

Dorothy Thompson: Commentary and Analysis of the European Situation for NBC Radio (August 23-September 6, 1939)

Added to the National Registry: 2023

Essay by Nancy F. Cott (guest post)*



Dorothy Thompson should be better known today. In the 1930s her fame as “First Lady of American Journalism” nearly equaled that of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. These broadcasts of hers from late August and early September 1939 show off her expertise, though not, regrettably, the fiery anti-fascism for which Thompson was then known. A special series on the National Broadcasting Network (NBC) in response to the shocking news of a non-aggression treaty between Germany and Russia (the Nazi-Soviet Pact), these talks were meant to keep Americans informed of the tense and threatening European situation. Their detail requires listeners’ close attention, the kind one would give to a serious newspaper article. Americans at the time were used to getting their foreign news in newspapers, not on the radio. Only in the lead-up to World War II did radio broadcasts become central to news transmission. Here, over two world-altering weeks, Thompson revealed European negotiations, Hitler’s defiance in invading Poland on September 1, Britain’s and France’s consequent declarations of war against Germany, and the stakes of American neutrality.

You will hear Thompson introduced in every broadcast as a well-known “woman commentator and former foreign correspondent.” Though the word “woman” sounds unnecessary today, it was the identity that made her journalistic career exceptional. The daughter of a genteel-poor Methodist minister in upstate New York, Thompson graduated from Syracuse University and quickly shed her provincial background by crossing the Atlantic when she was 26, in 1920. Like many members of her post-World War I generation, Thompson was eager to see Europe and figured she would support herself by writing for newspapers back home.

Equipped only with writing skill and marvelous determination, she rapidly gained journalistic credibility by securing interviews with refugees and rebels in Ireland, France, and Italy, and selling her articles wherever she could. In 1921, most aspiring young American writers abroad lived in Paris, but Thompson decided to live in war-ravaged Vienna. She submitted so many good stories about postwar outcomes in the former Austro-Hungarian empire that the “Philadelphia Public Ledger” appointed her a foreign correspondent. Within four years, the “Ledger” promoted her to be chief of its foreign bureau in Berlin, a plum post with authority almost unheard-of for a woman. Thompson thus became familiar with German culture and politics (and learned to speak German) in the hectic 1920s, and became alert then to the winds of authoritarianism that were already blowing over Europe. She was celebrated for many a journalistic coup in a news era when getting a story first was prized.

She left Europe and her job as a journalist in 1928, however, to marry the accomplished American novelist Sinclair Lewis. Lewis proposed marriage to her the very night he met her, when visiting Berlin in 1927, and insistently pressed his case until she gave in. Once married and living in the United States, Thompson happily gave birth to a son, yet regretted abandoning her European position. She had not given up her commitment to reporting European news.

She found reason to write again when the couple traveled to Sweden in 1930 for Lewis to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Great Depression was taking hold, roiling European politics as well as the economic landscape. Visiting Germany, Thompson could see the rising hold of Hitler’s National Socialist party, the ready violence of Nazi stormtroopers on the streets, and the failing parries of the existing republican government and rival communist groups.

Over the next few years, she took extended trips to Germany, reporting and analyzing what was taking place in Hitler’s gain of power and the increasing spread of fascism elsewhere. Most of her lengthy articles were published in “The Saturday Evening Post,” the most widely-read general weekly magazine in the United States. As a writer of more personal and analytical articles than she had been free to write for her newspaper in the 1920s, she could express her increasingly fervent anti-fascism.

Thompson’s bold condemnation of Adolf Hitler’s intents, including his lies about Jews, led to her becoming the first American journalist officially ejected from Nazi Germany. That was in 1934, once Hitler had consolidated his rule. This did not deter her. She had many sources in Europe who kept her closely informed. She also began a series of writings criticizing the New Deal at home. Because of what she had witnessed in Europe, she distrusted any government controls on the economy, including President Roosevelt’s programs to address the Depression.

Thompson’s unusual combination of anti-fascism and wariness about the New Deal led to her being sought out in 1936 by Helen Rogers Reid, wife of the owner and publisher of “The New York Herald Tribune,” then as widely read and trusted as the New York Times. Soon Thompson was writing a thrice-weekly column, just as Walter Lippmann, the “Herald Tribune’s” first columnist, did. Her notoriety and influence soared. Columns of opinion were brand-new at that time, and there were few of them. The successful ones, like Thompson’s, were syndicated, meaning that newspapers elsewhere could reprint them, paying a subscription fee. More than 150 newspapers paid for rights to Thompson’s column, “On the Record,” so her views circulated to seven or eight million people all over the country. In addition, NBC offered her a weekly 15-minute radio slot commenting on “People in the News.”

Millions of Americans chewed over Thompson's strong opinions. She consistently urged Americans to recognize the threats implied in fascist militarization; by 1934 she was sure that Hitler was bent on war. Her passionate antifascism and empathetic concern for Jews and other refugees made her revered by thousands, but also reviled. She criticized the American Neutrality Acts that prevented the US from helping republican Spain resist Franco's fascist war, for example. Once war began in Europe, she blasted isolationists such as the America First group, and they called Thompson a warmonger who aimed to bring the US into the war. Reams of antisemitic hate mail landed at her door. By some she was feted with banquets; by others she was hanged in effigy.

Her controversial celebrity did not last. In 1941 the Reids dropped her "Herald Tribune" column, furious that she announced last-minute support for FDR in 1940, when they'd expected her to back Republican candidate Wendell Willkie. Though her column appeared elsewhere, its influence was never as great. More importantly, most Americans could not comprehend Thompson's complex wartime and postwar views about Germany. She hated Nazism, but she prized much in German history and culture, and deplored the intention that Germany should be reduced to a rural wasteland. Her pleas to re-create Germany as a valued mainstay in Europe were perceived as an appalling reversal and even as antisemitism. Such critiques became far stronger after she visited Palestine in 1946 and found the Arab case against a Jewish homeland there reasonable. The sectors in the American populace who had previously most applauded her now rejected her. Although she continued to write a contemplative monthly "Ladies Home Journal" column until her death in 1961, she no longer had a significant public audience.

Yet Thompson should be remembered. She deserves lasting recognition less as the "first woman" or "only woman" in her field (a designation she rejected) than as an extraordinarily effective voice insisting that the United States recognize its international responsibilities to enable democracy and the rule of law to prevail over authoritarianism and aggression.

Nancy F. Cott retired in 2018 from her position as Jonathan Trumbull Professor of American History at Harvard University. She is the author of numerous books and articles concerning the history of gender, marriage, feminism, law, citizenship, social movements, political culture, and journalism. Her book, "Fighting Words: How Bold Young American Journalists Brought the World Home Between the Wars" (N.Y., 2020), focuses on Dorothy Thompson and three other international journalists.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.