

# Two veteran dissenters by Emanuel Litvinoff

*THE WAR, 1941-45, by Ilya Ehrenburg (Macgibbon and Kee, 45s).*

*STORY OF A LIFE, by Konstantin Paustovsky (Harvill, 25s).*

**T**HE Soviet Union at war should have been a magnificent subject for Ilya Ehrenburg, the voice of Russia during the titanic battle for survival against Nazi Germany and one of the world's outstanding war reporters. This fifth volume of his extensive autobiography, *Seven Years—Life*, eagerly awaited as it has been, is, however, not the book one expected. Ehrenburg has deliberately chosen not to write it. Instead, he maintains the conversational tone of previous volumes, that of a man compulsively reminiscent about people and events, frequently turning to dwell upon

some introspective bitterness. It's not a bad method at all. Russia's war was terrible, beyond our experience, and Ehrenburg writes about it with a dry grief that is deeply distressing. The defeats, the atrocities, are unbearable, and when the Iron armies are finally shattered we understand completely the sour misanthropy of that hard-won triumph.

Ehrenburg has been reviled in many places, including the West, as a bloodthirsty hater of the Germans. During the war a Swedish newspaper accused him of having "broken all records of intellectual sadism" in describing German atrocities. In the spring of 1944, *Pravda* itself attacked him for not distinguishing between good and bad Germans, and the editor of the Soviet forces newspaper, "Red Star," for whom he was the leading war correspondent, spoke harshly to him "as if I were a defaulter from the army." Well, he certainly hated the Nazis, convinced that they were in complicity with the majority of the Germans, and I do not see how he could have felt otherwise in the face of what happened in Russia. The bitterness remains. If one wishes to understand why the Germans are still mistrusted in Moscow, Ehrenburg should be read. He will also help you to understand the scar left on the Russian mind by the long delay in starting the Second Front. Whatever the political and strategic considerations for this delay, it seemed to the Soviet people that they were being sacrificed to save the lives of British and Americans, or to create a situation in which Russia would be too enfeebled to conserve its position in the post-war world. This festering suspicion has not yet been overcome.

Even in those grim times the Russians were oppressed by their insane bureaucracy and Ehrenburg conveys the ambivalence towards Stalin felt by writers, generals, and others. Stalin would occasionally take time off from conducting the war to censor personally a newspaper article; he spoke of "frightened little intellectuals" who, indeed, went in fear of his

displeasure; a message to American Jews from Ehrenburg was suppressed on the grounds that he was not permitted to mention the exploits of Jews in the Red Army, and that he was told to ask permission before accepting invitations to foreign embassies. But there was also a sense of imminent liberation from the domestic tyrannies. People believed that when the Germans were defeated everything would be different. Ehrenburg received letters from soldiers speaking optimistically of that future battle for freedom. With brilliant gamesmanship he quotes one from a young soldier-poet who appeals to him because "your voice has been with us . . . your authority and devotion to Russian literature are a guarantee of the honesty and sharpness of your judgment." The writer was Nikolay Gribachev, now, in middle age, a Soviet reactionary who has recently attacked Ehrenburg and Yevgeny Yevtushenko in thinly veiled anti-Semitic terms.

**KONSTANTIN PAUSTOVSKY**, who also earned official displeasure during the war for a scenario he had written on the life of the poet Lermontov, is one of the most consistently liberal voices in contemporary Soviet literature and regarded by many as the finest living Russian writer. In *Story of a Life*, an autobiography of his early years, he has written a book worthy to stand beside that of Samuel Marshak, who was a literary generation older.

Paustovsky's story begins after 1905, where Marshak's ended. He shares with the older man the gift of evocation, but whereas Marshak's was an unshadowed celebration of childhood and adolescence, Paustovsky's recalls the sombre experiences of a painful, often deprived, family life. He lived in the Ukraine, in Kiev, and spent long periods with relatives in small provincial towns. Part Turk, Cossack, Pole, and Ukrainian, Paustovsky's relations mirror the diverse racial vitality of Southern Russia. He has written a vivid, intense, and lyrical memoir that should make the reader eager to seek out more of his writings.