An End to Illusions
BY REINHOLD NIEBUHR

The morning newspaper brings reports of disaster everywhere. The morning mail acquaints me with the confusion created by these reports. My mail this morning, for example, contains four significant communications. The first is a letter from the Socialist Party informing me that my views on foreign affairs violate the party platform and asking me to give account of my non-conformity. The party position is that this war is a clash of rival imperialisms in which nothing significant is at stake. The second letter asks me to support an organization which will bring peace to the world by establishing “world education” and erecting a “world radio.” It fails to explain how its world education is to seep into the totalitarian states and wean them from their mana. The third letter is from a trade union under Communist influence asking me to speak at a union “peace” meeting. The fourth is from a person who wants me to join in an effort to set “moral force against Hitler’s battalions,” but it fails to explain just how this moral force is to be effective against tanks, flamethrowers, and bombing planes.

This mail increases the melancholy prompted by the morning’s news. I answer the Socialist communication by a quick resignation from the party. I inform the trade union that my views would not be acceptable at its peace meeting. The proposal for a world radio is quickly consigned to a file which already contains eighty-two different recipes for world salvation. I start to answer the person who wants to set “moral force” against Hitler, but overcome with a sense of futility and doubting my ability to penetrate the utopian fog in which the letter was conceived, I throw my reply into the wastebasket. Thus I save some time to meditate upon the perspective which informs this whole morning’s mail and upon the vapid character of the culture which Hitler intends to destroy. This culture does not understand historical reality clearly enough to deserve to survive. It has a right to survival only because the alternative is too horrible to contemplate. All four letters are but expressions of the utopianism which has informed our Western world since the eighteenth century.

The Socialists have a dogma that this war is a clash of rival imperialisms. Of course they are right. So is a clash between myself and a gangster a conflict of rival egotisms. There is a perspective from which not much difference may be perceived between my egotism and that of a gangster. But from another perspective there is an important difference. “There is not much difference between people,” said a farmer to William James, “but what difference there is is very important.” That is a truth which the Socialists in America have not yet learned. The Socialists are right of course in insisting that the civilization which we are called upon to defend is full of capitalistic and imperialistic injustice. But it is still a civilization. Utopianism creates confusion in politics by measuring all significant historical distinctions against purely ideal perspectives and blinding the eye to differences which may be matters of life and death in a specific instance.

The Socialists rightly call attention to the treason of the capitalistic oligarchy which has brought the cause of democracy to so desperate a state. But we are defending something which transcends the interests of Mr. Chamberlain and the venality of M. Bonnet. Furthermore the Socialists have forgotten how much they contributed to the capitulation of democracy to tyranny. It was a Socialist Prime Minister, Paul-Henri Spaak, who contrived the unrealistic neutrality policy of Belgium which was responsible for the German break-through at Sedan. The policy was unrealistic because it was based upon the quite untrue assumption that Belgium was inspired equally by rival imperialistic powers. The peril was not equal at all, and history has avenged this lie in a terrible way. The Socialists of the Scandinavian countries were deeply involved in the parasitic pacifism of these small nations which scorned “power politics” and forgot that their security rested upon the British navy and the contingencies of a precarious balance of power. The Socialists of Britain willed to resist Hitler but did not will the means of resistance. As for Munich, I heard American Socialists give thanks that a madman with a gun was met by a man with an umbrella. If there had been two guns, rather than an umbrella and a gun, they said, the world would have been plunged into conflict. European Socialists have learned to repent of these errors under the pressure of tragic events, leaving only American Socialists to indulge the luxury of their utopianism.

The proposal for “world radio” and “world education” is merely a particularly fatuous form of the utopian rationalism and universalism which have informed the thought of liberal intellectuals in the whole Western world. These liberals have always imagined that it was a comparatively simple matter for the human mind to transcend the welter of interest and passion which is
the very stuff of existence. They have not understood that man's very capacity for freedom creates the imperialist will to dominate, as well as the desire to subordinate life to universal standards. The five hundred American scientists who recently presented a memorial to the President favoring neutrality in the name of scientific impartiality seem not to have the slightest idea that scientific freedom is dependent upon the vicissitudes of political history. Their illusions reveal that modern culture completely misunderstands history precisely because it has learned a great deal about nature and falsely imagines that the harmonies and securities of nature are a safe asylum for man.

There seems to be absolutely no end to the illusions of which intellectuals are capable and no height of unrealistic dreaming to which they cannot rise. Aldous Huxley dreams in Hollywood of a method of making man harmless by subtracting or abstracting the self from selfhood, and stumbles into a pseudo-Buddhistic mysticism as the way of salvation without understanding that this kind of mysticism annuls all history in the process of destroying the self.

When the intellectuals are not given to a vapid form of universalism they elaborate an impossible individualism. Bertrand Russell, who has now repented of his pacifism, wrote in an article recently reprinted in The Nation that any political view which made individuals the bearers of ideological forces was outmoded. The fact is that Nazi collectivism with its primitive emphasis upon "blood and soil" is but a cruel and psychopathic emphasis upon organic and collective aspects of life which liberal individualism has outraged. As late as last February the New Republic promised to stand resolutely against any moral urge that might carry us into war because it knew so certainly that the "evils of a system" could not be cured by "killing the unfortunate individuals who for a moment embody the system." It failed to tell us that the individuals who for the moment embody a system might possibly fasten a system of slavery upon us which would not be for a moment. When Germany invaded Holland and Belgium and the situation of the Western democracies became precarious, the New Republic forgot these individualistic scruples and solemnly warned that we could not afford to allow the British navy to be destroyed, though it did not tell us how we were to prevent it without imperiling the lives of unfortunate individual sailors and soldiers "who for the moment embody a system." The real fact is that we have no right to deal with the rough stuff of politics at all if we do not understand that politics always deals with collective action and that collective action invariably involves both guilty and guiltless among the individuals who for the moment embody a system.

The letter from the communist trade union in my mail can stand as a symbol of the aberrations of those who frantically cling to Russia as their hope of salvation. The fear that a triumphant Germany will invade the Ukraine may bring Russia back on the side of the angels shortly, and then the rest of us will be told how wrong we were in judging Russia prematurely. Fortunately we have no intellectuals of the standing of George Bernard Shaw and J. B. S. Haldane who, under the influence of the Russian obsession, talk such nonsense as these two men have permitted themselves.

The letter from the person who wanted to set "moral force" against Hitler's battalions is a nice example of the sentimentalized form of Christianity which has engulfed our churches, particularly in America, and which has prompted them to dream of "spiritualizing life" by abstracting spirit from matter, history, and life. It is significant that this kind of "spiritual" religion identifies religious perfectionism with the morally dubious and politically dangerous dogmas of isolation. If we could only keep free of this European struggle we might still indulge our illusions about the character of human existence, which Christianity at its best illumines.

A survey of our culture gives us the uneasy feeling that Hitler was not quite wrong in his boast that he would destroy the world of the eighteenth century. In its more articulate forms our culture suffers from illusions which weaken its will and its right to survive. One can only be grateful for the common sense of common folk which has not been corrupted by these illusions and which in the hour of peril expresses itself in sound political instincts. But for this common sense we might capitulate to a system of government which declares war to be normal, because we do not believe in war. We might submit to a culture which glorifies force as the final arbiter, because we thought it a simple task to extricate reason from force. We might allow a primitive collectivism to enslave us, because we had false ideas of the relation of the individual to the collective forces of life. We might submit to tyranny and the negation of justice, because we had an uneasy conscience about the injustices which corrupt our system of justice.

Hitler threatens the whole world not merely because the democracies were plutocratic and betrayed by their capitalist oligarchies. His victories thus far are partly due to the fact that the culture of the democracies was vapid. Its political instincts had become vitiated by an idealism which sought to extricate morals from politics to the degree of forgetting that all life remains a contest of power. If Hitler is defeated in the end it will be because the crisis has awakened in us the will to preserve a civilization in which justice and freedom are realities, and given us the knowledge that ambiguous methods are required for the ambiguities of history. Let those who are revolted by such ambiguities have the decency and consistency to retire to the monastery, where medieval perfectionists found their asylum.