

DANGER: MINDS AT WORK

By Emanuel Litvinoff

WHAT does one make of the case of Ilya Ehrenburg? One of the more gifted Russian writers, endowed with scepticism and a sharp, satirical talent, he has been everything from a Stalinist ad-man to a leading defender of creative freedom. We think of him as a supremely skilful trapezist endowed with an unerring instinct for survival. Others have been braver or more foolish: he calculates the problems of equilibrium before cautiously moving an inch. For those of us who believe there is a positive value in staying alive, Ehrenburg is neither as ignoble nor guilty as the self-righteous—those who forget the uneasy compromises reached by intellectuals in any society—have proclaimed.

These reflections arise on reading *Bitter Harvest* (Thames and Hudson, 25s), a collection of stories, essays, and poems by writers in Communist countries, edited by Edmund Stillman, who subtitles the anthology "The Intellectual Revolt Behind the Iron Curtain." Thirty writers are represented and every contribution is memorable; some because the men who wrote them signed their death warrant by doing so, or because others were a passport to a prison cell, and some because they are outstanding contributions to the literature of our time. Yet the best single work in this volume is Ehrenburg's magnificent essay "The Lessons of Stendhal," which unfortunately appears here only in a

condensed version. It was first published in the June, 1957, number of "Inostrannaya Literatura" in Moscow, but it is known in the West, in the strange way these things do get around, that Ehrenburg fought stubbornly for a long time before he received permission to print it, and the fact that it has appeared at all in a Soviet journal testifies to the distance the Russians have travelled since the literary dictatorship of Zhdanov. For Ehrenburg's essay is as eloquent a defence of intellectual freedom as anything that has appeared in mid-twentieth-century writing. It is written out of one man's pain, out of the remembrance of private defeats, humiliations, shabby compromises. Between the lines are written the names of men who died because they tried to be as truthful as Stendhal, and reading it one understands why Ehrenburg's name was absent from the list of those who publicly pilloried Pasternak.

The unique brilliance of the essay on Stendhal is not, however, the only reason why this book should be bought, read, and treasured. It has Adam Wazyk's fine protest poem, "A Poem for Adults," as memorable in Polish writing as Eliot's "The Wasteland" was in Anglo-American literature of the 1920s. Published in "Nowa Kultura" in August, 1955, the reverberations of its impact shuddered the political edifices in Budapest, Moscow, and Peking, as well as in Warsaw. Poland in fact is prolific in talented nonconformists. There is the young philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, represented here by his powerfully sardonic essay "What is Socialism?" There is Marek Hlasko, Pawel Hertz, Bohdan Drozdowski, and several others writing with a bitterness and passion that we in the West cannot recall since the thirties.

Then there are the martyred Hungarians led by Imre Nagy, part of whose famous manifesto, "Hungarian Integrity and the Five Principles of Co-existence," is reprinted here; Tibor Dery, gaoled by the Fascist Horthy as a Communist and by the Communist Kadar as a counter-revolutionary, is represented by a short story, "Behind a Brick Wall," which manages to deal compassionately with one of those drab agents of bureaucratic tyranny the party informer; and the playwright Gyula Hay, also imprisoned by Kadar, contributes "Some Observations on Literary Censorship and Freedom." Yugoslavia is represented by an essay on "National Com-

munist" from Milovan Djilas's "The New Class," East Germany by Wolfgang Harich, the young social scientist who is serving a ten-year sentence on a charge of treason, and China by two practitioners of an Oriental brand of socialist realism which is all the more moving for being ridiculous.

But however different the quality of these writers, they share a common passion for truth and justice, and it would be a mistake to see them merely as unfortunates from whose predicament we ourselves are exempt. In fact they stand in the vanguard of a battle in which Western intellectuals are also engaged, even if the pressures in our society are in no way comparable. They function in a world which still takes literature seriously, so seriously indeed that a poet is regarded as more dangerous than an armed terrorist. One of the reasons writers are treated with more indulgence in the West is that Governments regard them with too much contempt to be frightened of them.



Ilya Ehrenburg