

## Ross J. S. Hoffman: Conservative Spokesman in a Utopian Period—the War and Post-War Years

The historian Ross J. S. Hoffman (1902-79) was one of the key figures in the revival of American academic interest in Edmund Burke in the late 1940s and 1950s—a revival closely related to the development of the modern American conservative intellectual movement. Unfortunately, the lingering effects of an illness he suffered while traveling in Ireland in 1952 seriously reduced the volume of Hoffman's literary productivity, although scarcely impairing its quality nor his teaching, for the remainder of his career. Hoffman's illness came on the eve of the renascent conservative intellectual movement that he helped father, when there appeared exciting new journals such as *Modern Age* and *National Review* to which he otherwise would have been a frequent and profound contributor.

There were two significant aspects to his contribution to the American conservative movement. First, he worked to broaden it from an essentially non-conservative emphasis on American uniqueness. Such intellectual isolationism adhered legitimately to a strict construction of the constitution, but often took the attitude that the Founding Fathers were the recipients of a divine vision about organizing a political order. The work of Hoffman helped conservatives identify the American constitutional heritage with an older tradition of limita-

tions on government dating back through medieval times.

Hoffman's second important role concerned his co-religionists, American Catholics. Many of them, as immigrants or children of immigrants, sought in political matters to be more American than the Americans. They did not appreciate the European heritage they had left, and often condemned it with the tones of revolutionary nationalism desirous of Americanizing Europe. Hoffman's influence, through his writing and as a professor at Fordham University (he was recruited there from New York University in 1938 by Rev. Robert I. Gannon, S.J., the president who firmly established the academic credibility of the school's graduate program), left a deep impression on many first generation American graduate students about the depth of their Catholic and European heritage. Many of his students, through an uninhibited system of networking, were placed in various Catholic undergraduate colleges. It was a situation vastly different from today's—where faculties in schools rooted in the "Catholic tradition" have become over-

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whelmingly secularized.

Coming from a Pennsylvania family that was "Old Guard" Republican and inactively Protestant, Hoffman attended Lafayette College. Required to take religious courses, he rejected Christianity as he sensed that intelligent modern man did not regard it "as anything more than a pious fable tied up with some rather commendable morality." However, this and his sympathy with "all the conventional radicalism of the age" did not inhibit his thinking of entering the Protestant ministry:

Towards the close of my senior year I played with the notion of entering a liberal seminary to do graduate work and fit myself for the pulpit . . . It seemed possible to slide over the supernatural and use the pulpit for preaching socialism, pacifism, cosmopolitanism, and other branches of the latest enlightenment.<sup>1</sup>

Travel to Europe, graduate study in history at the University of Pennsylvania, and a loving marriage to a Catholic, Hannah McCrudden, led him to a greater appreciation of Catholicism and a suspicion of shallow progressivism. He entered the Church in 1931, a process of development in which he was extremely dependent on the writings of the English Catholic author, Hilaire Belloc.<sup>2</sup>

He became a regular contributor to the short-lived but influential journal, *The American Review*. At that time *The American Review* was the major American voice of reflective conservatism and carried articles from such diverse groups as the English Distributists, the New Humanists, and the Southern Agrarians. Hoffman's pieces were concerned with the question "whether it is any longer possible to have a political order that respects human freedom and the main traditions of the Christian West." The 1920s and 1930s had demonstrated the bankruptcy of utilitarian liberal democracy, as demands were increasingly being made for state ac-

tion in more and more spheres of human life. One alternative was the "Godless Bolshevik thing," but not far behind was that "represented by such thinkers as, say, John Dewey or Harold J. Laski," since:

. . . in our day the liberalism that descends from Bentham blends with the Communism that descends from Marx, and disciples of these two major modern prophets mingle in congenial spirit. They unite in their common contempt of religion, in their theoretical and humanitarian concern for the "greatest number," and in their devotion to industrialism and material productivity.

He asked instead "whether there may not have been sounder principles of politics, derived from nature and reason, known to us once but since forgotten in the modern struggles between liberalism and absolutism." Indeed, such a political tradition existed, was common from classical through early modern times, and had emphasized authority rather than majority, recognized the corporate or organic character of society, and defended and respected religion and property.<sup>3</sup>

He realized that Fascism attracted some traditionalists concerned about assaults on the family, religion, and property, but was aware of the essentially statist and purely pragmatic character of Mussolini's system. Later in the decade he was more sanguine in his analysis. Hoffman saw the Italian regime becoming "more flexible and better related organically to a society permeated with a consciousness of freedom, therefore more truly popular and less dependent on the person of the leader." But after the war started, fearing that Italy would enter on Hitler's side, he prophetically warned:

[F]ew persons in Italy or Germany have ever really believed that Italians would willingly help Herr Hitler to re-draw the map of Europe. The government that seeks to make them do it will cease to be genuinely national.<sup>4</sup>

When the war broke out in Europe, Hoffman was drawn into the interventionist-isolationist argument with a colleague of his in Fordham's History Department, the renowned revisionist Charles Callan Tansill. In a statement for the Fordham quarterly, *Thought*, Tansill presented the isolationist case emphasizing the note of American exceptionalism: "America occupies a unique place in the world order, and its mission is one that no other nation can fulfill." The Founding Fathers realized that:

The only danger that threatened the success of the American experiment was the possibility that the high tide of European wars might sweep across the Atlantic before the strong barriers of American isolation could be erected.

Unfortunately, by the early twentieth century Woodrow Wilson had been able to lead millions of Americans to war in Europe with the theme song entitled "Let Us Make the World Safe for Democracy." Tansill feared that Franklin Delano Roosevelt had renewed the old song that "could easily lead the restless feet of the American people down the road to war," even though such a war would necessitate the transformation of the presidency into a dictatorship, a process the national economic emergency had already started. Sensing that "If democracy dies here, it will disappear throughout the world," he pleaded "Let us keep the lights burning by staying out of European wars."<sup>5</sup>

In one of his clearest challenges to the American exceptionalist view common to so many conservatives of the time, Hoffman presented in the same journal the case for intervention based on profoundly conservative and Christian grounds. His view rejected "the concept of a New World and an Old World each turning on its own axis, each forever indifferent to the main concerns of the other." He asked that America "grow in consciousness of membership in the society of nations whose roots and sense

of interdependent community derive from a common heritage of tradition, culture, morality and religion." That view envisioned "one great society sprung from Christian Europe." His position was not "that abstract and unrealistic internationalism, born of Masonic ideals," which would organize the world without regard for moral, cultural, and religious differences. Instead, he had in mind an international community of nations having "a common standard of morality" and sharing "a common heritage of culture."

He depicted the war that had started in Europe as an attack "by anti-national, anti-Western and anti-Christian imperialism on the culture and religion of the Polish state." Poland was "integrally part of the only organic unity that Europe possesses," combining "both the Catholic and revolutionary-liberal tradition," standing against Baltic paganism, Prussian and Czarist despotism, and now "against the new racialist paganism of Nazi Germany and the Bolshevik barbarism of Moscow." He realized that for the first few months of the war, the call for the defense of civilization and Christianity was not as convincing because it was being made by "free-thinking Protestant latitudinarians and masonic liberals," while "Catholic Iberia, Italy, Belgium, and Hungary either stood aloof or inclined to the enemy's side." But the lightening succession with which independent nations went down from April through June 1940 made it manifest that this was "a war between nations on the one hand and a revolutionary imperialism, fundamentally anti-national, on the other." Noting that one brave people was standing alone, he insisted "[Britain's] cause is also our cause" and "we should therefore share its burden and carry it on even if she fails."<sup>6</sup>

Hoffman's conservative and Christian appeal for intervention contrasted with both the American exceptionalism of isolation-

ists like Tansill and the "Christian Front" argument (that is, Germany's having Catholic allies like Hungary, Italy, Vichy France and, to a degree, Spain) of some American Catholics. His stand would definitely link him with figures whom John Lukacs calls "reactionaries," whose "dislike of Communism or...indifference to the League of Nations did not compromise their determination to stand up to Hitler," and examples of whom included George Bernanos, Winston Churchill, Charles De Gaulle and Count Stauffenberg.<sup>7</sup> From such a perspective, Hoffman interpreted the world's ills as resulting from liberalism's destruction of the historic state-system and its attempt to organize a universal peace under the League of Nations. He interpreted the war as a struggle "against the backwash of that effort, against barbaric forces which liberalism unwittingly released when it lost contact with its own roots in the Christian doctrines of freedom, human dignity and the natural law."<sup>8</sup>

As for ultimate post-war aims, Hoffman called for the linking of the historic states of the Western world sharing the same value system and constitutional concepts about the role of the state, much like what had happened after the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte. He read the rhetoric of Winston Churchill about defending "our island home" as being in accord with the defense of "a human and Christian civilization." But he feared the influence of many utopianists like Harold Laski in Britain and Henry Wallace in the United States, with Wendell Wilkie "running him a close second," who aspired to fix the world for all time in a pattern of pacific social and economic democracy.<sup>9</sup> Much of the literature of the time about the war was of this ilk, giving him "a distinct feeling of visiting the world of yesterday's ideas." So much of it

was "the work of sentimental journalists who came of age mentally in the nineteenth-twenties, when it was fashionable, progressive and advanced to doubt the values that underlie Western civilization." For them the purpose of the struggle was "not the defense of traditional civilization but arrival upon new horizons." On one side, they saw "Fascist reaction" (toward which the Vatican was suspected of leaning), and on the other, "Progressive Democracy."<sup>10</sup>

In his concern about the definition of the purpose for which the war was being fought, Hoffman hoped the United States would avoid the mistakes made in the First World War and in the subsequent withdrawal from international responsibility. Woodrow Wilson, he argued, should not have launched "a crusade in behalf of the abstract ideal of universal democracy," but ought to have made it clear that Germany posed a challenge to "the security of the American Republic," which necessitated our joining with allies in repulsing as an act of national defense.<sup>11</sup> By failing to demonstrate the real and legitimate purpose for our involvement, Wilson, with his idealistic rhetoric, opened the door for popular disillusionment with "the clash of national interests and imperialistic rivalries that came, as every realistic observer expected, at the end of the war." In essence, "The ideology of neither the war nor the peace was sufficiently identified with the American national tradition and recognized national interests." That tradition was "something richer than the noble doctrines of Jefferson, the sentiments of Walt Whitman, and the periodic impulse to rush sympathetically to the support of liberty and democracy in foreign lands."<sup>12</sup>

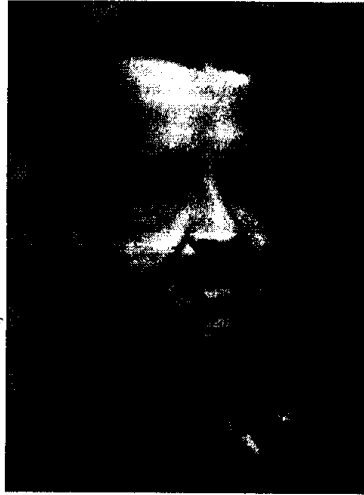
For guidance in and parallels to the post-war world, Hoffman looked back to the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic era. In the last years of the eighteenth century

when "the Jacobin armies...stood triumphant in the Rhine and in Italy," and when "the states of the old regime, rotted within, were collapsing at the merest touch of a revolution," few would have expected "that before another generation came of age, the restored states of Western civilization would enter upon a prolonged period of peace, prosperity, and orderly constitutional development." Neither would they have expected "the re-birth of a dynamic conservatism." The conflict then raging was not "between the old monarchical order and the new democracy," but between "the secularist, bureaucratic and anti-traditional 'enlightened' despotism," of which Napoleon was the supreme exponent, and "the revitalized historic political constitution of Europe." Similarly, the struggle that was the Second World War should not be seen as "democracy vs. dictatorship or Fascism," but as "constitutional law and liberty, genuine political civilization, vs. lawless revolutionary forces that seek an inhuman organization of mankind."<sup>13</sup>

Another parallel from the 1814-15 period that Hoffman sought to draw with the 1940s was between Czar Alexander I, "a revolutionary czar, who was a despot at home and a liberal abroad, who was idolized...by most of the liberals and democrats of the world" and "his successor," Stalin. He sensed that Stalin was likely to lead his armies into Central Europe in the defeating of Hitler, as did Alexander in the defeating of Napoleon, and thus be able to present the

world, as did Alexander, with "a grand plan for the reorganization of Europe."<sup>14</sup>

Hoffman's conservatism always minimized ideology as the determining motive in human behavior, hence he was never an ideological anti-Communist. He called for both realistic suspicion and accessibility to the Russian ally in the campaign. He acknowledged the decisive part Russia had played four times in 150 years "in restoring, preserving or arranging the state system of Europe": Alexander's driving of Napoleon from Russia back to France and to defeat, Nicholas I's saving of the Austrian Empire in 1849, the Russian absorption of the German offensive between 1914 and 1917, and, lastly, the Soviet Union's sustaining "the full force of the Nazi Wehrmacht attack



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in 1941-42."

Accordingly, Russia was entitled to a central part in any European settlement. Russia's estrangement from the world after the First World War had enabled the German menace to develop. Hoffman believed that could have been prevented in 1919-20 in either of two ways: to have made "an earnest effort to come to some kind of working relationship with the Bolshevik republic" or have given "resolute support...to restore constitutional monarchy and the territorial integrity of the Russian state." Instead, there were "half-measures which neither crushed Communism nor restored Russia, but only assured

that Communism would have a citadel for revolutionary imperialism and that Russia would be an enemy and an exile from international society."<sup>15</sup>

Russia's future co-operation would be gained "not by sycophantic licking of Stalin's boots, but by pursuit of common practical objectives and by resisting the lure of vengeful or sentimental purposes that cross Russian high interest."<sup>16</sup> In the fall of 1943, he envisioned bargaining with Russia, both opposing her in some matters while appeasing her in others, with the net result "that she supports the peace in Europe without having dictated it." Specific results he expected (which were never realized because of the West's absence of realism in and toward the end of the war) included Russia's meeting "reasonable Polish desires in the frontier question;" Poland's having "a free hand to join a central European federation" to guard against a revival of German power; "the recrudescence of those forces, habits and impulses which once sustained the Austro-Hungarian Empire as Europe's guardian...against Prussia and Pan-Germanism" in the form of a federal body composed of Poland, Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, and Croatia; Russia's abstaining "from propagating Communism;" and the Western powers denying themselves "the spiritual luxury of imposing 'democratic' schemes of government."<sup>17</sup>

This unwarranted confidence on Hoffman's part was based on assumptions he made about two central characters—Roosevelt and Stalin. He sensed that Roosevelt, "who had begun as a political playing at statesman," had grown to become "a statesman playing at politics" and was not likely to strike a "responsive chord with the noisy party that is planning to socialize America and then Americanize the world." He similarly sensed that Stalin had "grown from a party boss to be a

prime minister and a marshal" whose "public expressions are not at all in the outmoded manner of a Comintern politician of the nineteen twenties," but "sound rather more like Czar Nicholas I."<sup>18</sup>

But within two years all had changed, as ideology again resumed its place. For Hoffman, the signal was the "unconditional surrender" pronouncement issued from the Casablanca conference. This ideological movement "was accelerated as the Russo-German front began to move irresistibly westward." By the time of the Teheran conference "the war effort had become strongly ideological" as "militant Communism and militant Democracy crusaded under the uniting banner of 'anti-Fascism.'" Hoffman noticed that:

... an ominous coolness entered British-American relations after Roosevelt's re-election; that Churchill found himself unpleasantly isolated at Yalta, and that after Yalta, Mr. Roosevelt tended to take the Russian side against the British in the Polish question. Much remains dark, but enough is known to warrant saying that from the Teheran conference to V-E Day, Mr. Churchill tried to do what Castlereagh did in 1813-1814: that is, to manipulate the Russian alliance in such a manner as to topple one European tyrant without raising up another. But Mr. Roosevelt did not support that statesmanlike effort, and it does not appear to have succeeded.<sup>19</sup>

Writing on the occasion of the San Francisco conference that organized the United Nations, Hoffman indicated that, because of the lack of balance among the great powers, the Security Council was unlikely to work. Those powers were two: "Eurasia, which is headed and *organized* by Communist Russia, and the Atlantic Community...headed *but not organized* by the British-American partnership." While the Soviet Union's human and material resources were greatly inferior to the West, the Western system "presents itself as a chaotic inter-

national scene in which the U.S.S.R. is virtually invited to carry on a policy of dividing and controlling." That policy has been inspired by the Soviet military triumphs which "have vindicated (in Communist minds) the Marx-Leninist theories of society. . . and precipitated a new wave of world revolutionary Communism." Hoffman saw the Kremlin's policy as "the natural instinct of a great power striving for security in a disorganized surrounding world," one that would persist in Europe, China, and the Middle East "unless the Western nations act to check it." The only alternative to Soviet preponderance in all Europe, a similar development in Asia, or of the United Nations becoming "a world forum and instrument for Soviet propaganda and policy," would be for the West to become more coherent. To that end, he called for the United States to negotiate security pacts with Britain and France to guard against aggression. Only then "can we expect a slackening of the tension that has been created in Europe by the Red Army's conquests;" only then "can we expect the United Nations Charter to be more than a paper plan."<sup>20</sup>

Three years later, writing in the introduction to a selection of Edmund Burke's writings that he jointly edited with a Fordham colleague, Paul Levack, Hoffman suggested that Burke's words were of particular value to Americans in the postwar period:

[W]e grow more aware of the ancestral inheritance that we share with older nations across the Atlantic, and of the heavy responsibilities that attach themselves upon us. . . American democracy, organized in a republican representative government under a constitution a century and a half old, no longer appears as a revolutionary challenge to an old order, but as a majestic creation of the ages and the citadel of prescriptive right in Western Christendom. To the astonishment of some superficial observers, we emerged from the Second World War as the champions of a conservative cause:

the cause of conserving law and liberty against totalitarian despotism.<sup>21</sup>

In 1968, Corior Cruise O'Brien, a critic of the American role in much of the second half of the twentieth century, viewed the publication of the Hoffman-Levack edition of *Burke's Politics* as the beginning of the process whereby "Burke's works began to be systematically quarried for anti-Communist purposes."<sup>22</sup> Ironically, in 1990, at the time of "the bankruptcy of the greatest experiment in social and political innovation ever made," that in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, when the command economy was acknowledged to be "an abject failure," the same writer asked: "What stronger vindication could there be of the principles laid down, and the warnings contained, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*?"<sup>23</sup> It is thus fitting that we should take O'Brien's observation a step further and note that the "bankruptcy" of the Communist Eastern bloc was also a vindication of the call to a deeper conservatism and to an American identity with the Western heritage made in the dark days of the 1940s by Ross J. S. Hoffman.

When only the title is cited, the author is Ross J. S. Hoffman.

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