

The Soviet Union in Theory and Practice

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE U.S.S.R. By Michael T. Florinsky. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1939. 245 pp., with index. \$2.50.

Reviewed by REBECCA JANNEY TIMBRES

IN the author's preface we read: "This volume is an attempt to appraise the evolution of the Soviet State during the first two decades of its existence. The study deals chiefly with government and politics, but since communist theory and economic planning play an important part in the policies of the U.S.S.R., both were brought into the field of the investigation. I have also given a general account of the governmental and social structure before the revolution, for it is my sincere belief that it is essential to obtain at least some knowledge of the Russian background in order to understand the Soviet experiment."

The book is divided into two sections, the first dealing with Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution, and the second analyzing the U.S.S.R. from 1917 to the present time.

The first section—one third of the volume—comprises a swift and necessarily superficial survey of the Russian State from the time of the Grand Duchy of Kiev in the second half of the ninth century, through the influence of the Asiatic nomads on the early principalities and city states, the Tartar rule, the historical background of absolutism in Imperial Russia, the constitutional reforms, and the Imperial regime in action. The author's concise summary of the World War as it affected Russia, the fall of the Empire, the establishment and fall of the Provisional Government, the social revolution and the advent of Bolshevism is an excellent introduction to the main body of the volume, which is a "study in government, politics, and economic planning" in the U.S.S.R.

The author commences this study with a description of the Marxian scheme, the communist theory of the State, socialism, and integral communism. He outlines the history of the Russian Communist Party, and analyzes the constitutional and administrative structure of the government, the economic planning, and the State in business. The last chapter is entitled, "On the Threshold of Integral Communism"; the following paragraph (p. 227) illustrates the author's point of view:

It should not be overlooked that under Stalin's leadership private ownership of the means of production in Russia has disappeared and that from this point of view the Soviet Union is definitely a socialist State. The truth of the matter would seem to be that the Marxian prognosis has failed to tally with the actual course of historical development and that theory has been sacrificed on the altar of expediency and "Realpolitik."

A student of the U.S.S.R. who wishes a quick "digest" of historical events and the structure and policies of the government would find this volume of value. The author, however, has fallen into the pit that faces every writer on the Soviet Union. Far from being "dispassionate" (as is claimed) he allows personal bias to be felt frequently. His criticisms are unequal in depth and in objective value, especially in the second section. He has allowed himself to indulge in "personalities" both in regard to other authors, and to political personages.

The book is however, well-written and instructive. Taken as a whole, it should be of value to anyone who wishes to delve—not too deeply—into an understanding of communist theory, and the organization of the U.S.S.R. today.

Rebecca Janney Timbres is co-author of "We Didn't Ask Utopia," a record of her experiences in the Soviet Union.

Achieving Serenity

THE ART OF BEING A PERSON. By George Ross Wells. New York: D. Appleton-Century Co. 1939. 300 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GRACE ADAMS

DR. WELLS, who has an A.M. degree from Harvard and a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins, and is now Professor of Psychology at the Hartford Seminary, here contrives a readable and "helpful" book by rewriting, adapting, integrating, and expanding some of the material that has appeared in the three-day a week column which he contributes to the Hartford *Courant*.

His general thesis, which holds all his discourses together, is that man masters the art of being a person, and thereby achieves his highest destiny, when he learns how to become serene. And in demonstrating how serenity can be attained, Dr. Wells makes fresh and skillful use of the familiar stock in trade of most psychologists—the facts and theories set forth by Galen, Gaul, Binet-Simon, William James, and the strict structuralists, as well as the more arresting pronouncements of the Freudians and Adlerians — and never becomes pedantic or stuffy over any of it. He accepts the fact that human personalities are compounded of gross physical as well as refined psychic elements, and yet somehow manages to believe that in a truly artistic person the psychic easily subdues and dominates the starkly physical.

A happy person [he contends] is forcefully and usefully active . . . he knows where he wants to go and what he wants to do. Furthermore, he has a practical program of how to get where and what he wants. He gets important work done because all parts of his personality work together with one purpose.

In telling the rest of us how we can become men of serenity, Dr. Wells has produced a book that is more urbane and better written than most of the popularizations of psychology that have beat in upon our consciousness and struck into our pocket-books during the past twenty years. And yet the same sense of unreality — of facts gleaned through second- or third- or fourth-hand experience—pervades his book as it did the books of his less polished predecessors. If our psychologists could only by some means learn to know life before they are forced to study textbooks, then they might be able to write a real psychology. In this psychology men and women would appear not as neat patterns and integrations of instincts, sensations, memories, reactions, and aspirations. Rather they would appear as the driven, thwarted, contradictory, shoddy, but often amusing and strangely lovable people that they are. Yet if psychologists saw human nature as the rest of us see ourselves, few books like this one could ever be written; for with the knowledge of what men and women are really like, there would have to come the realization that no single exceptionally well-written book, or no library of learned volumes, could improve or make over that groping, exasperating, stubborn creature which we know as a fellow human being.

WIND, SAND and STARS

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The New Books

Fiction

O CANAAN! Waters E. Turpin. Doubleday, Doran. 1939. 311 pp. \$2.50.

The basic idea of this novel is an excellent one: the rise and fall of a Negro family. The war of 1914 caused a labor shortage in the North, and thousands of Negroes flocked to Chicago, to be swept upward by the wartime boom and left stranded by the subsequent depression. Here we see Joe Benson leave his poorly paying farm in Mississippi and take his family to Chicago as to the Promised Land of Canaan. He rises from store-keeping through bootlegging to ambitious transactions in real estate and banking. He becomes a leader in his community and keeps his family in luxury; but his two sons go to the bad, and his wife rewards him with infidelity. In the crash everything is swept away, but he and his two sturdy daughters set out to make their lives over again.

All this, with its background of colored society in Chicago and Harlem, its scenes of race rioting and of quiet, is splendid material for a novel; but here it is not much more. The author has not realized the specific value in his Negro material; far too much of this might be the story of any workingman in the boom and the crash. There are a few glimpses of the stratifications of Negro society, but we never are given any real feeling for the life of Harlem and Chicago's South Side. All the incidents are so overlaid with unnecessary reporting, especially with all too faithful transcripts of commonplace conversations, that the book has none of the impact which it ought to have; even the riot lacks immediacy. One can see here the bones of a good story, but it takes some hard reading to get at them.

B. D.

APRIL WAS WHEN IT BEGAN. By Barry Benefield. Reynal & Hitchcock. 1939. 309 pp. \$2.50.

Mr. Benefield is an author who can be counted upon. His course has been determinedly whimsical from its very beginning, and the latest item in the Benefield bibliography is no exception to the rule. In "April Was When It Began" we have once more a strange galaxy of characters with names out of some never-never land, intent upon pursuits that lead them breathlessly through fantastic labyrinthine adventures into the safe harbor of happy-ending. And again we have the swift movement of story and the prodigality of detail which make even those readers who cannot accept the Benefield formula in its entirety admit the vigor and the versatility of much that it produces. The eccentrics and misfits

come into their own in these novels by Barry Benefield, and their stories provide the escape from the humdrum which seems increasingly desirable as the mercury mounts in the thermometer.

Dik-Dik is the heroine of this Ap-rille chronicle and she is as strange a little creature as ever sat huddled in outlandish garments upon the forbidding stoop of a somber house on lower Eighth Avenue. She looked at the moment "like a small dark witch with a chronic grievance." But that was before Mole came along. Mole is a very young man, fourth deputy assistant editor in a publishing firm, with a very tender heart, and when he takes in Dik-Dik's unhappy situation of living with a father (his name is "Bloodhound" and his entire life is spent tracking down psychic phenomena) who scarcely knows she exists, and with "Old Tiger," a trance-scarred veteran of old Italian mediumistic days, he settles into the house with them and devotes his time to Dik-Dik's diverting betterment. Their adventures are amusing and fantastic and are joined together with the wild and inconsequential conversations which brighten all of Mr. Benefield's novels.

If you feel that life is real and life is earnest and its story should be told in mournful numbers, then "April Was When It Began" is not for you. But if you have liked the other Barry Benefield books and are inclined towards an excursion into contemporary whimsicality, this is the vehicle to take.

G. G.

Miscellaneous

I WAS IN PRISON. The Suppressed letters of German Pastors, interpreted by Charles S. MacFarland. Revell. 1939. 112 pp., with index. \$1.

Since Hitler's rise to power the Protestant Church in Germany has been subjected to continuous persecution by the Nazi regime. In the last five years a hundred leading pastors out of a total of eighteen thousand have at various times been either arrested or put into concentration camps. Twenty thousand letters written by these pastors from prison have been illegally printed and circulated in Nazi Germany. Dr. MacFarland has done a fine job in translating and editing these letters for publication in America. He clearly shows the involved religious situation existing in the Third Reich. Hitler wants the Church to be a mere tool of the state in order to promote the pagan Nazi ideology. For this reason the "German Christians" under the leadership of Rosenberg were organized. The Confessional Church rose as an opposition movement and in spite of its

persecution by the official regime it grew rapidly.

The Chaplains of the armed forces in 1937 complained to Hitler that the government and the official Nazis were trying to destroy Christianity, dividing the German nation into National Socialists on the one side and Christians on the other side. Although this was vehemently denied by the government, subsequent developments proved the veracity of these charges.

Letters written from concentration camps of course are censored by the Gestapo, therefore the imprisoned pastors used quotations from the New Testament to convey their feelings. The letters themselves show the courage and faith in the future.

After clearly illustrating the struggle of the Church in Nazi Germany, Dr. MacFarland draws the conclusion that the American Christians should help to ease the refugee problem. This action he considers imperative and he appeals for help to make America an asylum for all refugees from religious persecution in Germany.

R. L.

DON'T SAY IT. By John B. Opdycke. Funk & Wagnalls Co. 1939. 850 pp. \$5.

This "cyclopedia of English use and abuse" deserves this description. Ingenious in arrangement, comprehensive, and written with point and lucidity, it should become a standard desk book. The preface deals with the most common illiteracies, mispronunciations, and misspellings, followed by an analysis of the difficulties that cause them. This we have had before, though never better done. What gives Mr. Opdycke's book its distinction is the encyclopedia proper, which lists from A to Z the words most likely to give difficulty in writing or speaking, with concise, but readable and comprehensive, information about each. By careful selection and very efficient explanation the author succeeds in covering far more ground than Fowler in his "Modern English Usage" and in presenting his information in more readily usable form. Also, his book has the great advantage of recording the best American usage as it exists today. Pronunciation, meaning, usage, including how not to use or pronounce the word, are all included; also etymology where useful. This is not a dictionary. Mr. Opdycke lists only words that need to be listed because of mistakes made in employing them; he gives only such information as is necessary in order that they should be rightly used. His method is best illustrated by quotation:

A dopt' means to take into relationship voluntarily, as an heir or a child as one's own or a word into a language; to apply and put into practice something that is not strictly one's own; to accept, as minutes at a meeting. We adopt from something into our own, and something or somebody is adopted by some one, but a lyric is adapted to a melody.