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Nazism and Religion

IT'S YOUR SOULS WE WANT, by Stewart W. Herman, Jr. Harper. \$2.50.

NAZI Germany is a Christian country. Indeed Nazi Germany has statistically a better claim to be called Christian than has the United States, since ninety-five percent of the German people are church members as against only some fifty-four percent of Americans. How then explain the appalling paradox that a nation of professing Christians supports the vilest form of fascism?

Dr. Herman, a minister who spent six years in Berlin, gives no explanation. Yet the explanation is clear. German Christians were terrified by the "Bolshevik bogey" into supporting Nazi paganism. They supported Hitler because he promised to defend them against Bolshevism, because he demagogically proclaimed a nebulous "positive Christianity," because he maintained the system of state support of the Church. For these reasons most German churchmen were content to keep silent about Nazi iniquities. To put it crudely most German churchmen supported Hitler in return for his protection of church property and privilege. They may now be disturbed, as Dr. Herman is, because Hitler has failed to keep his part of an immoral bargain but they do not see that the bargain itself is immoral, or that they accepted the bargain out of an unjustified and unworthy fear of the Soviet Union.

Unfortunately Dr. Herman is infected with the same fear. His book therefore lacks any moral or intellectual basis for anti-fascism. He is shocked by Nazi excesses, horrified by their blasphemies, but essentially only disappointed in Nazism because as he puts it "something went wrong somewhere." Indeed Dr. Herman is still so terrified by the "Bolshevik bogey" that he arrives at the staggeringly false and dangerous conclusion that: "It remains to be seen which of the two forces [Christianity and Communism] will come out of the war in a better condition to make the final peace, because, even though they entered into a temporary truce with each other, it is unlikely that the truce could or would be continued after the common enemy has been destroyed."

In other words Dr. Herman hopes that the Soviet Union will emerge from the war too weak to share in the peace, and he expects with equanimity the dissolution of the Anglo-American-Soviet coalition immediately after the end of the war on the grounds of religious differences.

Unfortunately these opinions cannot be dismissed as the aberration of a young minister who stayed too long in Berlin; they reflect the sentiments of clerical fascists and they derive from the false premise, so invaluable to Hitler, that "Christian civilization" is menaced by Bolshevism.

This false premise is implicit throughout Dr. Herman's book, and gives a malicious twist to his comments. For example, "there is no doubt that the Nazis feel themselves to have been very badly repaid for their rescue of Christianity from sure death at the hands of the Communists." Again, "after all, not much difference was to be perceived between the Marxian method of slitting the church's throat and the Nazi method of strangulation." Again, "to some of Germany's Christians, many of whom had supported the Nazis only as a bulwark against Communism . . . this reversion [Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union] brought a tardy relief from the nightmare of a terrible fear" of Bolshevism.

Fear of Bolshevism, a corroding fear of our great Soviet ally, prevented Dr. Herman from gaining any valid lesson from his experience as American pastor in Berlin. The lesson that he might have learned, the lesson that American churchmen must learn from the tragic betrayal of Christianity in Nazi Germany is simply this: fear of the Soviet Union makes fascists, and fear for the churches' properties and privileges makes clerical fascists.

THOMAS L. HARRIS.

Young Guerrillas

STRUGGLE IS OUR BROTHER, by Gregor Felson. Illustrated by Woodi Ishmael. Dutton. \$2.

LET it be said in honor of the juvenile editors of our country that they have never sown in the anti-Soviet slime out of which too many adult book editors have raised a wonderfully malodorous but golden crop. However, this encomium must remain largely negative, for neither did the juvenile editors publish more than half a dozen books about Russia among the thousands released in the last twenty-five years. Consequently, the reading child had to acquire his information about the land which covers a sixth of the earth either from conversation at home or from the often viciously distorted views of Soviet-hating teachers. That is why we must particularly welcome Mr. Felson's Russian guerrilla story and hope that its reception will encourage the publication of more juveniles designed to stimulate an interest in and friendship for the most fiercely fighting anti-fascist people in the world.

Struggle Is Our Brother has limitations. Nowhere is there an intimation that Soviet Russia is something new in history, is a departure from an older Russia, or is in any way different from any other nation. The collective farm, scene of the action, might be any farm community in America. No one in the book appears as a Communist. There is so little attempt at characterization that the reader is unlikely to feel any twinge of emotion at the injury to or death of any of the story's people. Some of the pages read too much like verbatim excerpts

from Yank Levy's handbook on guerrilla warfare, while a goodly portion of the middle section has the quality of a comic action strip.

But these faults aside, *Struggle Is Our Brother* is a fast action story bound to leave the eight- to twelve-year-old reader feeling that Russians are people very like his own; that they are fighting heroically in a common struggle with us against a common foe; and that they deserve our deepest admiration and friendship. Moreover, the fascists are uncompromisingly depicted as menacing the lives and freedom of all mankind. The book begins on the day of the Nazi invasion. The enemy has swept rapidly into the Ukraine and has captured the great American-Russian built dam before the Red Army men can pull the secret switch that would destroy it. Mikhail, young sheep-herder of a local Cossack collective farm, joins the guerrillas and dedicates himself to the task of blowing up the dam. It is an appalling dedication, for the dam represents life and the bright promise of the future. But because Mikhail senses that man is above man's works and because he believes in himself and his people, he finds the courage to turn the proud Nazi capture into so much rubble.

Woodi Ishmael's strong, spacious illustrations constitute a powerful supplement to this often exciting tale of guerrilla warfare.

HARRY TAYLOR.

ERROR: In A. Landy's article, "Wrong On All Counts," which appeared in our May 18 issue, the price of the book *America, Russia, and the Communist Party*, published by the John Day Co., was listed as \$2.75. The correct price is \$1.25.

FILMS

"Masquerade"

A verse tragedy by one of Russia's classic poets.

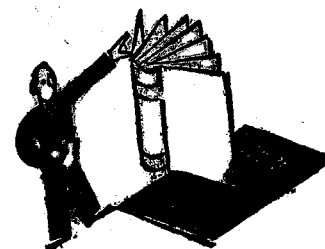
LERMONTOV's *Masquerade* is perhaps the most unpromising film material imaginable—a rhymed tragedy derived from *Othello* and watered down with the pompous Byronism of the early nineteenth century. Its story of a jealous husband who murders his wife through a misunderstanding was hackneyed a hundred years ago; its long speeches and lofty sentiments are certainly hackneyed today. Death scenes an

hour long, gentlemen who lurk about waiting for revenge, and bitter world-weary heroes are hard to take seriously in the grim modern world. So it is astonishing that Gerasimov, the director of the Soviet film version of *Masquerade* now playing at the Stanley, has managed to do arresting things with the play.

For a Russian audience the interest must be very high. Lermontov is one of Russia's classic poets and an early revolutionist, and his play has some acid things to say about the butterfly and caterpillar princelings of czarist society. Historically and culturally his work is significant; *Masquerade* was made, indeed, to commemorate his anniversary, and fits into every Russian's cultural background. His poetry is reportedly very lovely; the lines of *Masquerade* sound musical even to American ears. Moreover, the Russian audience has a tradition of rhymed tragedy which it accepts, just as the French astonish other nations by accepting and enjoying Racine.

Americans, unfortunately, lose most of these values. The beautiful verse is perforce translated by inadequate and rhetorical prose captions, and the form and content of the tragedy are alike alien to us. We perceive little of the play itself except the elaborate silliness of the plot and the elaborate pomposity of the sentiment. Lermontov's hero, the brooding and disillusioned Arbenin, believes his young wife unfaithful because of a mix-up over a lost bracelet. He promptly poisons the poor girl and gloats over her dying agony. At her funeral, however, an old enemy of Arbenin pops up with shattering proof of the girl's innocence. Arbenin goes wild and jumps out of the window.

AN ENGLISH-SPEAKING audience cannot help comparing this with the infinitely finer *Othello*. And *Masquerade*, for this and other reasons, must seem to us a lesser film than it actually is. True, there is much that is bad in the text, though little in its execution. But what makes it hard for us to enjoy *Masquerade* is partly our own cultural orientation, our concentration on a single film style—that of superficial naturalism. Our films, too often false and trivial in content, try to create the illusion of reality by the most minute attention to external detail—commonplace speech and slice-of-life decor, so that you might actually be looking through your neighbor's window. But the romantic verse-tragedy is not concerned with external fidelity. Its aim is to present life symbolically and with heightened intensity, and its conventions are quite different from the conventions of naturalism. The film version of *Masquerade* is a bold experiment in recreating the romantic theater, and what seems bad in it is often only strange. One cannot rule out romantic verse-tragedy, with its enormous place in the world's literature, by declaring that it has no right to exist.



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