CAPITAL GROUP®
PRIVATE CLIENT SERVICES

On the front line

In the 1920s, a small group of American journalists chronicled the seismic forces reshaping European politics and history.

Deborah Cohen is everything you wish you'd had in a history professor. Her eyes light up as she discusses her subject. She's one of those intellectually curious people who starts to follow one thread before darting joyfully in other directions. Cohen, who chairs the history department at Northwestern University and writes for the *Atlantic*, dispenses her knowledge in savory phrases and ambitious ideas that stretch readers' minds.

She calls upon those skills in *Last Call at the Hotel Imperial: The Reporters Who Took on a World at War*. The book grew out of Cohen's research on an unrelated work by one of the reporters, John Gunther. She discovered a trove of letters written by Gunther and other young journalists who had been bound by their experiences in Europe. With fascism stalking the Continent and World War II approaching, the American reporters chronicled the rise of Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini, interviewing all three.

Though their names may be unfamiliar now — Dorothy Thompson, H.R. Knickerbocker and James Vincent Sheean in addition to Gunther — their dispatches to an American public that was geographically and intellectually distanced from Europe helped influence the course of political history. Their reporting also set the standard for the legions of foreign correspondents who would come after them.

What prompted you to write about these reporters?

When I was going through Gunther's papers, I was brought in by their scope. Because of his work, he was in communication with everyone who was anyone in politics, and they were just amazing. I thought, "Wow, I can't believe I'm getting to see a letter from Jawaharlal Nehru and Winston Churchill." Very chatty, very informal letters. The deeper I went, the more I realized that I was seeing a group of friends being constituted: young people who left the United States around the same time and were making their careers in Europe and Asia, crossing paths and getting close. They had to rely on each other. They were testing their impressions on each other. And they were arguing as well, because they had really big differences.

How did these reporters end up in Europe?

Chicago was the writing capital of the United States, but they didn't feel that way. Civilization was centered in Europe in the '20s. They were impatient with American prudery and Prohibition and pretty ready to hotfoot it out and see the world.

These writers forged a new path in journalism that's evident to this day. At the time, reporters were supposed to be invisible to the reader, reporting objectively. But this group started to interpret the facts for readers and give their own impressions and thoughts.

That's very much the kind of landscape they were traversing, going from being raised on objectivity as the value of the newsroom to thinking that the truth has to be more than this collection of facts, and "unless people can see how I am seeing this, they're not going to actually understand it." They very much wanted to change people's minds and were kind of cynical about whether that was possible. Dorothy Thompson was probably the most idealistic. At some point in the 1930s, she said, "If fascism makes this really significant emotional appeal, and so does communism, where is the appeal for democracy that is going to stir people's emotions?"

How did communism and fascism gain such a foothold in Europe at that time?

There was the crisis of the Great Depression. The Western liberal democracy had just failed. So what are the alternatives? Well, Soviet communism, maybe. After all, they're managing to create industrial capacity; they're feeding people. All of the hopes are poured into Soviet communism and then equally into fascism. Mussolini can make the trains run on time. Maybe that's what Italy needs. Someone like Knickerbocker, who was a huge critic of Nazism and Stalinism, looks at Italy and thinks maybe Italy really does need a top-down strong state that's going to whip all of these regional authorities into shape.

Do you think there's a lesson that students today can learn from this group of reporters?

Working with our school's Leopold research fellows has been hugely useful to me because these students give me a sense of what young people think is interesting about the past, what grips them. I think a lot of them are struggling with the question of [how much] one individual can do. There is the dilemma of how not to just get depressed and turn off. Jimmy Sheean struggled with that — how not to live just a purely sybaritic life in Bloomsbury. This is everyone's dilemma, but especially a young person's dilemma: How do we lead a meaningful life?

What made these reporters special?

They were from mid-America, not from elite families. But they were really able to figure out what their fellow citizens needed to hear, or so they thought. Jimmy Sheean came across the ocean from Pana, Illinois, and then a decade later is consorting with duchesses and sitting at the heart of

Bloomsbury. If nothing else, it's just staggering social mobility. They're such an entrancing group of people. There they were, a group of friends, young people in the thick of the most important global happenings of the '20s, '30s and '40s.

Related Insights