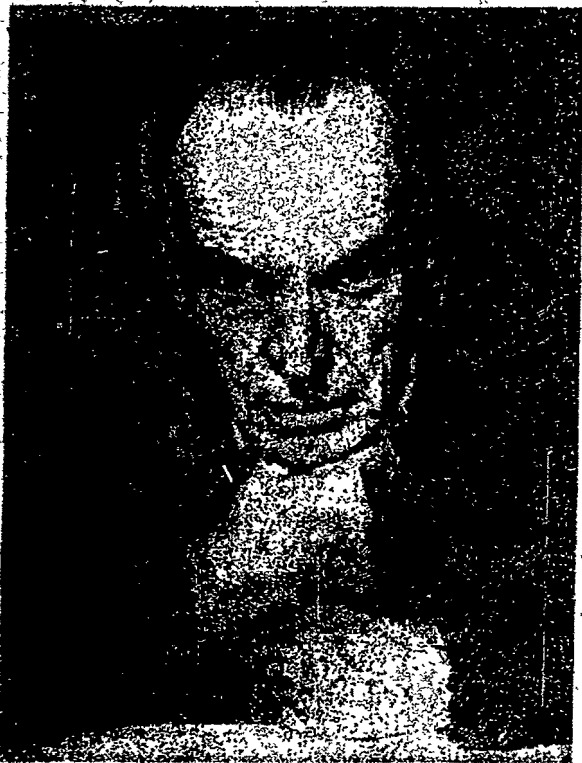


BOOKS OF THE DAY I

Battlefields of the Revolution

BY EMANUEL LITVINOFF



Konstantin Paustovsky: "... rich in humour, but the laughter is often grim. . . ."

IN THAT DAWN, by Konstantin Paustovsky (Harvill, 30s).
POST-WAR YEARS 1943-1954, by Ilya Ehrenburg (MacGibbon and Kee, 63s).

THIS, the third volume of Konstantin Paustovsky's immense autobiography, "Story of a Life," arrives appropriately in a year that marks the-fiftieth anniversary of the Soviet Union. It opens with the spring of 1917 when bitter, war-weary soldiers camped in the streets of Kerensky's Moscow and Russia shuddered with impending violence. It ends in 1920 as Soviet forces capture Odessa and the White counter-revolution peters out in a wild flurry of haphazard rifle-fire. The world we know was born in that violence, on that bloody couch, and this vivid book is, in a sense, our own family history.

Unlike Ehrenburg, who writes about events as of a drama in which he performs the essential rôle, Paustovsky remains on the fringe even when the bullets are aimed at his heart. He is a man caught up in tempestuous affairs that are of other men's making; he would prefer to go about his own business unmolested, but can only wait, endure, and hope for survival. Ehrenburg, the war correspondent, gives us a newsreel of the Revolution from his personal observation post. With Paustovsky we are there, marooned in a decrepit house in Moscow while opposing factions riddle the courtyard with machine-gun fire; sitting in the Journalist's Café drinking bitter coffee and making bitter argument; watching Lenin pacify mutinous soldiers; standing among the crowds in Kiev as the Ukrainian Ataman, Petlyura, rides arrogantly into the conquered city on a white horse. Paustovsky was almost executed by the Red Guards; drunken Cossacks

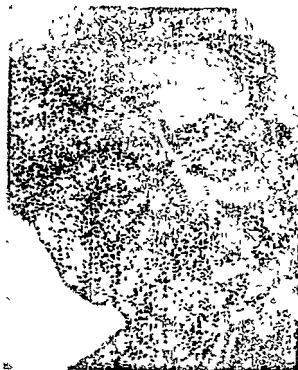
tried to shoot him in the back for sport; he was conscripted into a regiment of ex-bandits, terrorised by a comic but sinister commander, marched here and there, then sent home. He writes about all this with wide-eyed surprise and a marvellous sense of the ridiculous. The book is rich in paradox and humour, but the laughter is often grim—hunger and cruelty haunt its pages.

There is a description of the pogroms unleashed by the Whites as the Red Army drove south through the Ukraine. The crowds begin to attack the Jews of Kiev. "Then, from the dead stillness of the dark house, came a woman's terrifying, despairing shriek. . . . The woman's lonely cry was taken up by others, echoing it throughout the house, from attic to cellar. This howling broke the raiders' nerve and they took to their heels. But there was nowhere for them to run to—the walling outstripped them, coming from house after house in Vasilkov Street and from side street after side street. The screams spread like wildfire from district to district. The most terrifying thing about it was that it came from dark, deserted-looking houses and completely empty, lifeless streets where only a few gaslights flickered as though lighting its way. . . . I had heard people—even crowds—screaming in terror, but never a whole city."

Which brings us to the last of Ehrenburg's six volumes of "Men, Years—Life," for at the centre of Ehrenburg's personal tragedy is the problem of Russian Jews. There is no doubt at all that this vast autobiography has in itself been one man's battlefield. One does not want to shoot at a man who is under critical fire from all sides, but this is the worst volume of

all. Its theme is the cold war. Few of us are now so innocent as to believe that Stalin's was the hand that divided the world into hostile camps. The cold war was the ideology of frightened men in Washington, and Stalin welcomed it as a consolidating force in his own empire. But it is disheartening to find that Ehrenburg still perpetuates the empty rhetoric of Communist Peace Congresses, blocks out the issues in crude black and white, tells half the truth while pretending it is the whole of it.

The acid test has been in what he would write about Stalin's anti-Semitism. During this shocking period Ehrenburg was made to function, perhaps not wittingly, as Stalin's court Jew. He told lies abroad about the fate of Jewish writers who had been executed and suppressed the truth about the execution of his own colleagues on the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. In those days his motive was self-preservation. Now he has told half the truth here, a quarter there, and remains altogether silent on many things. What is his motive today?



Ilya Ehrenburg