

Harlem at War

BY CHARLES WILLIAMS

IN HARLEM, the country's largest Negro community, the war doesn't seem to matter much. The people there have asked the question, "What will the war bring us?" The answer, as most of them see it, is "Nothing." They still want the United Nations to win, but only casually. They are for the United Nations as a matter of form, but their hearts aren't in it.

Harlem's people hoped for a while that the inequalities which "stung and dishonored" them would be swept away in the war. It was, after all, a war for the Four Freedoms. At the very least, they thought, race barriers in industry would go down under the pressure of war needs. They know better now. "It is true that some jobs have been opened to us," they say, "that economically we are better off. But most Harlem people can still find work only as domestics, chauffeurs, or common laborers. In other ways discrimination has not lessened; it has become more blatant and cruel." At a time when its soldiers are dying, Harlem is conscious of this with an intensity that few white people realize. As a community, it feels oppressed and cheated.

You find this mood expressed in Harlem's newspapers, from its pulpits, on its street corners, among intellectuals and cleaning women—everywhere. One day last fall, for example, a typical cartoon in the *Amsterdam Star-News* showed a dead Negro soldier at the feet of a hard-faced military policeman with a smoking gun; the caption was, "Thanksgiving, U. S. A." A young Negro, refusing to report for induction into the army, wrote, "I cannot fight fascists in an army where I am treated as an inferior citizen." An editorial in the *People's Voice* said, "The tax on being black is still being levied." An educated and talented Negro with whom the writer was going to lunch paused before a restaurant and said quietly, "I can't go in there, you know." A letter from a Negro soldier in a Southern camp, quoted in the *People's Voice*, said, "Just yesterday they hanged a soldier only three miles from camp for no reason at all. . . . I am scared to leave camp."

The mistreatment of Negroes in the services is a continuing cause of Harlem's cynicism about the war. Murders may be infrequent, but Harlem runs over with accounts of "clubbings, insults, and abuse." "Morale builders," one person called them sardonically. One hears of Negro soldiers beaten by white civilians in Florence, South Carolina; of the jailing and beating of a Negro nurse attached to the Tuskegee Army Air Corps; of army nurses compelled to go without food for eighteen

hours while en route through Texas; of soldiers, back on furlough from the Solomons, treated well aboard ship but made to sleep on the floor of their train across the continent. It is difficult to determine the truth of these stories; the significant fact is that they circulate and are believed and resented.

Harlem is proud of its soldiers. It thinks that they are probably among the best in the country. But this does not affect its attitude toward the army's segregation policy and the navy's restrictions on Negro personnel. Some people in Harlem express disapproval of Joe Louis for donating the proceeds of one fight to Navy Relief.

The experiences of its boys in Southern army camps have given Harlem a new and keen interest in the problems of Southern Negroes. This was evident during the recent poll-tax debate. Though Harlem, of course, is not affected by the poll tax, the defeat of the bill to repeal it was taken hard, at least among the more intelligent elements of the community. Newspapers pointedly noted that reports of the bill's defeat were not permitted to reach Negro soldiers outside the country. A delegation of prominent New York Negroes, among them five ministers, went to Washington to observe the Senate debate on the bill. They were at first refused admittance to the Senate gallery, and were finally herded out of a Senate corridor at the point of guns. It was noticed with disillusion in Harlem that Vice-President Wallace, who had spoken so ringingly of the Century of the Common Man, failed to acknowledge a report of the incident sent to him. In a passionately angry editorial the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., editor of the *People's Voice*, wrote that the affair revealed that Washington "stinks with jimcrow, discrimination, prejudice, and hatred. . . . Now the stench and decay have reached into the Capitol itself."

Harlem, of course, is itself the creation of Jim Crowism, which is only less onerous in New York than in the South. For all New York's vaunted liberalism, Negroes can seldom obtain apartments outside of Harlem and a few other strictly Negro sections. Nor are they permitted to eat in many of the city's restaurants. Some Negroes like to speculate on why New York liberals, who become so furiously concerned at the least injustice to people in Burma or India, do so little about similar injustices in their own city. Though Harlem contains New York's worst slums, rents are higher there than elsewhere in the city—this, you are told, is part of the "tax on being black." Food prices are higher, too,

though Harlem housewives complain that only the poorest grades of food are sold there. School and hospital facilities are miserable. I walked up Lenox Avenue, in the heart of Harlem, with a Negro lawyer. "Here it is in all its glory," he said, pointing to rows of run-down, vermin-infested tenements in the side streets; "Harlem, the outhouse of New York, the thing for which we are expected to die joyously in the jungles of New Guinea or the deserts of Africa."

Harlem's "better elements" chafe under the impression, created by newspapers, that their community is overrun with crime. They admit that Harlem's crime rate is high but maintain that it is "no higher than in some other sections of New York, and certainly lower than newspaper accounts would indicate." Many stories of Negroes assaulting policemen are trumped up, they say, to conceal unjustifiable police assaults on Negroes. The *People's Voice* listed last month three instances of Negroes shot without provocation by policemen. But New York newspapers headed their account of at least one of these, "Detective Shoots Mugger." If the police want to clean up Harlem, its people ask you, why don't they curb prostitution and marijuana peddling? Why isn't something done to relieve its dreadful poverty?

It would be misleading to imply that Harlem has fallen into a kind of static despair, that it is waiting without much hope for something to be done for it. As a community Harlem is thoroughly tired of "Uncle Tomism." It is convinced that Negroes must organize and fight for what they want. The least popular Negro leaders in Harlem are those who advise forgetting about grievances for the duration. The Communists tried this for a while and lost followers in droves. A. Philip Randolph, chairman of the March on Washington movement, which compelled President Roosevelt to set up the Fair Employment Practices Committee, expressed Harlem's feeling at a meeting early this fall. "Negroes made the blunder of closing ranks and forgetting their grievances in the last war," he said. "We are resolved that we will not make that blunder again. Some of our appeasers say that if Negroes persist in fighting for their rights now, they are going to have trouble. Well, Negroes are already having trouble, and a little more trouble won't hurt." At one time the better-situated Negroes, the professionals and the intellectuals, thought they could rise to equality as individuals, by virtue of education and accomplishment. That notion has been quite thoroughly killed. "It doesn't matter who you are or think you are when you run up against the forces of reaction," Mr. Powell observed after his experience in the Senate, "a Negro is a Negro." As a result, some of the most able and gifted Negroes, who had more or less deserted Harlem, now are back in the fight.

Harlem is aware, of course, that it has made and is making gains. It is proud that most of these, like the

formation of the Fair Employment Practices Committee, are the result of the Negro's own efforts. It is encouraged by the new job opportunities that the Fair Employment Practices Committee has created. It is elated, though not in any servile manner, by every sign of fraternization between whites and Negroes. To realize how much this means to people who know that they deserve equality, one has only to look at their newspapers. They print with poignant eagerness pictures of Negro and white merchant-marine sailors swinging down a street together. The news that a single Negro girl had been given employment in the office of A. S. Beck was run under a two-column headline. The fact that no segregation exists at Fort Sill is jubilantly cited as proof that whites and blacks can get on together. Unfortunately, these signs of sanity in race relations, in comparison with what is happening in the country as a whole, are few and widely scattered.

It is a tribute to Harlem's basic loyalty to America that fascist propaganda has made no substantial inroads. Leonard Robert Jordan, the "Black Hitler" jailed by the FBI, had but a sparse following. Japanese propagandists, with customary thoroughness, invaded Harlem years before the outbreak of war, urging the solidarity of color, and Christian Front propagandists tried to exploit Harlem's resentment against some Jewish landlords. Apparently their combined efforts had only negligible results. Some of Harlem's people were surreptitiously pleased by the early "brown" men's successes against "white" Americans and English, and now, out of hurt-born malice rather than disloyalty, some talk of what Africans "will do to Americans if they get smart." Anti-white sentiment of a kind shows itself in other ways. A Negro soldier, asked to name a great member of his race, replied, "Joe Louis, because I don't think there's another Negro who doesn't go out of his way for the white man." But this is only race consciousness, which the country by every device of wrongheadedness has brought to a new pitch, it is not sedition.

Harlem's heightened race consciousness has taken a turn that is constructive and immensely interesting. Partly as a result of the insistent hammering of its newspapers and many of its leaders, Harlem is acquiring a sense of oneness with India, China, the West Indies, and, of course, Africa. A recent cartoon in the *People's Voice* showed an American Negro soldier holding a placard reading, "War Aims: Freedom Not Only for the People of Ravished Europe but Also for the Millions of Oppressed Colored People in Africa." Father Divine, who remains perhaps the most influential single person in Harlem, still preaches peace and tells his followers that only the freeing of all colored peoples everywhere can end war.

A few persons, such as Frank Crosswaith, chairman of the Negro Labor Committee, and A. Philip Randolph,

have at various times tried to imbue Harlem with some enthusiasm for the war. They have emphasized how much worse off Negroes would be under Hitler. It is, one person observed, "the kind of argument you can take into your head but not into your heart." The Communists are about the only important group in Harlem earnestly for the war. The best indication of how hard pressed Negro leaders are to justify active support of the war to their followers was provided by Mr. Powell several weeks ago. "My faith is really blind now," he confessed. "If it were not for that blind faith, this present society would not offer much to the Negro people."

What Harlem's leaders want most, however, is to direct the community's discontent into constructive channels. They are urging their people to study and improve themselves. More important, they are exhorting them to fight for their rights as a group. A meeting several months ago was told that "every Negro, big and little, preacher and craps shooter, Ph.D. and jitterbug, social

worker and whist fan, lawyer and longshoreman, must be made to realize that he must join with other Negroes to win our democratic rights now." The war is still regarded as a great, though swiftly fading, opportunity to accomplish something big. There is a feeling that should this war-time opportunity pass, the Negro will face a bleak eternity of fighting for piecemeal concessions which somehow will never add up to the one thing he really wants—equality. Harlem's leaders are saying, "If we don't fight for our rights during this war, while the government needs us, it will be too late after the war."

Whether Harlem, the country's largest Negro community, will rise to these exhortations—they are being heard in many other Negro communities, too—it is difficult to say. But while it debates whether or not to fight its own war, it isn't going to get very excited about the World War—not unless in some tangible way we demonstrate that both wars are the same.

"Suffer Little Children"

BY HERTA PAULI

WHEN I get to Lisbon," I told my little friend Marinka in Marseilles, "I'll send you fruits and chocolate." She shook her head earnestly: "Ca n'existe plus." If Marinka still lives, she is a big girl now—all of ten years old. I left Europe two years ago, but I still see her blue eyes and hear her sad grown-up voice. She never went to school, but at eight she spoke five languages, picked up in flight from one country to another. Her father was a Czech engineer; her ancestors were peasants settled in Bohemia for hundreds of years. Marinka was one of some 8,000 refugee children being cared for in France by various agencies before Hitler took over the whole country. Their present fate is unknown. It is often assumed that most refugees are Jews, but these were the children of the persecuted of all lands—of Spanish Loyalists interned in France, of Polish, Dutch, Belgian, or French fugitives driven from their homes by the Blitzkrieg, of patriots and anti-fascists and other sinners against Hitler's New Order.

Countless other homeless children, Jews and non-Jews, are scattered throughout Nazi Europe and the Near East. Last year the Joint Distribution Committee, the Jewish welfare agency known as "Joint" to a million people for whom it is the last hope, got 270 out of Rumania and Hungary with the aid of the International Red Cross. At present 800 are in Iran awaiting passage through Iraq; they came from Siberia but are Polish,

their parents having fled into Soviet territory when Poland was overrun. A month ago the J. D. C.'s representative in Lisbon cabled, "Succeeded after great effort in effecting release approximately eighty women and children from Gerona and Figueras prisons." This number represented about one-tenth of the total held in Spanish camps and city jails.

Until last November, however, there were more child victims of Hitler in France than anywhere else, for the simple reason that the Third Republic had been the only country in Europe to grant asylum without asking for money or bail. The first group crossed the Rhine in 1936. Almost wholly Jewish, most of them orphans of concentration-camp "suicides," they were cared for by a Jewish social agency known as the O. S. E., which housed them in a model home in Paris. In 1938, the year of *Anschluss* and "peace in our time," there was an influx from Austria and Czecho-Slovakia, as well as Germany, and the O. S. E. branched out, founding homes in the provinces of France and boarding children with French families. In the first year of war its activities could still be called normal social work. The deluge came with the Nazi drive to the west, when hordes of fugitives from Holland, Belgium, and northern France filled the roads leading south.

After the armistice and the emergence of Vichy from the ashes of the French Republic, the Line of Demarcation seemed the frontier between hell and heaven.

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