

SILENCES

by Emmanuel Litvinoff

EVE OF WAR 1933-41, by Ilya Ehrenburg (MacGibbon and Kee, 42s).

THE fourth volume of Ehrenburg's autobiography is steeped in the melancholy of events. Europe slithered ignobly into anarchy and war; the Communist élite of Russia disappeared into the cellars of the G.P.U.; the farce of non-intervention was enacted while Spain drowned in its own blood; it was the decade of midnight arrests, torture chambers, the firing squad; Chamberlain and Daladier traded Czechoslovakia for a dud peace; Stalin cabled Ribbentrop that Germany and Russia's friendship was "cemented with blood."

But the book is depressing not for these things alone. Ehrenburg is writing about the period when men told themselves lies so that they could give conviction to the lies they were telling others. It was a fraudulent time when cynics exploited in the service of tyranny the talents and vanity of intellectuals, the idealism, ignorance, and fear of the masses. There is no point in writing about it today except with unsparing honesty. Ehrenburg is unable: it is still too early for him to tell the Soviet public the full truth. Because the Stalin myth has been dismantled, he is licensed to disclose much about the period of Stalinist terror. But he has no licence to re-examine the events that took place beyond the Soviet frontiers, or to question the policies of the Communist International. Where he cannot be frank, he is defensively ironical or escapes into shallow nostalgia. The result is scrappy, faded, and melodramatic like an old newsreel. Remember the Popular Front with its shrill slogans and facile optimism that decent people were going to lick fascism and put the world to rights? In Ehrenburg's book the Left-wing intellectuals meet in Paris, praise Stalin's Russia, self-consciously wear the worker's cloth cap, lift their fists in the Communist salute, all to a commentary that, except for its tortured reticence, could have come out of back numbers of the "Daily Worker."

The account of the Spanish Civil War suffers much less from this mechanical defect. Ehrenburg was there as an "Izvestia" correspondent. Spain was a refuge from the nightmare of Moscow; it was an honest choice between right and wrong. But for Ehrenburg it was more than that. He loved the country,

was tormented by the suffering he saw and the fratricidal struggle between Anarchists, Communists, and Social Democrats which helped to deliver the Republic into the hands of its enemies. There is no doubt of his personal bravery. He was not one of those reporters who covered the war from the bar of a luxury hotel in Madrid, but was shelled and shot at in many front-lines, compulsively drawn by his own involvement in the fate of the Spanish people. The accounts of battle are raw and painful. He never acquired detachment and the scars still throb. Ehrenburg lost many close friends in the fighting but, even worse, in Spain he lost his political innocence and tasted the bitterness of betrayal. It is not easy to question his silences there because one knows what they must cost him. Yet even in the Soviet Union there are people who have read Orwell, Koestler, Malraux, Regier, and will know that Ehrenburg has suppressed uncomfortable truths about the Spanish Civil War. He does not talk of the time when Russia withheld arms because Spain could not pay for them in gold. He talks of André Marty, the French Communist International Brigade Commander, but does not mention that he murdered Anarchists in cold blood and was more hated by many Republicans than Franco himself. Marty, he writes, "was imperious, very short-tempered, and always suspecting everyone of treason . . . he spoke (and occasionally acted) like a mentally sick man."

For the sake of circumspection the truth is short-changed, and it is not good enough. One wonders how long it will be before Ehrenburg can speak as freely about the Martyrs of recent history as he does today about Stalin. If the people of the Soviet Union still cannot be trusted to know these things there is something fraudulent about de-Stalinisation.