

Watching history go by

by Emanuel Litvinoff

FOR an interpretation of contemporary history, we are largely at the mercy of newspaper reporters. Fortunately, these three have served us admirably and one comes away from reading them with a better understanding of the events they have observed.

For obvious reasons priority must be given to Giuseppe Boffa's *Inside the Khrushchev Era* (Allen and Unwin, 25s), although the publishers should be mildly reprimanded for representing the book as being more "candid" and "critical" of the Soviet Union than it is. Mr Boffa is the foreign editor of the Italian Communist newspaper, "L'Unita," and his book is virtually an authorised defence of recent Soviet developments, with all the reticences that such a brief demands. He worked for five years as a Communist correspondent in Moscow, clearly enjoys the confidence of the Soviet leadership, and appears to have been entrusted with the task of acting as their interpreter to the West. In the nature of things, the "frankness" proclaimed on the book jacket could not possibly exist. There is, of course, the usual public acknowledgment—with reservations—of the "mistakes" of the Stalin era, but Mr Boffa acknowledges with approval the "unwritten, perhaps unconscious code of conduct for the Soviet individual" to criticise, yes, but only "among ourselves" and not to "wash dirty linen in public." The same discipline applies to Communists generally and to Mr Boffa in particular. He can, and does, criticise what party directives permit in open criticism and conceals under such dim verbalisations as "negative aspects" and "objective realities" what has not yet been allowed in open discussion. Within these limits "Inside the Khrushchev Era" is a valuable book. The problems of Soviet society are ably and intelligently discussed and its dynamism in productivity, science, and education is made explicable in terms of the great organisational improvements that developed from the

rise to power of the Khrushchev faction. Mr Boffa, as spokesman, tells us how the present leadership wish us to see their defeat of "the anti-party faction" and particularly the overthrow of Malenkov, who is accused of criminal enormities that would at one time have ensured his liquidation. He extracts the bombast from Soviet propaganda and shows what is left is still remarkable, and often admirable. A well-argued brief for the defence, in fact.

The Reluctant Satellites, by the American journalist, Leslie B. Bain (Macmillan Co. N.Y., 27s 6d), is an eye-witness report on Communist Central Europe and the Balkans around the time of the 1956 Hungarian Rising. Written in the best traditions of American journalism, which can be very good indeed, it makes a valuable contribution to the literature of the Hungarian tragedy. Mr Bain's criticism of the disastrous rôle of "Radio Free Europe" in that episode deserves wide notice. Unduly influenced by former Hungarian Fascists, anti-Communists, and anti-Semites, "Radio Free Europe" was sometimes reckless and inflammatory, misreporting the situation inside Hungary, misleading the resistance forces, and undermining the influence of Imre Nagy at the critical moment when he might have achieved a compromise with the Russians.

Central Europe and the Balkans are also featured in Robert St John's *Foreign Correspondent* (Hutchinson, 25s), but the period is the first half of the Second World War. It is one of those vivid, cinematic narratives in which the narrator plays a modest, heroic rôle like Gary Cooper. But Mr St John can recall turbulent events and the people involved with a visual immediacy that reminds one of old newsreels. We all know the shock of sudden remembrance these celluloid records can give. This is precisely the impact of "Foreign Correspondent." It makes a magnificent story out of the war in Europe as seen by an impassioned observer.