

The Realism of Mikhail Sholokhov

THE DON FLOWS HOME TO THE SEA. By Mikhail Sholokhov. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1941. 770 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by MANYA GORDON

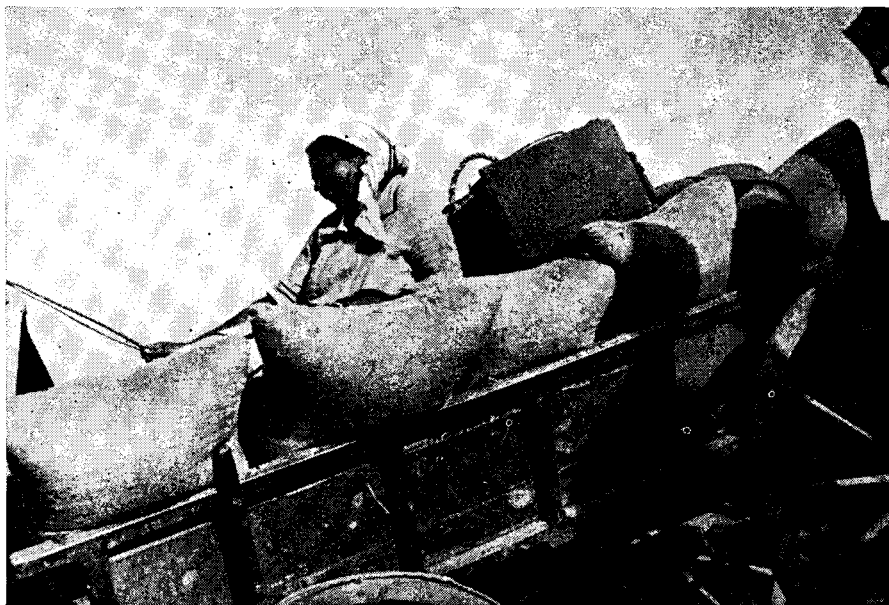
SHOLOKHOV'S historical novel returns to the period of the Russian civil war, 1918-20, which he described in "And Quiet Flows the Don." The strife between the Bolsheviks and the Don Cossacks is depicted in battle scenes and minor skirmishes. The book's 770 pages are studded with people who appear and vanish before the reader has had time to learn their names.

It is a novel without a hero. Gregor Melekhov and his family, around whom the action is built, is not really outstanding. He fights hard in the ranks of his own Cossacks against the Bolsheviks and becomes a commander, but is scarcely ever pleased with the activities of his comrades. Later he voluntarily joins the Bolshevik forces and tries in every way to do his duty, despite his basic aversion for the Cheka and all its deeds. At the conclusion of the civil war Gregor returns to his village prepared to accept the Soviet regime and resume his duties as a farmer. But in his own home he encounters the suspicion and hostility of his brother-in-law, Mishka Koshevoi, who fought in the Bolshevik ranks and is now the chairman of the village soviet.

Gregor is warned by his sister of his approaching arrest and is compelled to leave his orphaned children and the woman he loves and take to the road again, this time as an outlaw. He is captured by an anti-Soviet band and participates unwillingly in attacks on the Red Army. His activities, like those of the Bolsheviks, move on a middle level. Nothing is over-stressed. There are no climaxes. The obvious effort at complete objectivity slackens the emotional pace of the novel. People are slaughtered for no particular reason. It is the record of a civil war without an iota of the revolutionary spirit. One looks in vain for the name of one outstanding Bolshevik, or any kind of social program.

The human stream in Sholokhov's Don is thus very shallow. It does not carry a single person or idea worth remembering. And yet, oddly enough, its realism is unquestionable. The interminable bloody encounters do convey a sense of actuality and the numerous people who participate in the struggle are undeniably genuine. But the whole performance is in a minor key.

One feels the restraint of the author and his effort to avoid entangling issues. He does not, however, for a moment forget his objective. This is not the creation of character or the discussion of Bolshevik dogma, but to make civil war hateful. This sole purpose is carried out with infinite pa-



—From "The Land without Unemployment."

tience. Every battle, every skirmish is described in all its gruesome detail. Nothing is left to the imagination. It is a propaganda novel which does not try to sell Communism to the Soviet people, but drives home the horror and futility of civil strife. This accounts for Sholokhov's seeming impartiality.

It likewise explains the suppression of some of the most outstanding characteristics of the Don Cossacks and the constant emphasis upon their illiteracy. As a matter of fact the Don Cossacks were reactionary but far from illiterate. As far back as 1901, according to the celebrated revolutionist, Peter Kropotkin, "they had beyond comparison the greater number of the best schools, primary and secondary, for boys and girls" because the territory of the Don Cossacks was under the direct jurisdiction of the Ministry of War and not of the Ministry of Public Instruction. But whatever the reason it seems curious that in this long narrative there appears not one Cossack who knows his letters.

Similarly, misrepresentation is reflected in the picture of the people. The Don Cossacks were a well-disciplined race of martial bearing and powerful characteristics. They were excellent farmers as well as fighters. On their own territory they enjoyed

considerable autonomy, although they were always ready to do the bidding of the autocracy suppressing strikes and peasant uprisings. Barring their obedience to the ataman or headman, they were dogged individualists and knew their own mind and power.

Civil war among these people could not have been the undisciplined and mutual extermination described in "The Don Flows Home to the Sea."

The struggle was indescribably bloody and tragic, but it was not lacking in idealism and purpose. The Don struggle was a part of the national effort against the Bolshevik usurpation of power, and embodied all the virtues and defects of humanity. It was a struggle for individual freedom, and for democracy.

The Blitz and a Book

Perhaps no book published in England has been so thoroughly blitzed in all its parts as the pamphlet, "The English at War," which Secker & Warburg brought out in June. Of the first edition of ten thousand copies, half was sold within a few days, but the other half was destroyed by the bombs before it could be moved from the printers to the binders. Not content with this, however, the Nazis proceeded to destroy reserve stocks of paper on which new editions would have been printed, the blocks for the illustrations, the cover and the paper for the cover, and, at the printers, the standing type and all facilities for printing the book.

Despite this, Secker & Warburg, undiscouraged, succeeded in getting a new edition of ten thousand copies on the market again in less than three weeks from publication date.

...And She Found It

LOOKING FOR TROUBLE. By Virginia Cowles. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1941. 447 pp., with index. \$3.50.

Reviewed by LINTON WELLS

WHEN Virginia Cowles persuaded the Hearst Newspapers to let her write "mailers" for them from the Spanish Civil War in 1937, she already had been around the world once, but still was a pretty naive young lady. Her captivating journalistic memoirs—"Looking for Trouble"—reveal that Virginia's unaffected naturalness has not been disturbed very much, but four years of widespread dealings with power politics and the senseless brutalities of warfare certainly have made her "one of the boys."

This American socialite didn't exactly go "looking for trouble" but she found it in large quantities—from the Arctic to the Mediterranean; from the Baltic to the Black Sea—and reported contemporary history so competently as to become one of the outstanding foreign correspondents of our day—better known in England than in America, because her dispatches were written chiefly for the *Sunday Times* of London.

Virginia Cowles was able to hear more than most journalists, because of her astonishingly wide acquaintanceship in high places—particularly British.

You find her dining with Chamberlain, whom she pitied, and week-ending with Churchill, whom she admir-

ers. She calls other cabinet ministers, ambassadors, and military attaches by their first names and is a confidante of their wives. She evaded "passes" made by Balbo in Libya and sunbathed on Italian beaches with Ciano and Alfiero. She was on intimate terms with Unity Mitford, who gave her inside dope about Hitler.

According to Unity, "Hitler had a sense of humor and liked company. He was a man who seldom read, but when he was at Berchtesgaden spent a good time drawing up architectural plans for new housing settlements." (Territorially extensive, one might remark.) "But what he really likes," Unity said, "is excitement. Otherwise he gets bored." And, Unity added, "He says it's very exciting to have the whole world trembling before him. He needs the excitement as other people need food and drink." (As the world doesn't seem to be doing much trembling these days, Hitler must be rather hungry and thirsty.) Unity also revealed that Hitler likes scandalous gossip and "if he were not the Führer of Germany, he would make a hundred thousand dollars a year on the vaudeville stage"

as an imitator. Besides Goering, Goebbels, Himmler, and Mussolini, "sometimes he even imitates himself."

Virginia Cowles quotes Chamberlain as telling her that "unless the French find some new and vigorous leaders at once, they are finished as a first class power." This was after "Daladier and Bonnet flatly announced that France wouldn't fight for Czechoslovakia."

After the collapse of France, Pierre Laval confided in Virginia: "I don't think France is Germany's primary object. I think her *real* aim is Soviet Russia." Being so close to Germany, Laval was in a position to know.

"Looking for Trouble" certainly integrates events and personalities into a compact picture which is as absorbing as it is worthwhile—absorbing because it vividly depicts a courageous American newspaper woman struggling for her stories in the flaming vortex of war; worthwhile because it reveals clearly the history-making things she saw and heard as one nation after another died.

And when you lay down this volume you rather wonder if Virginia wasn't doing a spot of work on the side for the British Foreign Office. If not, then Whitehall overlooked a very good bet.

Your Literary I. Q.

By Howard Collins

10 SHORT STORY OPENINGS

Here are the opening lines of ten famous short stories. How many of them do you recognize? Allowing five points for each story you can name, and another five if you can also name its author, a score of 60 is par, 70 is good, 80 or better is excellent. Answers are on page 17.

1. East is East, and West is San Francisco, according to Californians. . . .

2. Midge Kelly scored his first knockout when he was seventeen. The knockee was his brother Connie, three years his junior and a cripple. . . .

3. In the very olden time, there lived a semi-barbaric king, whose ideas, though somewhat polished and sharpened by the progressiveness of his distant Latin neighbors, were still large, florid, and untrammelled, as became the half of him which was barbaric. . . .

4. Dennis de Beaulieu was not yet two and twenty, but he counted himself a grown man, and a very accomplished cavalier into the bargain. . . .

5. Mrs. Ballinger is one of the ladies who pursue Culture in bands, as though it were dangerous to meet alone. . . .

6. "My aunt will be down presently, Mr. Nuttel," said a very self-possessed young lady of fifteen; "in the meantime you must try and put up with me."

7. True! nervous, very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses, not destroyed, not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. . . .

8. On all the roads about Goderville the peasants and their wives were coming toward the town, for it was market day. The men walked at an easy gait, the whole body thrown forward at every movement of their long, crooked legs, mis-shapen by hard work. . . .

9. In compliance with the request of a good friend of mine, who wrote me from the East, I called on good-natured, garrulous old Simon Wheeler, and inquired after my friend's friend, Leonidas W. Smiley, as requested to do, and I hereunto append the result. . . .

10. To Sherlock Holmes, she is always *the* woman. . . .



Virginia Cowles