

## Several types of Soviet reality

by Emanuel Litvinoff

PEOPLE frequently profess themselves mystified by the conflicting impressions brought back from the Soviet Union. Excluding the oversimplifications of the Communist and anti-Communist propagandists, scarcely two people agree on the character and appearance of "Soviet reality." Here, for example, are several books, each valid and "true," yet each reflecting a different Soviet Union. One is by a young foreigner who lived the life of a Soviet citizen in the relatively relaxed period after Stalin's death; another is by a Soviet secret agent, trained as an assassin, who remained in the West rather than carry out a gruesome assignment; a third is an account of her childhood by one of the old Russian aristocracy; yet another looks at Soviet life through the prism of literature; and the last surveys Russian history through the narrow windows of the Kremlin.

*The Future is Ours, Comrade* (Bodley Head, 21s) is written by the pseudonymous "Joseph Novak," a Russian-speaking young man from an East European Communist State (probably Poland) who travelled all over the USSR carefully recording his conversations with people on all levels of the Soviet hierarchy. He was trusted, permitted intimacies rarely conceded to the foreign visitor, and has produced an authoritative account of the fears, hopes, and ideas of representative men and women in the Soviet Union as expressed in hundreds of candid, uncensored conversations. I am particularly convinced of his accuracy because, in his chapter on the vexed problem of Soviet Jews, I am able to corroborate all he says from direct experience and specialised knowledge. The book is something of a revelation. It will fit scarcely anybody's preconceptions. Are you impressed by Soviet education? Do you believe Russian society is more or less moral than that in the West? Do you think the secret police are in retreat before "socialist legality"? Or that there is a great hunger for individual liberty? Or that young Soviet men and women secretly admire Western culture and behaviour? Mr Novak's answers—or rather, the answers he received from his Russian friends—will astonish you. This is the Russian people talking in a way that they do not talk in their books, newspapers, or in their encounters with Westerners, talking with passion, vigour, intelligence, and disconcerting candour. They are worth listening to.

On April 22, 1954, a man named Nikolai Khokhlov, told a news conference in Bonn that he had been sent to organise the assassination of a

Russian anti-Communist leader in Germany. It was an outrageously melodramatic story, with what seemed fictional elaborations—an intricate sifient automatic built into a cigarette case, an organisation of killers specially trained in Moscow in the latest murder techniques, an assassin's midnight confession to his would-be victim. Soviet "reality" or an invention of American counter-espionage? The answer is given in Khokhlov's book, *In the Name of Conscience* (Muller, 21s). As a young Moscow student he was recruited into the Soviet Secret Service and carried out a daring guerrilla assignment in Nazi occupied territory which accomplished the death of the Nazi gauler Kube, known as the Butcher of Byelorussia. Khokhlov became a prized, but reluctant, agent of the MVD, and made several unavailing attempts to be released from the organisation. Finally, he was ordered to liquidate the anti-Communist Russian, Okolovich, and this was the moment when he said no, inspired by his young wife's readiness to risk arrest rather than have her husband act as a cold-blooded killer. The denouncement was tragic. Khokhlov fell into the hands of American Intelligence, who first distrusted him, then failed to keep their promise to get his wife and child to the shelter of the American Embassy in Moscow and so sealed the family's doom. The MVD succeeded in poisoning Khokhlov with radioactive Hallium, but he finally recovered although permanently disfigured by baldness and radiation scars. It is a terrifying story, a reminder that the Soviet Secret Service which spent so many years in planning the murder of Trotsky and his close associates is still capable of long-range assassination accomplished with great resource and technical ingenuity.

Professor George Gibian's *Interval of Freedom* (Oxford, 34s) is an attempt to get at Soviet reality through the literature of the 1954-7 "thaw" when censorship was comparatively relaxed. He organises his discussion under the three topics which most preoccupy Soviet writers and which, he feels, afford the best insight into the workings of Soviet society and the mind of the Russian intellectual. These are science and scientists, love and sex, and the treatment of so-called "negative characters" or Soviet "bad men." The result is an interesting, if academic enterprise along rather familiar lines, a kind of highbrow crystal-gazing. But Professor Gibian does succeed in clarifying an

important distinction between the Soviet intellectual and his Western counterpart. The writer in a Communist society is always aware that he is serving the interests of a group, that he participates in society as a member of its collective. His rôle is more that of spokesman than critic; one might say there is much more loneliness in the literature of the West.

An earlier period of the Russian Revolution is the setting of the *Sickle and the Harvest*, by Zenaide Bashkiroff (Neville Spearman, 21s). The author is the daughter of a Captain of the Imperial Guard, a Gentleman of the Chamber of the Emperor Nicholas II, and her mother's first cousin, Prince Yousoupoff, was the man who killed Rasputin. She describes, not without humour, the vicissitudes of an aristocratic family in the early years of the Bolshevik regime; and the portrait of her father, a man who loved Russia too much to leave it even when his world had been destroyed, reminds me that the old ruling class was often brave and humane, as well as obtuse. But they were more frequently cruel, selfish, and merciless.

Jules Koslow's *The Kremlin* (Macgibbon and Kee, 25s) wades through bloodshed, intrigue, and national disaster in its history of the Byzantine fortress that has become the symbol of Russia's violent history. From Ivan the Terrible to Stalin the Tyrant, the Kremlin stood as a closely guarded monument of evil, autocratic rule. Now that tourists from all over the world wander through its chambers and stare at its fabulous treasures, the symbol may be changing.