

# **TRAITORS' GALLERY**

Carl Van Doren's new book helps demolish the Tory-Copperhead version of American history. A startling account of fifth column conspiracies in the Revolutionary era. Reviewed by Samuel Sillen.

SECRET HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION, by Carl Van Doren. Viking. \$3.75.

EVER since Kenneth Roberts glorified the American traitor in *Oliver Wiswell*, I have been anxiously awaiting a book like Mr. Van Doren's *Secret History of the American Revolution*. The success of *Oliver Wiswell* was appalling. That so corrupt a version of our War for Independence should be gobbled up by critics and lending libraries seemed to betoken a dangerous cynicism in American life. Nobody knows how many of the novel's one or two million readers were actually persuaded that the Revolutionary patriots were an unruly rabble of thieves and guttersnipes. Only the most gullible, certainly, could have accepted the fantasy that Tories, spies, and snobbish hypocrites were the real heroes of 1776. But it was scandalous enough that a work like this should be a best seller in a nation preparing to defend democracy.

*Oliver Wiswell*, let us remember, was not an isolated or freakish instance. Behind it lay a whole school of historical thought. Founded by Claude Van Tyne, this school has attempted to "rehabilitate" the American Tories who remained loyal to the Crown. In recent years the extreme followers of Van Tyne have busily bestowed more honor upon the "misunderstood and tragic" loyalists than upon the "impetuous" rebels. The fascists and the fascist-minded, as George Dimitrov pointed out a number of years ago, "are rummaging through the entire history of every nation" in an effort to "bamboozle the masses." And the sinister effect of this effort is not only that it fosters downright historical lies, but that it gives comfort to contemporary exercises in treason. If collusion with the enemy was a patriotic virtue in the eighteenth century, then America First-Aid to Hitler (to use Upton Sinclair's neat phrase) must be a patriotic duty today.

Carl Van Doren has written a book which helps demolish the new Tory-Copperhead version of our history. His detailed, factual account of the conspiracies of Benedict Arnold and many other traitors of the Revolutionary era has been drawn from the Secret Service Papers of the British Headquarters in America. The files of British Headquarters were preserved among the papers of Sir Henry Clinton, who was in command of the British forces from 1778 to 1782. This invaluable manuscript collection was brought to America about fifteen years ago and is now in the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan. The first scholar to have been granted

access to these files, Mr. Van Doren spent two years of what must have been arduous and fascinating labor deciphering codes, chasing down clues, filling in gaps in the story. And the result is a startling document which should make us all more alert to the warning of the late Ambassador Dodd that "There is no doubt that the Nazi government has paid spies in America and that many of these are ranking American officials."

For, as Mr. Van Doren properly emphasizes, Benedict Arnold was not the first, as he was not the last renegade in American history. The supreme traitor of the Revolution, the most dangerous and skillful of the time, Arnold had precedents enough for his plot to betray his command at strategic West Point. Before May 1779, when he made his first overtures to Sir Henry Clinton, there had been other traitors in high places. And one of the great merits of the Van Doren study is that it places Arnold against the background of that treachery which, as Washington once observed, is part of the growth of every nation and particularly in periods at which momentous issues are at stake.

The record is overwhelming. There is the plotter Thomas Hickey, a member of Washington's guard, who was hanged in 1776 near the Bowery Lane for engaging in a conspiracy in which a mayor of New York, David Mathews, had acted as a go-between for the British. And William Demont, of the 5th Pennsylvania Regiment, who enabled the British to capture 2,700 men by handing over the plans of Fort Washington. And

Benjamin Church, Boston physician, minor poet, member of the provincial Congress of Massachusetts, who as the paid informer of General Gage provided information leading to the enemy's attempt to capture the secret American stores at Concord; only three months later Church, still unexposed, was made director and chief physician of the first American army hospital. And the mischievous, double-dealing Maj. Gen. Charles Lee, who, at a time when he was second in the American command, wrote of his chief, Washington, that he was "most damnably deficient." And John Vardill, a New Yorker, who spied on the American commissioners in Paris on the promise that if the British won he would be made regius professor—of divinity!—at King's College (Columbia). And Jacob Duche, a former chaplain of the Continental Congress, who tried to persuade Washington to give up the rebellion because there were so few rebels he would feel like inviting to dinner. And Gen. Horatio Gates; Edward Bancroft, the confidant of Franklin in Paris; and many, many more.

Several significant things may be said about this imposing roll call of traitors. It is gratifying to note that Mr. Van Doren has not approached his material in a cynical, debunking spirit. On the contrary, he impresses the reader with the fact that the temptations were so great, the rewards offered by the enemy so appealing, that it is a tribute to the vast majority of patriot leaders and their followers that they stood steadfastly by the principles of independence. This record of secret maneuvers and bribes reveals that the patriots were high-pressured with offers of ease and comfort at moments when they were tired, poor, or even despairing. The wonder is, said Washington, that "in a revolution of the present nature," with the cause so perilous and the colors so ragged, the catalogue of treachery is so small rather than that there should have been found a few. Mr. Van Doren's study increases rather than lowers our respect for the winter soldiers.

At the same time, such a study enables Americans to understand, in terms of our own history, the actual meaning of the Soviet trials of traitors and spies. At the time of these trials it was maintained in some quarters that, granting the guilt of the accused, there must be something wrong with a system that "produces so many" wreckers. But the fact is, as Earl Browder once pointed out, and as this book incidentally demonstrates, that "We can safely say, making allowance for enormous differences in histori-



Carl Van Doren

From an etching by Theodore Brenson

cal epoch and social relations, that America suffered much more than has the Soviet Union from treason, relatively speaking." (Earl Browder in *Traitors in American History*.) Treasonable men had wormed themselves into the highest places, as we have seen. For every Tukhachevsky there was an Arnold or Thomas Conway. And only a contemporary traitor—or a fool—would maintain that the destinies of America would have been furthered by the success of the spies and informers. Any sober historical evaluation must recognize that the apprehension of traitors, and the overcoming of their designs, was a sign of health, not disease, in our early American Revolution as in the Soviet reorganization of society.

"Fantastic," "incredible," as the facts of treachery may seem to gentle minds, the facts stubbornly remain. It is in the account of the Arnold affair that we may follow most clearly the sinister pattern of national sabotage. Arnold had no "Russian soul," nor was he a "character out of Dostoyevsky." Of late there have been attempts to treat him as a hero, the victim of circumstance, the unappreciated, the man who hit back at the tyranny of revolution. Nobody acquainted even with the limited evidence previously available could intelligently have reached such an opinion. With the full information contained in this book, there is not the slightest reason to disagree with Mr. Van Doren's verdict that the treason of Arnold, long considered mystifying, was a downright transaction. "Traditional guesses about Arnold, either that he was a villain out of melodrama or that he was a disillusioned hero honestly converted to the enemy, give way to facts which show him to have been bold, crafty, unscrupulous, unrepentant: the Iago of traitors."

The major find in the British Secret Service papers was the complete correspondence between Arnold and Maj. John Andre, who handled General Clinton's deals with traitor agents. This correspondence appears in the Appendix to this volume, and those who found the evidence of the Moscow trials "incredible" may treat themselves to another orgy of "scepticism" by examining this correspondence. Here was Arnold, the counterpart of Eugene Lyons' "old Bolshevik," who had accompanied Ethan Allen at Ticonderoga and made a soldier's reputation at Quebec and Saratoga. Even in those flush days, the evidence now shows, Arnold was wilful, imperious, inordinately conscious of money and reputation. He had got into protracted squabbles with the Continental Congress because he felt himself slighted. Washington tended to be patient with him for a time, and he even placed him in command of Philadelphia after the British evacuation of that key city. His behavior in Philadelphia was so disreputable that the Pennsylvania Council was moved to take legal action against him. Information now available and cited in this book shows conclusively that Arnold in Philadelphia, as else-

where, took advantage of his official position for personal profit. He favored the Tories; he closed the shops to keep even army officers from buying goods while he made considerable purchases for his own benefit; he gave special privileges to enterprises in which he had investments. And, at the trial, eight months after offering his services to Clinton, he had the gall to protest that "I sacrificed domestic ease and happiness to the service of my country, and in her service have I sacrificed a great part of a handsome fortune." "I was one of the first," said Arnold, "that appeared in the field; and from that time to the present hour have not abandoned her service." And, since the facts were still hidden, Arnold was punished only with a reprimand from his Commander-in-Chief.

During this time he was conducting a correspondence in cipher with British Headquarters. It is a wretched exchange of notes filled with nauseating haggling over money, on both sides. Arnold had his price; Clinton was cautious. Arnold wanted to be sure he was properly rewarded; Clinton wanted to be sure of his information. The record of this intrigue is not glamorous. It is sordid, mean, revolting. Arnold was advised by Andre, on behalf of Clinton: "Join the Army, accept a Command, be Surprized, be cut off—these things may happen in the Course of Manoeuvre, nor you be censured or Suspected a Complete Service of this Nature involving a Corps of 5 or 6000 Men would be rewarded with twice as many thousand Guineas." Arnold, as Mr. Van Doren says, "went into treason as into a business, surveying the ground and estimating the possible profits." He wanted a sum down for security. The deal was arranged. Arnold managed to get the command at West Point, a big kill, a better and quicker bargain. He communicated the size of the garrison, the amount of provisions, the plans of the high command. But the scheme of betrayal failed when Andre, through a miscarriage of plans, was caught with incriminating notes in his possession. Arnold escaped to the British; Andre was executed.

Benjamin Franklin's remark in a letter to Lafayette was sharp and to the point: "Judas sold only one man, Arnold 3,000,000. Judas got for his one man 30 pieces of silver, Arnold not a halfpenny a head. A miserable bargainer." Washington ordered that Arnold be put summarily to death if captured. And Jefferson, governor of Virginia, later to have his own troubles with traitors, offered a reward of 5,000 guineas for Arnold's capture. The country was at last fully aroused, after nearly fatal leniency. And Arnold went on to England, where he survived as a miserable figure, whining that the terms of his Judas contract were not being altogether fulfilled.

The record shows that Arnold was no weakling filled with self-doubts. It was he who opened negotiations. He did not waver in his purpose or price. And the record shows that Peggy Shippen, his wife, was not a hysterical victim of her husband's malpractice,

as some have thought, but an accomplished partner in his intrigue. The record leaves no room for sentimentality. Mr. Van Doren should be congratulated for staying stubbornly with the facts and for avoiding any temptation to indulge in heroics or fancy psychological speculations.

If the book has any fault, it is a failure to give a general historical analysis which might illuminate the larger meaning of the conspiracies in terms of the social relations of the period. These conspiracies were a part of the structure of counter-revolution, and a more incisive analysis of the class alliances in that structure would have given a greater historical richness to the study. But we must be grateful for the extremely important facts which are so patiently and carefully marshaled here.

*The Secret History of the American Revolution* appears at a strikingly opportune moment. In the present crisis of American life it is a significant warning. Treachery and double-dealing infest many circles of American society today, and there are those who plot to betray the West Points of the land to the enemy. The lessons of our own past have a profound and urgent meaning for us in our national determination to crush Hitlerism. Mr. Van Doren's book is an answer to *Oliver Wiswell* as it is to those who complacently assume that we can afford to tolerate treason.

SAMUEL SILLEN.

## Dramatic Reportage

MEN OF EUROPE, by Andre Simone. Modern Age Books. \$2.50.

ANDRE SIMONE's reportage is superior in many respects to that of other journalists who have described European events since Hitler's rise to power. It is readable without being fantastic, the anecdotes have point, and the writer is not obsessed by personalities. He tries to get beyond the two-dimensional aspect of history which leads so many correspondents to accept the most superficial appearance for reality. This helped him to judge the Finnish-Soviet war correctly, while most of his colleagues went off the deep end (many of them are still spluttering). It enables him now to relate the lessons of yesterday to the desperate needs of the present. His book is a good weapon forged from an understanding of the nature and methods of fascism.

The word "appeasement" is given its true significance in Simone's account of the advance of fascism in Europe. He shows that the history of appeasement is not a record of horrible mistakes made by well meaning diplomats who wished to right the injustices of Versailles, or who wanted to avoid bloodshed at all costs. Blood bothered the great men not at all. Injustice only made them sleep more soundly. But the ghost that got them was the very much alive Soviet Union, and they literally created Hitler, Mussolini, and the whole miserable gang of Baltic and Balkan knights-