

Gaslit Nation

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“Last Call at the Hotel Imperial: The Deborah Cohen Interview”

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[intro - theme music]

Andrea Chalupa (00:10):

Alright, everyone, welcome to *Gaslit Nation*. I am your co-host, Andrea Chalupa, and with me today is a very special guest. Deborah Cohen is the author of *The War Come Home*, *Household Gods*, and *Family Secrets*. She's also the Peter B. Ritzma Professor of Humanities and professor of history at Northwestern University focusing on modern Europe. She's here to speak with us about her book, *Last Call at the Hotel Imperial*, which is an extraordinary story of John Gunther, H.R. Knickerbocker, Vincent Shean, and Dorothy Thompson. This is a generation of authors that I am especially interested in because Dorothy Thompson is a personal hero of mine. Full disclosure, I am working on a script that was brought to me by a wonderful producer in Wales. I love this project so much and I'm so eager to dive in and learn more about Dorothy Thompson's incredible life and that whole generation of journalists that stared down fascism and all that we can learn from them today. Welcome, welcome to the show, Deborah Cohen. Thank you so much for being here.

Deborah Cohen (01:23):

Thanks so much for having me. It's a thrill.

Andrea Chalupa (01:24):

Tell us about these reporters that you focus on in *Last Call at The Hotel Imperial*. Am I saying it correctly? Is it *Last Call at The Hotel Imperial*?

Deborah Cohen (01:35):

Yeah, I just call it *Last Call at The Hotel Imperial*.

Andrea Chalupa (01:38):

Imperial. Oh, sorry.

Deborah Cohen (01:40):

But imperial is correct as well. So they were a group of young men and women—reporters, college graduates—who in the early 1920s left America for Europe and Asia. And they left because they were fed up with American moralism and they were disgusted by prohibition, and Europe to them was the center of all culture, and they were interested in an adventure. So, some of them had worked on big city newspapers like *The Chicago Daily News* or *The Newark Papers*, and all of them were interested in participating in what they felt were the big events happening in Europe and in Asia.

Andrea Chalupa (02:25):

Yeah, I mean, this was an extraordinary time, much like today, where the world was facing the crossroads of fascism versus democracy.

Deborah Cohen (02:35):

Yeah. So there was really a three-cornered contest between liberalism on one hand, fascism on the other, and communism in the third corner. They're running around Europe and also going to China, going to Asia, trying to understand what is going to happen. And so they have two big stories, really. One of them is they're tracing the rise of fascism and trying to understand this phenomenon of modern dictatorship, and then their second story is about the anticolonial movements against the European empires. And so they're trying to understand what's Gandhi up to? What is Nehru up to? What about Chiang Kai-shek? And they're fully there in the midst of all of those stories. What they help us do is something that you don't oftentimes get in the interwar period in the 1920s and '30s and '40s, which is to put together stories that are oftentimes told separately. So you have all of these events that, if you are a reporter at the time, what you're trying to do is figure out how do they connect, what's the relationship between what's happening, you know, in the Soviet Union and what's happening in the British Empire, and what kinds of links can you draw between those events?

Andrea Chalupa (03:54):

And what were those links?

Deborah Cohen (03:55):

So what they're staking out is the ways in which each of these world systems is competing for, in a sense, the attention of in the West—a newly democratized public—and then in the authoritarian states, a populace where the regimes depended upon a certain kind of public glorification. And so these are world economic systems, world political systems, that are really competing against each other. So, can you live the best life under communism? Can you live the best life instead under democracy or liberalism? And, well, what about fascism? And they really become the arbiters not just for Americans—they're absolutely that for Americans—but for a worldwide public on the merits and disadvantages of these various systems.

Andrea Chalupa (04:46):

Yeah, and it's extraordinary how much power these journalists had in building up and being the voice, like as you say, the arbiters. This was obviously before Twitter, before social media, where there was this gatekeeping naturally, right? Because how would you reach people? Through a printed material that'd be delivered to your house. You'd buy it at a kiosk and you'd have these editors back in, you know, Chicago, New York and London and so forth that would be their lifeline to getting their stories out. It was just so different, right? The blockchain, if you will, was so different.

Deborah Cohen (05:17):

Yes. Although it's great thinking about which of them would have been Twitter stars too.

Andrea Chalupa (05:21):

Oh, Dorothy Thompson far. Dorothy Thompson and her threads.

Deborah Cohen (05:25):

Dorothy Thompson, definitely. I think Frances Gunther, who we haven't mentioned but was the first wife of John Gunther, actually I think she would've been the big Twitter star because she's very aphoristic and very cunning and very funny. They existed in a world of newspaper where the new thing was radio

and that was the new way to communicate with people. If you think about their newspaper personalities, they're really filtering the news from Europe, from Asia, from millions and millions of Americans. But then as soon as radio comes in, they also have regular radio programs. They're broadcasting from the war. When the second World War is declared, Dorothy Thompson is on the air for 36 hours on the radio. They're featured to newsreels. Yeah, they're the arbiters of opinion and then they also become international celebrities. So that Knickerbocker is, you know, there are plays about him in Weimar, Germany. There's a bar named after John Gunther in Baghdad. That just gives you a sense of the ways in which, you know, people recognize them and trust their opinions.

Andrea Chalupa (06:31):

Absolutely. Why were they just so larger than life? Like Dorothy Thompson, when I read about her, it's just extraordinary. She was a suffragist on the front lines of fighting for the rights to vote for women and was successful there as a young organizer. And then she parlays that into a career by spearheading her way into Europe to become one of the few women foreign correspondent running a major bureau. And then she's suddenly on the frontlines of fighting Hitler. She interviews Hitler during his rise to power, laughs at him in her article for *Cosmopolitan*, and then he gets back at her by kicking her out of the country once he's dictator. And that was a huge shock.

Deborah Cohen (07:11):

Exactly. But there are a couple of things that are going on with them. First of all, they are very perspicacious analysts. They really are able to anticipate what is going to happen. Of course, they make a lot of mistakes because as you know, [laughs], if you make prophecies and if you're trying to anticipate where the world is going to go, inevitably, sometimes you're wrong, so we'll come back to that. Sometimes they're wrong but mostly the first drafts that they wrote of history have held up really, really well. So, for instance, H.R. Knickerbocker, the Texan in my book, he predicts the Nazi Soviet Pact in 1939. He also predicts that the Second World War is going to last almost six years. Dorothy Thompson, after she misjudges Hitler, spends the rest of the late 1930s raising the alarm, becoming the best known antagonist of Hitler. So much so that Goebbels is dreaming about her, he's writing about her in his diaries.

Deborah Cohen (08:11):

Goebbels also—Hitler's propagandist—can't get Knickerbocker out of his mind either. Even as the Nazis were throwing their armies against the Soviet Union's armies, Goebbels was dreaming all night about Knickerbocker and writing in his diary about him. So they were smart. They were perspicacious. They had a comparative imagination in the sense that they were able to see different places to understand these systems, just like I said at the start. They really had a bird's eye view, which is something that foreign correspondence, when they're given a free reign, can acquire. And then there's a third thing, which is that they knew brilliantly what the audience wanted to hear. They were people who came from small towns. They were not people who were Ivy Leaguers or from East Coast boarding schools. They came from small Midwestern towns. They knew what their neighbors wanted to hear. So they'd grown up, many of them, in the Midwest. They knew what isolationism was and I think they knew how to persuade people.

Andrea Chalupa (09:18):

Mmm. Like you said, they came from humble beginnings. They were down to earth. And at least in Dorothy Thompson's case, I know she had a strong moral compass. She was fighting for refugees, right? She's very much on the side of like—

Deborah Cohen (09:35):

Definitely. I mean, her work directly leads to the Evian Refugee Conference. And not very much happens at Evian, but it's Dorothy Thompson who's really leading the way, as you say, morally. Yeah. I mean, Dorothy Thompson, like HR Knickerbocker (the Texan), was the child of a minister. And so if you think about providing a moral compass, the idea that ministers' children become reporters and a certain kind of slangy hard living foreign correspondent... So they're not obeying the moral precepts anymore, but they have a new moral vision for the world. I think that that's very right. The other thing that they have is they understand, because they know their neighbors; they also understand that personalization works and that personalities sell. And this is something that their European counterparts really make fun of them for. You know, the, "Oh, it's so American to always be talking about personalities", but they have grown up reporting on the big city bosses of the big American cities.

Deborah Cohen (10:36):

So when Dorothy Thompson, for instance, meets Hitler and interviews him in 1931, she offers a pen portrait of him that is really devastating. He crooks his finger—little finger—when he sips his tea, you know, basically coming right out and saying that this is the man of "abnormal sexuality" in some ways, meaning code word for homosexual, which is what Nazism was oftentimes accused of. And she knows how to make Hitler seem like your weird uncle, you know? That guy. And that's something that John Gunther shared with Dorothy Thompson. So he becomes famous as the author of *Inside Europe*, first of all in 1936, and then *Inside USA* in 1947. And he writes these books that are about the sort of behind the scenes politics in international relations. And one of the things that he does is he really brings those larger-than-life figures into his writing. So, he's describing Mussolini as a guy who's afraid to sleep in the house with a mummy [laughs]. That's one of the things that he writes about Mussolini. So then all of a sudden you think, "Well, what kind of person is that?" Or he writes about Hitler's family life as Hitler's a man who's too overly attached to his mother. So they have that sense of what is really going to catch the public's imagination. And that's a very personality-driven account of politics.

Andrea Chalupa (12:04):

They knew how to get under the skin of dictators in a way that was really entertaining for their audience. Sort of like all the people today on Twitter trolling Elon Musk [laughs].

Deborah Cohen (12:16):

Absolutely.

Andrea Chalupa (12:17):

Who are now getting fired from Twitter for trolling. Elon Musk. I wanna just ground our audience in just how impactful this generation was. When Trump came to power, a 1941 essay in *Harper's Bizarre* went viral. That is called, "Who Goes Nazi?" And it is written by Dorothy Thompson. Dorothy Thompson who, of course, wrote that scathing piece on Hitler in 1931 after interviewing him, basically laughing at him, which is every man's deep fear, is being laughed at by women [laughs]. When Trump comes to power, everyone's suddenly sharing the essay by Dorothy Thompson written in 1941 called "Who Goes Nazi?" And I reference it so much on the show because it illustrates exactly what you're saying of how she places us in the issue. She places us inside the story where she describes you, the reader, at a fancy dinner party with all these illustrious people.

Andrea Chalupa (13:13):

And she points out in the room who among you will go Nazi. You really feel like you're living this weird fascist version of the movie *Clue*, you know? And she says to you directly to the audience, the reader, she says, "Try this. Try this next time at your next dinner party. Look around the room and you'll be able to know now who among you would go Nazi." It's just such a brilliant essay and it's why we're still reading it today. These guys just really just had such sharp vision because of the strong moral compass, because of the power of their imaginations, they could connect, you know, this and this and this together and see where, which way the wind was blowing. And they were just tenacious. They really weren't falling into the trap of conformity and both-sidesism. They were like, "No, fascism's bad. Hitler's bad," and so on. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Deborah Cohen (14:03):

Sure. So I also love that essay. So this, as you say, Dorothy Thompson's sitting at a party—or invites the reader to sit at a party—and she goes through all of the characters and she says, Well, what about that bank vice president in the corner? He's always in the right place at the right time. He'd join the Nazis in a second, when it's personally expedient for him to do so. But what about the demure, clingy wife of the brilliant scientist? She's totally inoffensive, isn't she? She wouldn't go Nazi. And Dorothy says to her readers, "Count on it. She's an easy mark for any jack-booted thug who bellows the woman's place in the kitchen." And then this is a quote from Thompson: "She's looking for someone else before whom to pour her ecstatic self-abasement." It's quite a chilling description. So the interesting thing about them is they really, by the '30s and sometimes before, so John Gunther, as of the mid-'20s, writes back to his editor in Chicago and he says... So at this point, you know, he's 25 years old.

Deborah Cohen (15:06):

He is Chicago born and bred. He's shot off to Europe reporting for *The Chicago Daily News*. And he writes to a girl he wants to impress that he's going to write a note to his editor proposing a series on dictatorships. And he says to the girl he wants to impress, You know, people think that the big story is actually the coming of democracies and Wilson's promises at the League of Nations, but no, it isn't. It's, instead, dictatorship. And all over the world, dictators are rising. And then he reels off a bunch of countries that are heading towards authoritarianism. So Gunther was very prescient. As we said, Dorothy Thompson though, of course, got it wrong. She didn't think it was possible for Hitler to come to power and really exercise any kind of influence, even if he got to the chancellery. H.R. Knickerbocker understood very well the danger of the Nazis.

Deborah Cohen (16:02):

He kind of stumbled into the beer hall where Hitler's putsch was taking place in 1923, and then thought, Okay, this is the story. And Knickerbocker as well, when he went to the Soviet Union in 1930, thought the five year plan was industrialization that is cataclysmic, this is devastating. And he becomes one of the very few reporters to actually listen to Gareth Jones when he comes with his stories of Ukrainian famine, and actually to legitimate them. As I said, you know, their first drafts aren't bad. They do get it wrong. And in a sense you realize how important it's to be able to change your mind. Or as Dorothy Thompson says, "It's okay to be wrong the first time so long as you change your mind and you're right the second time." That's also a part of the story that I found really compelling which is, in a way, their struggles; to be able to see their struggles, to figure out what they were observing.

Deborah Cohen (17:01):

I mean, you've lived through that. How many people have come to see the Trump presidency completely differently? I mean, there's a group of people who knew what was going on, that many, many people who told themselves, "It will be fine. Paul Ryan will take care of the situation." [laughs] I had to debate with someone about this and I thought, "I can't believe what I'm hearing." In that sense, to watch them

struggle with what modern dictatorship actually meant and to come to see that no, Hitler and Mussolini are not going to destroy each other, they're going to join forces, because the hope is, you know, in the early '30s, is, "Oh, these two jokers. Let's just sit on the sidelines and wait for them to kill each other."

Andrea Chalupa (17:45):

No, they were after world domination and helping each other get there and living above accountability and weakening all the structures that would have contained them.

Deborah Cohen (17:52):

But if you looked at it in 1933 or 1934, you could think these guys are on a collision course. And indeed they were, right? It took a while for them each to recognize that their interest was going to be in joining forces.

Andrea Chalupa (18:04):

And there were a lot of fashionable people—like Walter Duranty—who loved New York City and would go on these trips to New York and be the exotic guest at dinner parties to talk about the backwoods of Stalin's Russia and the Soviet Union and all that was happening there. And he was a celebrity among celebrities at the Algonquin Round Table for all of his interesting insights and stories and of course advising FDR during his big election. So could you speak a little bit about how these fashionable people in the West have always sort of flirted with fascism?

Deborah Cohen (18:38):

Yeah, I mean, I think that the thing is, there's always... In a way, this is back to Thompson, right? Back to her point about who goes fascist, which is, she says it's a question of character. Now, someone like Duranty is absolutely on the outskirts of this circle. So, he's a friend of Knickerbocker, though Knickerbocker argues with him. And he and Knickerbocker have a two-man show that they take on the road after the second World War where Duranty is basically arguing for Stalinism, or he's arguing Stalin's point, and Knickerbocker is the naysayer. They appear in small towns and big towns all over America with this road show. What Dorothy Thompson said to John Gunther after the Second World War when they were talking about their status... So by this time, both of them were just huge celebrities, but she says, "Oh, honey, we were outcasts." By which she means that they didn't owe a living to, you know, an elite that had produced them.

Deborah Cohen (19:39):

They were people who sort of made themselves. And of course they existed in a moment of America's increasing ascendancy in the world and certainly, you know, superpower potential, but they didn't represent the US in that way. At the very most, they had a set of American characteristics, which is their fondness for personality, the idea that they could always go home again, that they had some sense about the future, I think, that was coming in terms of America's world descendancy. But they were remarkably detached from power structures. They would go—Jimmy Sheean, one of the people whom we haven't talked about, who was a very difficult man to corral, the Zionist news organization sent him out to report in Palestine in 1929 thinking that he was gonna produce favorable stories. And instead, he produced this series of articles that were so incendiary about what was going on in Palestine, and especially about the Western Wall riots, that he dropped his contract with the news organization. But even any other paper that had published them found itself the target of protests. So they were difficult to corral in part because they insisted on the significance of their personal experience upon what they had personally

seen. And so instead of Duranty sitting in his apartment, in his lavish apartment in Moscow, they were out there talking to people.

Andrea Chalupa (21:07):

Yeah, they all had fiercely independent streaks. What impact did they have? Dorothy Thompson was fighting the Nazis on the home front. She famously got kicked out of the Nazi rally in Madison Square Garden in New York City for being in the audience of all these Proud Boys and laughing at the Nazis. They kicked her out. And she was taking on FDR and Republicans, Charles Lindbergh and Ford, you know, all of the Nazi fanboys of her day. But what impact did she really have? Because it was really Pearl Harbor that finally got America into the war to liberate Europe. Do you think she laid the foundation to get Americans ready for that? Do you think she built enough... What impact did she ultimately have?

Deborah Cohen (21:56):

I think that they had a huge impact. So one of the things that is an open question in terms of thinking through these people, and in journalists in general, is who are their readers? Well, we know that Dorothy Thompson had a public of between 8 to 10 million readers twice weekly for her columns in the late '30s. And in fact she was much more widely read than Walter Lippman. She was the second most widely read columnist in the United States at the time. Whereas we remember Lippman, Thompson has kind of faded from the scene. But in her moment, she was a hugely important swayer of opinion; a person who people really listened to and changed their minds. And I think we're just at the beginning of trying to reckon with the reception of the views of these people. So there's a lot of new historical work that's trying to understand, you know, the degree to which the United States is non-interventionist, the public is non-interventionist.

Deborah Cohen (22:59):

Some open questions there. We have to imagine that the 8 to 10 million people who are reading with her, not all of them are hate-reading her, right? Many of them are reading her because they're taking their sense of the world from her, or as a reviewer of one of her collections of newspaper columns—this was published in 1939 just as the second World War was breaking out and she called it, "Let the Record Speak"—but as a reviewer pointed out, she could just as well have called it, "I was right." So I think that they have an outsized influence because, as you said, at the beginning, they're really funneling the news for millions and millions of people. And when we think about why it is that people were ready to fight in the United States, I think it's not just the attacks in the Philippines and the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Andrea Chalupa (23:47):

It was the Nazi problem. The US had the Neutrality Act and you had Republicans really being on the side as some of them are today when it comes to Ukraine and Russia, "Why are we giving support? That's not our war. Why are we getting pulled into that?" And FDR really had a problem with that. Privately, he wanted to do more. And what was really interesting was that Dorothy Thompson basically was providing air cover for FDR. She was the one saying that stuff that his administration couldn't say and going farther and pushing and naming names and being just scathing when she was going after so many—

Deborah Cohen (24:23):

For instance, she is in many senses preparing the groundwork for the sorts of decisions that are going to be taken. She claimed that she was writing some of FDR's speeches and by the way, on her politics, she is someone who is politically quite difficult to classify. John Gunther calls her a "liberal conservative" or sometimes a "conservative liberal" in the sense that she disliked, intensely, The New Deal. She thought

that, you know, she's a minister's daughter. She thought that all of that kind of state aid was going to sap people's moral fiber. And she didn't like big states. And she thought on the whole that big states, you know, this Nazis state, the Soviet state, the New Deal state, that that was all very dangerous for American initiative and American moral fiber. On the other hand, she was an ardent anti-Nazi and it was on that ground that she made her deals with FDR.

Andrea Chalupa (25:22):

Yeah, she went from criticizing him to writing his speeches [laughs] and advising his administration.

Deborah Cohen (25:29):

Taking his calls, right? There's a story that is told, perhaps apocryphal, but Sinclair Lewis, her second husband, used to say it, which is that he's lying in bed with Dorothy Thompson, whom he called derisively "the talking woman" and the president calls. And she takes the phone call and the phone cord stretched over his neck so he can't move. And he's lying in bed [laughs] with his wife who's talking to the president, and he's just trapped there while she's giving FDR foreign policy advice.

Andrea Chalupa (25:58):

Let's talk about that. So, Sinclair Lewis, the first American to win the Nobel Prize in literature, he wrote several novels that were just these biting insights on all aspects of American life. And he was also an abusive alcoholic, not a good dad to the one child, and not a great husband. He was trying to divorce her.

Deborah Cohen (26:23):

A disastrous husband.

Andrea Chalupa (26:26):

Horrific. Horrific human being. [laughs] Just saying. And so Dorothy Thompson, being this one woman crusader against Hitler, really trying to redeem herself from laughing him off earlier and, you know, with her coverage of him would tell anybody who would listen about the threats of Hitler and what was happening in Germany. And Sinclair Lewis would roll his eyes at this and make a joke saying that, "Well, if I ever divorce my wife, I'm gonna, you know, cite Hitler as one of the reasons." What ends up happening is Sinclair Lewis absorbs everything he's hearing from Dorothy Thompson, his wife, and turns it into the novel we all remember him by, which is, *It Can't Happen Here*.

Deborah Cohen (27:04):

That's right. And then Dorothy Thompson has to disclaim when reporters ask her, you know, what role did you have in this? Because obviously this is Dorothy Thompson's table talk turned into the setting for a novel. She says, "Oh, I didn't really have anything to do with it at all." And I think she says, "I didn't even really read the manuscript." Many of the reporters—these journalists who we're talking about, these prescient, alive, brilliant people—had seriously screwed-up personal lives; a lot of alcoholism, a lot of affairs, a lot of sexual shenanigans of all sorts. So my book is about those things not just because they fill the archive—these are voluminous archives and a lot of the stuff that is in there is actually diary writings about exactly this sort of stuff—but because what they tell us is that something else was happening.

Deborah Cohen (27:59):

And I think something that's really familiar not just to you Andrea, but also to the listeners of *Gaslit Nation*, which is the sense that the line between international relations or the sort of big stuff happening on the world stage, and your inner life are dissolving. So this is a group of reporters who were really lightning rods and also stuck out there experiencing all of this; trying to understand the patterns of Hitler's family life and how they had produced this monster, and trying to understand how the monsters were basically going to wreck everyone's lives and plunging Europe into a cataclysmic war. But then they started to ask themselves questions like, "Well, am I like Hitler in my marriage?" And, "How is the marriage like the Indian freedom struggle against the British empire?" And questions like that, that all of a sudden are erasing the distinction between private life and geopolitics. And so when Sinclair Lewis says to Dorothy Thompson, "I'm gonna divorce Dorothy" and named Hitler as the guy who's basically wrecked my marriage, or when he says, "If Dorothy comes out in favor of intervention, I'm gonna rent Madison Square Garden and join forces with the America Firsters."—he doesn't rent Madison Square Garden, but he is sympathetic to the America First campaign—that is exactly this kind of slippage between the geopolitical and the intimate.

Andrea Chalupa (29:28):

Absolutely. Could we talk about how surreal it is that America First is back? You have Kari Lake, who luckily just got shot down in her race for governor, but over a million people voted for her and she's coming out talking openly, casually, campaigning on America First. America first is back. Could you explain what was the original America first and what it stood for?

Deborah Cohen (29:53):

Yes. The original America First was against intervention, chiefly in European politics. So this is what we popularly think about as being isolationism. And actually as it starts, it's a movement that has both leftwing people and rightwing people involved. So there are a number of people like John Gunther's first wife, Frances Gunther, who is an ardent anti interventionist. She hates the British Empire and she thinks if America intervenes to save the British from this war, all that's going to happen is more world domination by the British. So she's an America Firster at the beginning. It also has people like Charles Lindbergh; people who are sort of pro-Nazi sympathizers. By the time of 1940, 1941, 1942, America First had become a sort of outright rightwing group. The left-wingers had basically dropped away, but it continues to provide a kind of historical touchstone for the sorts of people who then want to revive the movement. Like, of course, Trump most significantly.

Andrea Chalupa (31:02):

It's just so strange that they're just doing it without irony, you know what I mean? It's just like, this can't be normalized or mainstreamed, but unfortunately that's what is happening in the Republican party today. So, why were they isolationist? Was it because they wanted to see Hitler succeed? Or were they really anti-war?

Deborah Cohen (31:24):

So I think there's a really important point here, which is that people understood some of what was happening in the early '30s. Certainly a person like Frances Gunther, she knows about violence against communists, against Jews after the Nazi takeover in 1933. And yet she becomes really vehemently anti intervention because of her hatred of the British Empire. So she goes to India with her husband, she becomes very good friends with Jawaharlal Nehru and with other Indian nationalists. And she thinks fascism is terrible, but British imperialism is also terrible. It is also brutality. It is also violence. It is also a

form of domination. And if we allow the British to escape from this war undeterred and unpunished, then essentially what we're doing is allowing them to keep millions and millions of Indians in chains. Or she says to John, when London is being bombed, she says, "I hope that they bomb every stick of it", because at that point, her friend Nehru is in jail. And ailing in jail.

Deborah Cohen (32:29):

And she's enraged. Those debates between people at the outset of the Second World War rip apart friends and families, and they seem to people, again, like the sort of microcosm of international politics have come to destroy relationships. So Frances is arguing with all of her erstwhile friends about this. Dorothy Thompson thinks she's nuts. You know, she likes Frances but like, what is this? You don't see that the battle for civilization is on, but when you look at Frances' analysis of the British... So she says things like "the British are terrible Europeans, they will always stand in the way of European integration," which looks like a pretty prescient point at the moment. And she mocks, ceaselessly, Churchill's, you know, "We mean to keep our own, we mean to hold our own" statements about India saying, "Why does he think India is his own?" And, "Isn't it an embarrassing confession?" And, "An Englishman can't stand on his own that he needs to subjugate millions and millions of Indians." So they're those sorts of people. There's a left anti-British sentiment that's pretty widespread in the United States. Lots of people feel it. And then of course there's quite a lot of rightwing sentiment as well that's sympathetic actually to the project of Nazim, that is sympathetic to the militarism, to the racism, to the anti-Semitism.

Andrea Chalupa (33:52):

And we see some parallels of that today where you have some on the Left who see every foreign policy step of the US government as leading us to the next Iraq war or the next Afghanistan or the next whatever forever war. And therefore, they're screaming, you know, "Ukraine, stop the aid to Ukraine" or whatever. You know, this appeasement narrative. And the joke on Twitter is, "Look, the anti-imperialist Left is pro Russian imperialist." You know? It's sort of that same interesting sort of justification. The people that we were dealing with back in the interwar period, they're still here; making different arguments but the same sort of spirit is still among us and sort of this fight for the future that we're all waging

Deborah Cohen (34:42):

And the dilemma of journalism is also really familiar. You know, it's the kind of charge of bothsidesism and, What is the truth? And is the collection of facts the same thing as the truth? Those are the sorts of battles that you wage in journalism when you have authoritarians that you have to actually somehow manage to give some account of.

Andrea Chalupa (35:04):

What were they up against in terms of disinformation, the forces of disinformation. I mean, today we have social media run amuck with obviously the Fox News machine and so on. But what were they up against in terms of oligarch ownership of media, disinformation channels and censorship? What were those forces like for them back then, and how do they navigate them?

Deborah Cohen (35:28):

So the press barons, someone like Hearst, a rightwing press baron who was running columns by Mussolini and by Hitler in his papers, Knickerbocker worked for him. Knickerbocker actually quit his job with Hearst in opposition to Hearst's isolationist policies saying essentially journalists have more cause than anyone else to work for the defeat of Hitler and his gang, and I quit. They were up against the

problem of getting information. So the difficulties in a fascist country—what they want you to print are the handouts that the press office distributes to foreign journalists, but what if you go around to the hospitals, as Dorothy Thompson does in 1933, and try to figure out who's been beaten up by these Nazis who have just taken power. Who are these people and will they talk to you? Or will the doctors talk to you? Or has she found, guess who talked to her?

Deborah Cohen (36:21):

The nurses, not the doctors. So they have to be very resourceful in terms of cultivating and finding sources of information outside of official channels. And that's true in the democratic countries, by the way, of course, as well. The third thing that they're up against is the difficulty of believing what is happening. And, you know, this is the way in which they sought to change people's minds. So it's said that John Gunther's *Inside Europe*, published in 1936, is one of the most frightening books to people because he makes these dictators so believable and real and pathological. As I said before, it's like your crazy uncle at the table. He's able to really bring them to life. So they have a set of strategies for actually reaching the reader that are really significant.

Andrea Chalupa (37:11):

Yeah, absolutely. They have that voice, that relationship with the readers, which makes it all the more interesting. So, when Dorothy Thompson was really becoming a huge celebrity in the US, she was writing for the *Herald Tribune*, which itself was a monument in media. And it was essentially being ran at the time by Helen Reid, who was the wife of the publisher. And the publisher was, as I understand it, a bit of an alcoholic, so Helen Reid took his newspaper under her care and started liberalizing it by hiring a bunch of women writers. And she turned the paper around and made it hugely successful and was selling all these ads. And one of her big crowning achievements was hiring her old friend from the Suffragist movement, Dorothy Thompson. For a while there, the relationship was great, but after a while, when Dorothy Thompson became too close with FDR, who Helen Reid as a hardcore Republican could not stand, that's when Helen Reid decided not to renew Dorothy Thompson's contract, letting loose a big star over this big political disagreement over FDR, which I think is so interesting; these two veterans of the suffragist movement completely breaking with each other, you know what I mean? They came together and then they broke apart over a political disagreement.

Deborah Cohen (38:26):

This speaks to how existential these things felt to people and we're in that moment ourselves in the sense that of, you know, where emotions and politics, politics is suffused by emotions and that is very true of their moments. And that absolutely was not true of the mid '50s by contrast. So there's a much clearer division between private and public, between what's politics, what's inner life. But those kinds of breaking your friendships. And I think Helen Reid felt also that she'd given Dorothy Thompson pretty fair warning that this is what was coming to her if she endorsed FDR and Thompson decided to do it anyway.

Andrea Chalupa (39:08):

And friendship over. It's just so interesting. It's like you said, you put it so perfectly: What's going on in the world today, where everyone is being forced to take a side—because if you're quiet, you're on the side of the oppressor—so what's going on in the world today has completely taken over our personal lives, our relationships, dividing families, families have broken apart because they've lost people who believe in the conspiracy theories of Trump's Big Lie or believe in the conspiracy theories of covid and masks and vaccines being a big hoax and so on. It's really breaking apart families and seeping into our personal lives, into our dreams. It's just like you said, it's like we're facing existential crises. No one's

allowed to be neutral and therefore our own relationships are places of work. The decisions we're making; where we raise our kids, the cultural wars being waged on school boards, all of it just feels so high stakes. And that's not normal.

Deborah Cohen (40:03):

Everything feels implicated. Dorothy Thompson has a brilliant, brilliant essay in 1937, "The Dilemma of a Liberal", where she says, "In my parents' world, politics stopped at the front door. And in my world, it is everywhere. And I love my husband and my child, but they are secondary to my considerations." And what she's really wrestling with is how do you live squeezed between communism and fascism? This is the dilemma of the liberal, but what she's also tracking is the kind of emotional invasion that she feels happening. And that's really significant for her.

Andrea Chalupa (40:41):

That's exactly it. It's an emotional invasion and that's why this whole podcast, *Gaslit Nation*, was started, because it came out of a friendship of two women trying to cling on to each other and help each other makes sense of what we were being hit with from 2016 with the rise of Trump. We both knew, we saw what was happening because I studied Ukraine, Sarah studied Uzbekistan, and we saw how bad it was about to get and how no one was gonna stop it and so on. So we've clung to each other and all of our personal phone calls that we've made over the years, we decided to open it up to a show because if we felt this way, others did. And that's what it all comes down to. It's been this emotional invasion that's just taken over our lives and we're trying to push back. We're trying to reclaim our space. We talk a lot on the show about making art and making time for art and consuming art and being creative because the war is in your mind. You need to get some oxygen to breathe and that's what's gonna ultimately sustain you in this marathon. You're absolutely right. It's like that's what the fascists want. It's like the narcissists of Hitler, Mussolini, Putin, Trump.

Deborah Cohen (41:46):

They want to occupy your mind. Yeah, that's right. And in the end, I've been thinking about this a lot. So what did they do to guard against that? They drank a lot [laughs]. They had affairs. After the war, they embarked on memoir projects, I think to try to reclaim the sorts of individual experience. So John Gunther writes his famous memoir, *Death Be Not Proud*, which is published in 1949—a completely taboo-breaking memoir about the death of his 17-year-old son from a brain tumor. Jimmy Sheean publishes his taboo-breaking account of the marriage of Sinclair Lewis and Dorothy Thompson, which is where some of those details that we were talking about earlier—about the alcoholism, the domestic violence—are first revealed. And they do that because, in a sense, part of their diagnosis of what has gone wrong is that people have repressed those kinds of human experiences. But maybe if you could talk about them, maybe if you could have an accounting of them, maybe the world would be able to be not just reconstructed in material terms—you know, rebuilding the buildings and the infrastructure,—but also reconstructed in psychological terms. And that's the hope.

Andrea Chalupa (43:04):

Wow. Obviously being on the forefront of covering dictators, taking over the world, they were obviously in danger in various ways. What, to you stood, out as sort of the most striking survival strategies for them, both physically, mentally, emotionally, as well as whatever strategies they employed to get the truth out and to resist not just structural censorship but also self-censorship that can seep in when you're in danger?

Deborah Cohen (43:34):

You know, I don't know to what extent they self-censored. As I said, they changed their mind, but that's definitely a different thing. Everyone feels the need, I think, who is on the front lines to think about, you know, what effect the story is going to have. And so in that sense, they were no different. But I don't see a lot of examples of really thinking, "I'm not gonna print this because it's gonna make FDR unhappy" or "I'm not gonna print this because Churchill's really gonna be pissed off about it." Instead, Jimmy Sheean not only wrote negative things about Churchill, but also sent his manuscript to Churchill, or maybe the finished product, actually sent the book to Churchill with the offending passages underlined [laughs], just so Churchill would be able to find them more easily. That's the kind of people these five were. They had no strategies really for taking care.

Deborah Cohen (44:26):

And the truth is that they led hard and pretty desolate, at the end, existences in the sense that someone like Dorothy Thompson ended up feeling like her whole life had gone by. There's a set of wonderful letters that she writes to Rose Wilder Lane, her old friend from the '20s. And at this point Thompson has given up her column and she's sort of getting a little bit of her life back, but she's now an old lady and she writes to Rose Wilder Lane to say "every life goes by very quickly but I never saw your letters to me. I just lived amidst an avalanche for decades." So what did she do? She smoked a lot. She drank a lot. She had affairs. In terms of coping strategies, they don't offer very much. But of course these are the people who are just on the front lines completely exposed. And I think, you know, any war correspondent today... I'm thinking about Fergal Keane's new memoir coming out that's basically about post-traumatic stress, and that just seems to me to be pretty par for the course.

Andrea Chalupa (45:33):

Yeah, I mean it was an age of trauma just like today with covid, mass deaths of covid, with the mass anxiety we're all under, whether it's Trumpism or the climate crisis. It's very much mass trauma. That was an age of mass trauma. Today's an age of mass trauma.

Deborah Cohen (45:52):

Yeah. They had friends and they were very, very funny. I mean, they made each other laugh and they had not just gallows humor but also a very kind of sardonic humor. And so someone like Jimmy Sheean, when I was reading his letters to his friends, I would laugh, you know? 60-70 years later they were still really funny.

Andrea Chalupa (46:11):

Yeah, there's so much fun to spend time with, this generation. I remember just, you know, moving to New York City in my early '20s and being very alone, feeling very lost and alone. And I would hang out in my head with Gareth Jones because I thought he was like the coolest guy in the world. He was like my invisible friend and I'd spent so much time with him because they were just such a charming, larger-than-life and just, their nonconformity.

Deborah Cohen (46:38):

Yes, I should say the nonconformity, the independent mindedness. And of course they took comfort and solace in each other and even after they had argued with each other, in some cases pretty fatally, they still kept talking to each other in their minds. So you can see diary entries where Dorothy Thompson is thinking about Knickerbocker, and John Gunther, even after he breaks with Knickerbocker, is thinking about him, wondering how each other are receiving the news of this, that or the other thing. But one

thing I do wanna say actually about Sheean. This is Jimmy Shean. Everyone is affected by the events that they're reporting, but Sheean, there's something else that's happening to him too, which is he actually begins to feel like his body is this tuning fork for the universe. And he has this really extreme sense that he knows what is going to happen next.

Deborah Cohen (47:29):

So it's like a version of the reporter's sixth senses; where should you be, you know, because you have cultivated your sixth senses of where the news is going to happen. Only in Sheean's case, he looks at a lighted globe, he kind of spins it around and he knows where the next trouble spot is going to be. And thus in 1947, he's telling his friends, "Gandhi will be assassinated by a Hindu and I have to get there, I have to go." And they all think he's ridiculous except that Sheean is sitting in the courtyard at Birla House when Gandhi is assassinated because it's his sixth sense that has led him to actually understand that this future is right upon him.

Andrea Chalupa (48:10):

Wow, that's extraordinary. You know, what you pointed out are the helpful coping mechanisms for today. This whole conversation makes me wanna have a very dirty martini at an exotic hotel bar somewhere.
[laughs]

Deborah Cohen (48:26):

Definitely a last call in more ways than one, right?

Andrea Chalupa (48:29):

Yeah. I think the coping mechanisms from this generation that we're repeating today, especially on the show, is you cling to people that help you make sense of the world. You make each other laugh. And you write things down! It's the diary entries. It's the talking to yourself on paper. It's the talking to old friends past, present on paper. It's getting it out of your system. On paper, my co-host Sarah Kendzior went viral when Trump came to power when she wrote an essay saying, "Write things down, write things down."

Deborah Cohen (48:59):

I remember reading that and actually I've been thinking a lot about that in terms of the ways in which people had coped. But yes, as you say, there's fellowship, there's political organizing and there's a kind of community. And a lot of drinking.

Andrea Chalupa (49:15):

[laughs] And with that, thank you so much for being on the show. Everyone, please check out Deborah Cohen's book, *Last Call at The Hotel Imperial*.

Deborah Cohen (49:25):

Thank you so much for having me.

[outro - music up and under, roll credits]

Andrea Chalupa:

Our discussion continues and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth-teller level or higher.

Sarah Kendzior:

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Our production manager is Nicholas Torres and our associate producer is Karlyn Daigle. Our episodes are edited by Nicholas Torres and our Patreon exclusive content is edited by Karlyn Daigle.

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