I.F. Stone, The Truman Era 1945-1952

PROLOGUE
THE END OF THE WAR

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More terrifying than the atomic bomb is the casual way we all seem to be taking the end of the war. It has been clear since Friday morning that there would be a Japanese surrender within a matter of a few days, if not a few hours. But the news seemed to stir extraordinarily little excitement. The finish of a World Series evokes more talk at the lunch counters.

In part this is because, as before V-E Day, there was no clear-cut announcement. Victory, expected and discounted, is no longer news. In part, this phlegmatic response may reflect the fact that people are punch-drunk on horror and sensation. Imagination has been dulled by the demands made upon it.

The cables indicate that this is not true in those countries where the war has been experienced directly. In London, Paris, and Chungking, news of the Japanese surrender offer sent rejoicing crowds pouring into the streets. There the end of the war was the end of something people had themselves felt, seen, heard, and suffered — not a distant drama played out in the headlines.

I do not feel like writing the standard editorial today in the face of all the agony the last few years have seen. Terrible things have been done to human bodies and to human minds. I think of the picture of the Chinese baby crying alone in the ruins of Nanking. I think of the German woman who said all this would not have happened if those damned British had only surrendered in 1940. And I think of the American airman who came back from dropping

an atomic bomb over Nagasaki to report that the results were "good."

I am worried by the casualness with which we in America are greeting the peace, because this failure of the imagination does not bode well for the future. I wrote down "The most terrible war in human history is coming to an end," and scratched it out because I felt that to most people who read it the words would have but a pallid reality, and seem only another editorial cliché.

This is terrifying because the task of preventing another world war is a difficult one. If people do not achieve some vivid conception of what hell has reigned in parts of Europe and Asia during the past decade or so, how can one expect them to think hard enough and act firmly enough to prevent it from happening again?

Since 1931, when peace began to crumble in Manchuria, there has been war, civil war and world war, at an increasingly furious tempo: from those first shootings in Mukden and the first beatings in Dachau to the bombing of Shanghai and the civil war in Spain, from the first blitz on Poland to the use of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What a vista of blood and cruelty!

But not blood and cruelty alone. As in some gigantic symphony played on human hearts for the delectation of a mightier race, agony has blended with a beaten-down but irrepressible, mounting, and finally victorious heroism and aspiration. These are only gaudy words to us. We and our orators have rung the changes on democracy and freedom until the words have grown shabby and nauseating. But to certain men the war's ending comes as the end of a struggle against fascism begun long before war was declared, fought in the underground hideaways of Japan, Italy, and Germany, in occupied China and in Spain, in the Vienna working-class suburbs and in the Warsaw ghetto, humbly and obscurely but as bitterly as on the broader battlefields.

Those who understand that this was in truth, for all its contradictions and compromises, a war against fascism, a successful war against fascism, a war that is slowly but surely letting loose the forces of freedom the world over, cannot take the end of the war casually. One of the reasons for the apathetic reaction to

victory in our own country is that so few felt and understand this. To too many of us the war was a kind of horrible accident, disrupting families and lives for no good reason; a distant quarrel into which we were somehow drawn.

One cannot understand what one has not suffered. How many of us are thankful that our own country was spared, that our children did not jump from their beds as the warning air-raid sirens screamed in the nights, that we did not huddle with our families in the subways, that our daughters were not shipped into slavery and our mothers sealed into death cars for the extermination camps, that our cities are not gutted by bombs, our children's faces pinched by hunger?

I know that if a Gallup poll taker came among us tomorrow 99 percent of us would vote for a permanent peace. And I know that this feeling is not to be lightly dismissed; it has already had its effect in concrete steps toward peace such as the ratification by the Senate of the United Nations Charter. But preventing war is not that easy.

Some of the causes of this war went deeper than any enemy men or movements. They were not removed by the death of Hitler and they will not be removed by the execution of Japanese generals. Some of these causes lie in our own minds and hearts as well as in those of our defeated enemies.

A small group of scientists can unlock the secrets of uranium and leap into the future. But it is harder to break a prejudice than an atom. Hundreds of millions of men the world over must take thought, must take time off from workday cares to perform a far more difficult task than that involved in the mastery of U 235 if peace is to be preserved, if the new horizons of science are not merely to provide a new and immense stage for destruction. They must shake loose from ancient nationalist egotisms; the world has grown too small for them. They must grope forward past cherished preconceptions to a better-organized society in which all men may be assured of their daily bread; the world cannot afford a renewal of the economic insecurity in which war and fascism grew, and can grow again.

I wish it were possible to throw on some gigantic screen for all to see some fraction of the suffering, the treachery, the sacrifice, and the courage of the past decade. For how are we in America to fulfill our responsibility to the dead and to the future, to our less fortunate allies and to our children's children, if we do not feel a little of this so deeply in our bones that we will be unswervingly determined that it shall never happen again?