Africa? Intellectual honesty is a crime in any totalitarian country; but even in England it is not exactly profitable to speak and write the truth. These parallels can be extended indefinitely. But the implied argument all along the line is that a difference of degree is not a difference. It is quite true, for instance, that there is political persecution in democratic countries. The question is how much. How many refugees have fled from Britain, or from the whole of the British Empire, during the past seven years? And how many from Germany? How many people personally known to you have been beaten with rubber truncheons or forced to swallow pints of castor oil? How dangerous do you feel it to be to go into the nearest pub and express your opinion that this is a capitalist war and we ought to stop fighting? Can you point to anything

in recent British or American history that compares with the June Purge, the Russian Trotskyist trials, the pogrom that followed vom Rath's assassination? Could an article equivalent to the one I am writing be printed in any totalitarian country, red, brown or black? The *Daily Worker* has just been suppressed, but only after ten years of life, whereas in Rome, Moscow or Berlin it could not have survived ten days. And during the last six months of its life Great Britain was not only at war but in a more desperate predicament than at any time since Trafalgar. Moreover – and this is the essential point – even after the *Daily Worker's* suppression its editors are permitted to make a public fuss, issue statements in their own defence, get questions asked in Parliament and enlist the support of well-meaning people of various political shades. The swift and final 'liquidation' which would be a matter of course in a dozen other countries not only does not happen, but the possibility that it *may* happen barely enters anyone's mind.

It is not particularly significant that British Fascists and Communists should hold pro-Hitler opinions; what is significant is that they dare to express them. In doing so they are silently admitting that democratic liberties are *not* altogether a sham. During the years 1929–34 all orthodox Communists were committed to the belief that 'Social-fascism' (i.e. Socialism) was the real enemy of the workers and that capitalist Democracy was in no way whatever preferable to Fascism. Yet when Hitler came to power scores of thousands of German Communists – still uttering the same doctrine, which was not abandoned till some time later – fled to France, Switzerland,

England, the USA or any other democratic country that would admit them. By their action they had belied their words; they had 'voted with their feet', as Lenin put it. And here one comes upon the best asset that capitalist Democracy has to show. It is the comparative feeling of security enjoyed by the citizens of democratic countries, the knowledge that when you talk politics with your friend there is no Gestapo ear glued to the keyhole, the belief that 'they' cannot punish you unless you have broken the law, the belief that the law is above the State. It does not matter that this belief is partly an illusion – as it is, of course. For a widespread illusion, capable of influencing public behaviour, is itself an important fact. Let us imagine that the present or some future British government decided to follow up the suppression of the *Daily Worker* by utterly destroying the Communist Party, as was done in Italy and Germany. Very probably they would find the task impossible. For political persecution of that kind can only be carried out by a full-blown Gestapo, which does not exist in England and could not at present be created. The social atmosphere is too much against it, the necessary personnel would not be forthcoming. The pacifists who assure us that if we fight against Fascism we shall 'go Fascist' ourselves forget that every political system has to be operated by human beings, and human beings are influenced by their past. England may suffer many degenerative changes as a result of war, but it cannot, except possibly by conquest, be turned into a replica of Nazi Germany. It may develop towards some kind of Austro-fascism, but not towards Fascism of the positive, revolutionary, malignant type.

The necessary human material is not there. That much we owe to three centuries of security, and to the fact that we were not beaten in the last war.

But I am not suggesting that the 'freedom' referred to in leading articles in the *Daily Worker* is the only thing worth fighting for. Capitalist Democracy is not enough in itself, and what is more it cannot be salvaged unless it changes into something else. Our Conservative statesmen, with their dead minds, probably hope and believe that the result of a British victory will be simply a return to the past: another Versailles Treaty, and then the resumption of 'normal' economic life, with millions of unemployed, deer-stalking on the Scottish moors, the Eton and Harrow match on July 11th, etc., etc. The anti-war theorists of the extreme Left fear or profess to fear the same thing. But that is a static conception which fails even at this date to grasp the power of the thing we are fighting against. Nazism may or may not be a disguise for monopoly capitalism, but at any rate it is not capitalistic in the nineteenth-century sense. It is governed by the sword and not by the cheque-book. It is a centralised economy, streamlined for war and able to use to the very utmost such labour and raw materials as it commands. An old-fashioned capitalist state, with all its forces pulling in different directions, with armaments held up for the sake of profits, incompetent idiots holding high positions by right of birth, and constant friction between class and class, obviously cannot compete with that kind of thing. If the Popular Front campaign had succeeded and England had two or three years ago joined up with France and the USSR for a preventive war – or threat of

war – against Germany, British capitalism might perhaps have been given a new lease of life. But this failed to happen and Hitler has had time to arm to the full and has succeeded in driving his enemies apart. For at least another year England must fight alone, and against very heavy odds. Our advantages are, first of all, naval strength, and secondly the fact that our resources are in the long run vastly greater – if we can use them. But we can only use them if we transform our social and economic system from top to bottom. The productivity of labour, the morale of the Home front, the attitude towards us of the coloured peoples and the conquered European populations, all ultimately depend on whether we can disprove Goebbels's charge that England is merely a selfish plutocracy fighting for the *status quo*. For if we remain that plutocracy – and Goebbels's pictures is not *entirely* false – we shall be conquered. If I had to choose between Chamberlain's England and the sort of régime that Hitler means to impose on us, I would choose Chamberlain's England without a moment's hesitation. But that alternative does not really exist. Put crudely, the choice is between socialism and defeat. We must go forward, or perish.

Last summer, when England's situation was more obviously desperate than it is now, there was a widespread realisation of this fact. If the mood of the summer months has faded away, it is partly because things have turned out less disastrously than most people then expected, but partly also because there existed no political party, newspaper or outstanding individual to give the general discontent a voice and a direction. There

was no one capable of explaining – in such a way as would get him a hearing – just why we were in the mess we were and what was the way out of it. The man who rallied the nation was Churchill, a gifted and courageous man, but a patriot of the limited, traditional kind. In effect Churchill said simply, ‘We are fighting for England,’ and the people flocked to follow him. Could anyone have so moved them by saying, ‘We are fighting for socialism’? They knew that they had been let down, knew that the existing social system was all wrong and that they wanted something different – but was it socialism that they wanted? What *was* socialism, anyway? To this day the word has only a vague meaning for the great mass of English people; certainly it has no emotional appeal. Men will not die for it in anything like the numbers that they will die for King and Country. However much one may admire Churchill – and I personally have always admired him as a man and as a writer, little as I like his politics – and however grateful one may feel for what he did last summer, is it not a frightful commentary on the English socialist movement that at this date, in the moment of disaster, the people still look to a Conservative to lead them?

What England has never possessed is a socialist party which meant business *and* took account of contemporary realities. Whatever programmes the Labour Party may issue, it has been difficult for ten years past to believe that its leaders expected or even wished to see any fundamental change in their own lifetime. Consequently, such revolutionary feeling as existed in the leftwing movement has trickled away into various blind alleys, of

which the Communist one was the most important. Communism was from the first a lost cause in western Europe, and the Communist parties of the various countries early degenerated into mere publicity agents for the Russian régime. In this situation they were forced not only to change their most fundamental opinions with each shift of Russian policy, but to insult every instinct and every tradition of the people they were trying to lead. After a civil war, two famines and a purge their adopted Fatherland had settled down to oligarchical rule, rigid censorship of ideas and the slavish worship of a Fuehrer. Instead of pointing out that Russia was a backward country which we might learn from but could not be expected to imitate, the Communists were obliged to pretend that the purges, 'liquidations', etc. were healthy symptoms which any right-minded person would like to see transferred to England. Naturally the people who could be attracted by such a creed, and remain faithful to it after they had grasped its nature, tended to be neurotic or malignant types, people fascinated by the spectacle of successful cruelty. In England they could get themselves no stable mass following. But they could be, and they remain, a danger, for the simple reason that there is no other body of people calling themselves revolutionaries. If you are discontented, if you want to overthrow the existing social system by force, and if you wish to join a political party pledged to this end, then you must join the Communists; effectively there is no one else. They will not achieve their own ends, but they may achieve Hitler's. The so-called People's Convention, for instance, cannot conceivably win power in England, but it may

spread enough defeatism to help Hitler very greatly at some critical moment. And between the People's Convention on the one hand, and the 'my country right or wrong' type of patriotism on the other, there is at present no seizable policy.

When the real English socialist movement appears – it must appear if we are not to be defeated, and the basis for it is already there in the conversations in a million pubs and air-raid shelters – it will cut across the existing party divisions. It will be both revolutionary and democratic. It will aim at the most fundamental changes and be perfectly willing to use violence if necessary. But also it will recognize that not all cultures are the same, that national sentiments and traditions have to be respected if revolutions are not to fail, that England is not Russia – or China, or India. It will realise that British Democracy is *not* altogether a sham, *not* simply 'superstructure', that on the contrary it is something extremely valuable which must be preserved and extended, and above all, must not be insulted. That is why I have spent so much space above in answering the familiar arguments against 'bourgeois' Democracy. Bourgeois Democracy is not enough, but it is very much better than Fascism, and to work against it is to saw off the branch you are sitting on. The common people know this, even if the intellectuals do not. They will cling very firmly to the 'illusion' of Democracy and to the Western conception of honesty and common decency. It is no use appealing to them in terms of 'realism' and power politics, preaching the doctrines of Machiavelli in the jargon of Lawrence and Wishart.

The most that that can achieve is confusion of the kind that Hitler wishes for. Any movement that can rally the mass of the English people must have as its keynotes the democratic values which the doctrinaire Marxist writes off as 'illusion' or 'superstructure'. Either they will produce a version of socialism more or less in accord with their past, or they will be conquered from without, with unpredictable but certainly horrible results. Whoever tries to undermine their faith in Democracy, to chip away the moral code they derive from the Protestant centuries and the French Revolution, is not preparing power for himself, though he may be preparing it for Hitler — a process we have seen repeated so often in Europe that to mistake its nature is no longer excusable.

Literature and Totalitarianism

May 1941

In these weekly talks I have been speaking on criticism, which, when all is said and done, is not part of the main stream of literature. A vigorous literature can exist almost without criticism and the critical spirit, as it did in nineteenth-century England. But there is a reason why, at this particular moment, the problems involved in any serious criticism cannot be ignored. I said at the beginning of my first talk that this is not a critical age. It is an age of partisanship and not of detachment, an age in which it is especially difficult to see literary merit in a book whose conclusions you disagree with. Politics – politics in the most general sense – have invaded literature to an extent that doesn't normally happen, and this has brought to the surface of our consciousness the struggle that always goes on between the individual and the community. It is when one considers the difficulty of writing honest, unbiased criticism in a time like ours that one begins to grasp the nature of the threat that hangs over the whole of literature in the coming age.

We live in an age in which the autonomous individual is ceasing to exist – or perhaps one ought to say, in which the individual is ceasing to have the illusion of being autonomous. Now, in all that we say about literature, and above all in all that we say about criticism, we instinctively take the autonomous individual for granted.

The whole of modern European literature – I am speaking of the literature of the past four hundred years – is built on the concept of intellectual honesty, or, if you like to put it that way, on Shakespeare's maxim, 'To thine own self be true'. The first thing that we ask of a writer is that he shan't tell lies, that he shall say what he really thinks, what he really feels. The worst thing we can say about a work of art is that it is insincere. And this is even truer of criticism than of creative literature, in which a certain amount of posing and mannerism and even a certain amount of downright humbug, doesn't matter so long as the writer has a certain fundamental sincerity. Modern literature is essentially an individual thing. It is either the truthful expression of what one man thinks and feels, or it is nothing.

As I say, we take this notion for granted, and yet as soon as one puts it into words one realises how literature is menaced. For this is the age of the totalitarian state, which does not and probably cannot allow the individual any freedom whatever. When one mentions totalitarianism one thinks immediately of Germany, Russia, Italy, but I think one must face the risk that this phenomenon is going to be worldwide. It is obvious that the period of free capitalism is coming to an end and that one country after another is adopting a centralised economy that one can call Socialism or State Capitalism according as one prefers. With that the economic liberty of the individual, and to a great extent his liberty to do what he likes, to choose his own work, to move to and fro across the surface of the earth, comes to end. Now, till recently the implications of this weren't foreseen. It

was never fully realised that the disappearance of economic liberty would have any effect on intellectual liberty. Socialism was usually thought of as a sort of moralised Liberalism. The state would take charge of your economic life and set you free from the fear of poverty, unemployment and so forth, but it would have no need to interfere with your private intellectual life. Art could flourish just as it had done in the liberal-capitalist age, only a little more so, because the artist would not any longer be under economic compulsions.

Now, on the existing evidence, one must admit that these ideas have been falsified. Totalitarianism has abolished freedom of thought to an extent unheard of in any previous age. And it is important to realise that its control of thought is not only negative, but positive. It not only forbids you to express – even to *think* – certain thoughts but it dictates what you *shall* think, it creates an ideology for you, it tries to govern your emotional life as well as setting up a code of conduct. And as far as possible it isolates you from the outside world, it shuts you up in an artificial universe in which you have no standards of comparison. The totalitarian state tries, at any rate, to control the thoughts and emotions of its subjects at least as completely as it controls their actions.

The question that is important for us is, can literature survive in such an atmosphere? I think one must answer shortly that it cannot. If totalitarianism becomes worldwide and permanent, what we have known as literature must come to an end. And it won't do – as may appear plausible at first – to say that what will come to

an end is merely the literature of post-Renaissance Europe. I believe that literature of every kind, from the epic poem to the critical essay, is menaced by the attempt of the modern state to control the emotional life of the individual. The people who deny this usually put forward two arguments. They say, first of all, that the so-called liberty which has existed during the last few hundred years was merely a reflection of economic anarchy, and in any case largely an illusion. And they also point out that good literature, better than anything that we can produce now, was produced in past ages, when thought was hardly freer than it is in Germany or Russia at this moment. Now this is true so far as it goes. It's true, for instance, that literature could exist in medieval Europe, when thought was under rigid control – chiefly the control of the Church – and you were liable to be burnt alive for uttering a very small heresy. The dogmatic control of the Church didn't prevent, for instance, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* from being written. It's also true that medieval literature, and medieval art generally, was less an individual and more a communal thing than it is now. The English ballads, for example, probably can't be attributed to any individual at all. They were probably composed communally, as I have seen ballads being composed in Eastern countries quite recently. Evidently the anarchic liberty which has characterised the Europe of the last few hundred years, the sort of atmosphere in which there are no fixed standards whatever, isn't necessary, perhaps isn't even an advantage, to literature. Good literature can be created within a fixed framework of thought.

But there are several vital differences between totalitarianism and all the orthodoxies of the past, either in Europe or in the East. The most important is that the orthodoxies of the past *didn't change*, or at least didn't change rapidly. In medieval Europe the Church dictated what you should believe, but at least it allowed you to retain the same beliefs from birth to death. It didn't tell you to believe one thing on Monday and another on Tuesday. And the same is more or less true of any orthodox Christian, Hindu, Buddhist or Moslem today. In a sense his thoughts are circumscribed, but he passes his whole life within the same framework of thought. His emotions aren't tampered with. Now, with totalitarianism exactly the opposite is true. The peculiarity of the totalitarian state is that though it controls thought, it doesn't fix it. It sets up unquestionable dogmas, and it alters them from day to day. It needs the dogmas, because it needs absolute obedience from its subjects, but it can't avoid the changes, which are dictated by the needs of power politics. It declares itself infallible, and at the same time it attacks the very concept of objective truth. To take a crude, obvious example, every German up to September 1939 had to regard Russian Bolshevism with horror and aversion, and since September 1939 he has had to regard it with admiration and affection. If Russia and Germany go to war, as they may well do within the next few years, another equally violent change will have to take place. The German's emotional life, his loves and hatreds, are expected, when necessary, to reverse themselves overnight. I hardly need to point out the effect of this kind of thing upon literature. For writing is largely a

matter of *feeling*, which can't always be controlled from outside. It is easy to pay lip-service to the orthodoxy of the moment, but writing of any consequence can only be produced when a man *feels* the truth of what he is saying; without that, the creative impulse is lacking. All the evidence we have suggests that the sudden emotional changes which totalitarianism demands of its followers are psychologically impossible. And that is the chief reason why I suggest that if totalitarianism triumphs throughout the world, literature as we have known it is at an end. And in fact, totalitarianism does seem to have had that effect so far. In Italy literature has been crippled, and in Germany it seems almost to have ceased. The most characteristic activity of the Nazis is burning books. And even in Russia the literary renaissance we once expected hasn't happened, and the most promising Russian writers show a marked tendency to commit suicide or disappear into prison.

I said earlier that liberal capitalism is obviously coming to an end, and therefore I may have seemed to suggest that freedom of thought is also inevitably doomed. But I don't believe this to be so, and I will simply say in conclusion that I believe the hope of literature's survival lies in those countries in which liberalism has struck its deepest roots, the non-military countries, Western Europe and the Americas, India and China. I believe – it may be no more than a pious hope – that though a collectivised economy is bound to come, those countries will know how to evolve a form of Socialism which is not totalitarian, in which freedom of thought can survive the disappearance of economic individualism.

That, at any rate, is the only hope to which anyone who cares for literature can cling. Whoever feels the value of literature, whoever sees the central part it plays in the development of human history, must also see the life and death necessity of resisting totalitarianism, whether it is imposed on us from without or from within.

Freedom of the Park

December 1945

A few weeks ago, five people who were selling papers outside Hyde Park were arrested by the police for obstruction. When taken before the magistrate they were all found guilty, four of them being bound over for six months and the other sentenced to forty shillings' fine or a month's imprisonment. He preferred to serve his term, so I suppose he is still in jail at this moment.

The papers these people were selling were *Peace News*, *Forward* and *Freedom*, besides other kindred literature. *Peace News* is the organ of the Peace Pledge Union, *Freedom* (till recently called *War Commentary*) is that of the Anarchists: as for *Forward*, its politics defy definition, but at any rate it is violently Left. The magistrate, in passing sentence, stated that he was not influenced by the nature of the literature that was being sold: he was concerned merely with the fact of obstruction, and that this offence had technically been committed.

This raises several important points. To begin with, how does the law stand on the subject? As far as I can discover, selling newspapers in the street is technically obstruction, at any rate if you fail to move on when the police tell you to. So it would be legally possible for any policeman who felt like it to arrest any newsboy for selling the *Evening News*. Obviously this doesn't happen,

so that the enforcement of the law depends on the discretion of the police.

And what makes the police decide to arrest one man rather than another? However it may have been with the magistrate, I find it hard to believe that in this case the police were not influenced by political considerations. It is a bit too much of a coincidence that they should have picked on people selling just those papers. If they had also arrested someone who was selling *Truth*, or the *Tablet*, or the *Spectator*, or even the *Church Times*, their impartiality would be easier to believe in.

The British police are not like a continental gendarmerie or Gestapo, but I do not think one maligns them in saying that, in the past, they have been unfriendly to Left-wing activities. They have generally shown a tendency to side with those whom they regarded as the defenders of private property. There were some scandalous cases at the time of the Mosley disturbances. At the only big Mosley meeting I ever attended, the police collaborated with the Blackshirts in 'keeping order', in a way in which they certainly would not have collaborated with Socialists or Communists. Till quite recently 'red' and 'illegal' were almost synonymous, and it was always the seller of, say, the *Daily Worker*, never the seller of, say, the *Daily Telegraph*, who was moved on and generally harassed. Apparently it can be the same, at any rate at moments, under a Labour government.

A thing I would like to know – it is a thing we hear very little about – is what changes are made in the administrative personnel when there has been a change of government. Does the police officer who has a vague notion that 'Socialism' means something against the law

carry on just the same when the government itself is Socialist? It is a sound principle that the official should have no party affiliations, should serve successive governments faithfully and should not be victimised for his political opinions. Still, no government can afford to leave its enemies in key positions, and when Labour is in undisputed power for the first time – and therefore when it is taking over an administration formed by Conservatives – it clearly must make sufficient changes to prevent sabotage. The official, even when friendly to the government in power, is all too conscious that he is a permanency and can frustrate the short-lived Ministers whom he is supposed to serve.

When a Labour Government takes over, I wonder what happens to Scotland Yard Special Branch? To Military Intelligence? To the Consular Service? To the various colonial administrations – and so on and so forth? We are not told, but such symptoms as there are do not suggest that any very extensive reshuffling is going on. We are still represented abroad by the same ambassadors, and BBC censorship seems to have the same subtly reactionary colour that it always had. The BBC claims, of course, to be both independent and non-political. I was told once that its 'line', if any, was to represent the Left wing of the government in power. But that was in the days of the Churchill Government. If it represents the Left Wing of the present Government, I have not noticed the fact.

However, the main point of this episode is that the sellers of newspapers and pamphlets should be interfered with at all. Which particular minority is

singled out – whether Pacifists, Communists, Anarchists, Jehovah's Witness or the Legion of Christian Reformers who recently declared Hitler to be Jesus Christ – is a secondary matter. It is of symptomatic importance that these people should have been arrested at that particular spot. You are not allowed to sell literature inside Hyde Park, but for many years past it has been usual for the paper-sellers to station themselves just outside the gates and distribute literature connected with the open-air meetings a hundred yards away. Every kind of publication has been sold there without interference.

As for the meetings inside the Park, they are one of the minor wonders of the world. At different times I have listened there to Indian nationalists, Temperance reformers, Communists, Trotskyists, the SPGB, the Catholic Evidence Society, Freethinkers, vegetarians, Mormons, the Salvation Army, the Church Army, and a large variety of plain lunatics, all taking their turn at the rostrum in an orderly way and receiving a fairly good-humoured hearing from the crowd. Granted that Hyde Park is a special area, a sort of Alsatia where outlawed opinions are permitted to walk – still, there are very few countries in the world where you can see a similar spectacle. I have known continental Europeans, long before Hitler seized power, come away from Hyde Park astonished and even perturbed by the things they had heard Indian or Irish nationalists saying about the British Empire.

The degree of freedom of the press existing in this country is often over-rated. Technically there is great freedom, but the fact that most of the press is owned by

a few people operates in much the same way as a State censorship. On the other hand freedom of speech is real. On the platform, or in certain recognised open-air spaces like Hyde Park, you can say almost anything, and, what is perhaps more significant, no one is frightened to utter his true opinions in pubs, on the tops of buses, and so forth.

The point is that the relative freedom which we enjoy depends on public opinion. The law is no protection. Governments make laws, but whether they are carried out, and how the police behave, depends on the general temper of the country. If large numbers of people are interested in freedom of speech, there will be freedom of speech, even if the law forbids it; if public opinion is sluggish, inconvenient minorities will be persecuted, even if laws exist to protect them. The decline in the desire for intellectual liberty has not been so sharp as I would have predicted six years ago, when the war was starting, but still there has been a decline. The notion that certain opinions cannot safely be allowed a hearing is growing. It is given currency by intellectuals who confuse the issue by not distinguishing between democratic opposition and open rebellion, and it is reflected in our growing indifference to tyranny and injustice abroad. And even those who declare themselves to be in favour of freedom of opinion generally drop their claim when it is their own adversaries who are being persecuted.

I am not suggesting that the arrest of five people for selling harmless newspapers is a major calamity. When you see what is happening in the world today, it hardly seems worth squealing about such a tiny incident. All

the same, it is not a good symptom that such things should happen when the war is well over, and I should feel happier if this, and the long series of similar episodes that have preceded it, were capable of raising a genuine popular clamour, and not merely a mild flutter in sections of the minority press.

Review of *The Invasion from Mars*

October 1940

Nearly two years ago Mr. Orson Welles produced on the Columbia Broadcasting System in New York a radio play based on H. G. Wells's fantasia *The War of the Worlds*. The broadcast was not intended as a hoax, but it had an astonishing and unforeseen result. Thousands mistook it for a news broadcast and actually believed for a few hours that the Martians had invaded America and were marching across the countryside on steel legs a hundred feet high, massacring all and sundry with their heat rays. Some of the listeners were so panic-stricken that they leapt into their cars and fled. Exact figures are, of course, unobtainable, but the compilers of this survey (it was made by one of the research departments of Princeton) have reason to think that about six million people heard the broadcast and that well over a million were in some degree affected by the panic.

At the time this affair caused amusement all over the world, and the credulity of 'those Americans' was much commented on. However, most of the accounts that appeared abroad were somewhat misleading. The text of the Orson Welles production is given in full, and it appears that apart from the opening announcement and a piece of dialogue towards the end the whole play is done in the form of news bulletins, ostensibly real bulletins with names of stations attached to them. This is

a natural enough method of producing a play of that type, but it was also natural that many people who happened to turn on the radio after the play had started should imagine that they were listening to a news broadcast. There were therefore two separate acts of belief involved: (i) that the play was a news bulletin, and (ii) that a news bulletin can be taken as truthful. And it is just here that the interest of the investigation lies.

In the USA the wireless is the principal vehicle of news. There is a great number of broadcasting stations, and virtually every family owns a radio. The authors even make the surprising statement that it is more usual to possess a radio than to take in a newspaper. Therefore, to transfer this incident to England, one has perhaps to imagine the news of the Martian invasion appearing on the front page of one of the evening papers. Undoubtedly such a thing would cause a great stir. It is known that the newspapers are habitually untruthful, but it is also known that they cannot tell lies of more than a certain magnitude and anyone seeing huge headlines in their paper announcing the arrival of a cylinder from Mars would probably believe what he read, at any rate for the few minutes that would be needed to make some verification.

The truly astonishing thing, however, was that so few of the listeners attempted any kind of check. The compilers of the survey give details of 250 persons who mistook the broadcast for a news bulletin. It appears that over a third of them attempted no kind of verification; as soon as they heard that the end of the world was coming, they accepted it uncritically. A few

imagined that it was really a German or Japanese invasion, but the majority believed in the Martians, and this included people who had only heard of the 'invasion' from neighbours, and even a few who had started off with the knowledge that they were listening to a play. Here are excerpts from one or two of their statements:

'I was visiting the pastor's wife when a boy came and said, "Some star just fell." We turned the radio on – we all felt the world was coming to an end . . . I rushed to the neighbours to tell them the world was coming to an end.'

'I called in to my husband: "Dan, why don't you get dressed? You don't want to die in your working clothes."'

'My husband took Mary into the kitchen and told her that God had put us on this earth for His honour and glory and that it was for Him to say when it was our time to go. Dad kept calling "O God, do what you can to save us."'

'I looked in the icebox and saw some chicken left from Sunday dinner . . . I said to my nephew, "We may as well eat this chicken – we won't be here in the morning."'

'I was looking forward with some pleasure to the destruction of the entire human race . . . If we have Fascist domination of the world, there is no purpose in living anyway.'

The survey does not reveal any single all-embracing explanation of the panic. All it establishes is that the

people most likely to be affected were the poor, the ill-educated and, above all, people who were economically insecure or had unhappy private lives. The evident connection between personal unhappiness and readiness to believe the incredible is its most interesting discovery. Remarks like 'Everything is so upset in the world that anything might happen,' or 'So long as everybody was going to die, it was all right,' are surprisingly common in the answers to the questionnaire. People who have been out of work or on the verge of bankruptcy for ten years may be actually relieved to hear of the approaching end of civilisation. It is a similar frame of mind that has induced whole nations to fling themselves into the arms of a Saviour. This book is a footnote to the history of the world depression, and in spite of being written in the horrible dialect of the American psychologist, it makes very entertaining reading.

Visions of a Totalitarian Future

c. 1942

The struggle for power between the Spanish Republican parties is an unhappy, far-off thing which I have no wish to revive at this date. I only mention it in order to say: believe nothing, or next to nothing, of what you read about internal affairs on the Government side. It is all, from whatever source, party propaganda – that is to say, lies. The broad truth about the war is simple enough. The Spanish bourgeoisie saw their chance of crushing the labour movement, and took it, aided by the Nazis and by the forces of reaction all over the world. It is doubtful whether more than that will ever be established.

I remember saying once to Arthur Koestler, 'History stopped in 1936,' at which he nodded in immediate understanding. We were both thinking of totalitarianism in general, but more particularly of the Spanish Civil War. Early in life I had noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper, but in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie. I saw great battles reported where there had been no fighting, and complete silence where hundreds of men had been killed. I saw troops who had fought bravely denounced as cowards and traitors, and others who had never seen a shot fired hailed as the heroes of imaginary victories; and I saw

newspapers in London retailing these lies and eager intellectuals building emotional superstructures over events that had never happened. I saw, in fact, history being written not in terms of what happened but of what ought to have happened according to various 'party lines'. Yet in a way, horrible as all this was, it was unimportant. It concerned secondary issues – namely, the struggle for power between the Comintern and the Spanish left-wing parties, and the efforts of the Russian Government to prevent revolution in Spain. But the broad picture of the war which the Spanish Government presented to the world was not untruthful. The main issues were what it said they were. But as for the Fascists and their backers, how could they come even as near to the truth as that? How could they possibly mention their real aims? Their version of the war was pure fantasy, and in the circumstances it could not have been otherwise.

The only propaganda line open to the Nazis and Fascists was to represent themselves as Christian patriots saving Spain from a Russian dictatorship. This involved pretending that life in Government Spain was just one long massacre (*vide* the *Catholic Herald* or the *Daily Mail* – but these were child's play compared with the continental Fascist press), and it involved immensely exaggerating the scale of Russian intervention. Out of the huge pyramid of lies which the Catholic and reactionary press all over the world built up, let me take just one point – the presence in Spain of a Russian army. Devout Franco partisans all believed in this; estimates of its strength went as high as half a million. Now, there was no Russian army in Spain. There may have been a

handful of airmen and other technicians, a few hundred at the most, but an army there was not. Some thousands of foreigners who fought in Spain, not to mention millions of Spaniards, were witnesses of this. Well, their testimony made no impression at all upon the Franco propagandists, not one of whom had set foot in Government Spain. Simultaneously these people refused utterly to admit the fact of German or Italian intervention, at the same time as the German and Italian press were openly boasting about the exploits of their 'legionaries'. I have chosen to mention only one point, but in fact the whole of Fascist propaganda about the war was on this level.

This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. After all, the chances are that those lies, or at any rate similar lies, will pass into history. How will the history of the Spanish War be written? If Franco remains in power his nominees will write the history books, and (to stick to my chosen point) that Russian army which never existed will become historical fact, and schoolchildren will learn about it generations hence. But suppose Fascism is finally defeated and some kind of democratic government restored in Spain in the fairly near future; even then, how is the history of the war to be written? What kind of records will Franco have left behind him? Suppose even that the records kept on the Government side are recoverable – even so, how is a true history of the war to be written? For, as I have pointed out already, the Government also dealt extensively in lies. From the anti-Fascist angle one could write a broadly truthful history

of the war, but it would be a partisan history, unreliable on every minor point. Yet, after all, *some* kind of history will be written, and after those who actually remember the war are dead, it will be universally accepted. So for all practical purposes the lie will have become truth.

I know it is the fashion to say that most of recorded history is lies anyway. I am willing to believe that history is for the most part inaccurate and biased, but what is peculiar to our own age is the abandonment of the idea that history *could* be truthfully written. In the past people deliberately lied, or they unconsciously coloured what they wrote, or they struggled after the truth, well knowing that they must make many mistakes; but in each case they believed that 'the facts' existed and were more or less discoverable. And in practice there was always a considerable body of fact which would have been agreed to by almost everyone. If you look up the history of the last war in, for instance, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, you will find that a respectable amount of the material is drawn from German sources. A British and a German historian would disagree deeply on many things, even on fundamentals, but there would still be that body of, as it were, neutral fact on which neither would seriously challenge the other. It is just this common basis of agreement, with its implication that human beings are all one species of animal, that totalitarianism destroys. Nazi theory indeed specifically denies that such a thing as 'the truth' exists. There is, for instance, no such thing as 'science'. There is only 'German science', 'Jewish science' etc. The implied objective of this line of thought is a nightmare world in which the Leader, or some ruling

clique, controls not only the future but *the past*. If the Leader says of such and such an event, 'It never happened' – well, it never happened. If he says that two and two are five – well, two and two are five. This prospect frightens me much more than bombs – and after our experiences of the last few years that is not a frivolous statement.

But is it perhaps childish or morbid to terrify oneself with visions of a totalitarian future? Before writing off the totalitarian world as a nightmare that can't come true, just remember that in 1925 the world of today would have seemed a nightmare that couldn't come true. Against that shifting phantasmagoric world in which black may be white tomorrow and yesterday's weather can be changed by decree, there are in reality only two safeguards. One is that however much you deny the truth, the truth goes on existing, as it were, behind your back, and you consequently can't violate it in ways that impair military efficiency. The other is that so long as some parts of the earth remain unconquered, the liberal tradition can be kept alive. Let Fascism, or possibly even a combination of several Fascisms, conquer the whole world, and those two conditions no longer exist. We in England underrate the danger of this kind of thing, because our traditions and our past security have given us a sentimental belief that it all comes right in the end and the thing you most fear never really happens. Nourished for hundreds of years on a literature in which Right invariably triumphs in the last chapter, we believe half-instinctively that evil always defeats itself in the long run. Pacifism, for instance, is founded

largely on this belief. Don't resist evil, and it will somehow destroy itself. But why should it? What evidence is there that it does? And what instance is there of a modern industrialised state collapsing unless conquered from the outside by military force?

Consider for instance the re-institution of slavery. Who could have imagined twenty years ago that slavery would return to Europe? Well, slavery has been restored under our noses. The forced-labour camps all over Europe and North Africa where Poles, Russians, Jews and political prisoners of every race toil at road-making or swamp-draining for their bare rations, are simple chattel slavery. The most one can say is that the buying and selling of slaves by individuals is not yet permitted. In other ways – the breaking-up of families, for instance – the conditions are probably worse than they were on the American cotton plantations. There is no reason for thinking that this state of affairs will change while any totalitarian domination endures. We don't grasp its full implications, because in our mystical way we feel that a régime founded on slavery *must* collapse. But it is worth comparing the duration of the slave empires of antiquity with that of any modern state. Civilisations founded on slavery have lasted for such periods as four thousand years.

When I think of antiquity, the detail that frightens me is that those hundreds of millions of slaves on whose backs civilisation rested generation after generation have left behind them no record whatever. We do not even know their names. In the whole of Greek and Roman history, how many slaves' names are known to you? I can think of two, or possibly three. One is Spartacus and the

other is Epictetus. Also, in the Roman room at the British Museum there is a glass jar with the maker's name inscribed on the bottom, '*Felix fecit*'. I have a vivid mental picture of poor Felix (a Gaul with red hair and a metal collar round his neck), but in fact he may not have been a slave; so there are only two slaves whose names I definitely know, and probably few people can remember more. The rest have gone down into utter silence.