

# Revolutions and Reality

*OUT OF THE NIGHT.* By Jan Valtin.  
New York: Alliance Book Corporation.  
1941. 841 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by FRED A UTLEY

**T**HIS book is not only a historical document showing the importance of the role played by the Communists in bringing the Nazis to power, not only an exciting, poignant, and tragic personal history, not only a unique study of Communist psychology but an important documentary account of the inner workings of the Comintern and of its activities all over the globe.

The reviewer who could do this book justice would have to be a historian, a literary critic, a student of political science and psychology, and, in addition, have had the experience of having worked actively in the revolutionary movements of the post-war world.

But everyone must marvel that a man who has lived for twenty years as an active revolutionary, has suffered physical and mental tortures which would have driven most men insane, and whom one would have expected to have been corrupted and broken by his experiences, should have been able to write so noble and sincere a book.

One is also astonished that a man who went to sea in his teens should be able to write so well and to translate into words his understanding of men and their motives. One feels throughout the book that one is living with that diverse assemblage of professional revolutionaries, idealists, young and ignorant enthusiasts, dedicated youth, and cynical careerists and libertines, G.P.U. spies, decoys, gangsters and assassins, which made up the world subject to Moscow.

"Out of the Night" is the life story not only of Jan Valtin himself but of the whole lost generation of German youth which came to manhood in a broken country where the old standards, values, and loyalties had been destroyed, and who were driven by the desolation and hopelessness around them to give themselves body and soul to the Parties which promised a new world or a new Germany. After reading these pages one understands better not only the Communists but the Nazis. Jan Valtin shortly before he joins the Communist Party in 1923, debates with himself:

Shall I run away from this diseased country? Or shall I join the forces which are actively attacking the

wrongs which make my blood rebel? One road tempted me with the free and happy countries I had seen during my seafaring years. The other filled me with the fervor and high expectation of revolutionary youth. I felt a strangulating loneliness. I yearned for a place where I could belong.

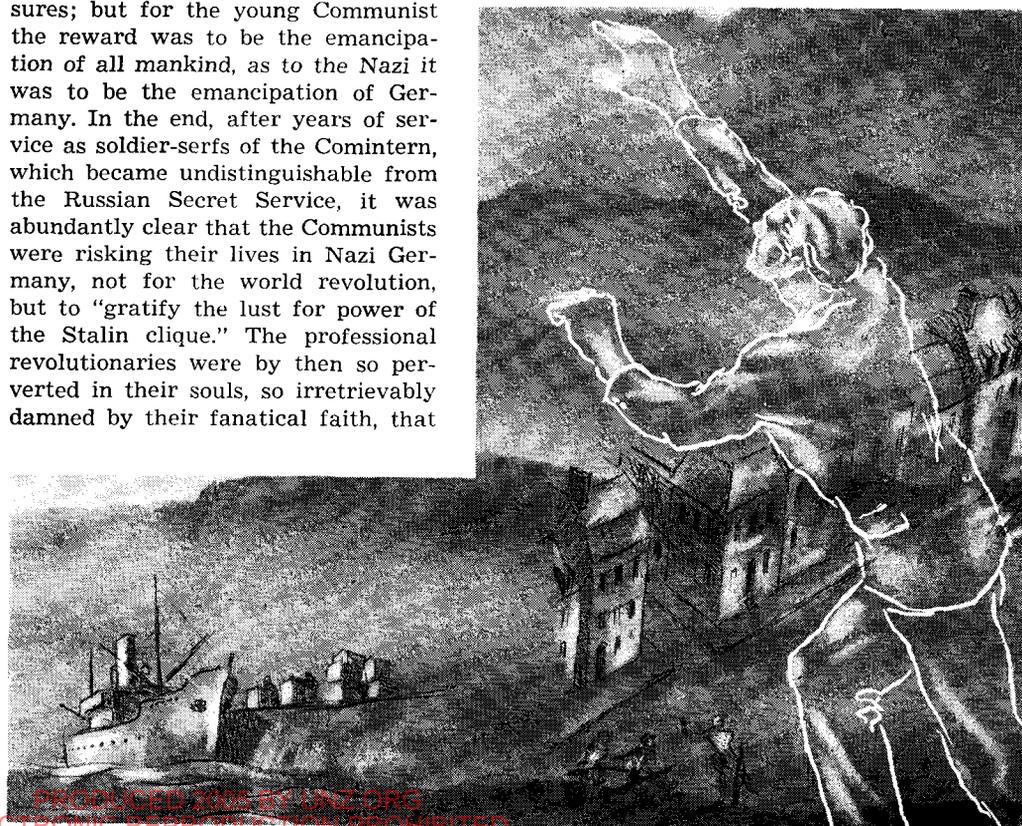
In the jail where he is consigned as a detected stowaway he meets the Communist Zympanski who is rousing the seamen without ships, the workless dockers and all the rest of the hopeless, the starved and the homeless of ruined Germany, by telling them: "With us a man can find awareness of his own strength. He is no longer a homeless cur. A man is born to fight."

To the Communist Party militant and idealist youths like Valtin gave themselves heart and soul, considering themselves as loyal soldiers of the world revolution dedicated to the emancipation of mankind at any cost of personal sacrifice. They regarded their leaders as heroic idealists, as "officers in the great army of freedom." Soon they recognized no authority except that of the Party chiefs. "All concepts of moral obligation toward men and groups outside of the movement were utterly weeded out. . . . Men must struggle with every means at their disposal, shying at no lawless deed so long as it would further the cause, giving no quarter until the revolution had triumphed." The young Communists delivered their minds and bodies and souls to the Comintern as other young men were delivering theirs to Hitler. Faust sold his soul to the devil for earthly pleasures; but for the young Communist the reward was to be the emancipation of all mankind, as to the Nazi it was to be the emancipation of Germany. In the end, after years of service as soldier-serfs of the Comintern, which became undistinguishable from the Russian Secret Service, it was abundantly clear that the Communists were risking their lives in Nazi Germany, not for the world revolution, but to "gratify the lust for power of the Stalin clique." The professional revolutionaries were by then so perverted in their souls, so irretrievably damned by their fanatical faith, that

they could not withdraw from the movement which had betrayed them but to which "we had given all our youth, all our hopes, all the enthusiasm and selflessness we had once possessed." Again and again in his narrative Valtin reverts to the theme that the idea of life outside the Party was intolerable even to the most disillusioned.

Once caught, it was at first psychologically and later physically impossible for the Communist who had become a member of the inner circle to escape. As the leaders of the Comintern became ever more unscrupulous, corrupt, callous to human suffering, and forgetful of their original aims, the revolutionary movement abroad was transformed into a secret arm of the Russian state, and the professional revolutionaries were forced to become spies, informers, betrayers of their friends, gangsters, thieves, and even murderers. Continually they were faced with the choice between personal integrity and what was represented to them by their leaders as revolutionary necessity. When Valtin is ordered by the G.P.U. representative in California to murder a man without even being allowed to know what crime he is supposed to have committed against the Party, a terrible conflict takes place in his mind between his blind sense of duty and the rebellion of his whole nature against committing a murder. His subconscious resolves the dilemma for him by leading him to assault his victim in broad daylight in a crowded street, knowing

Illustration by Salter from the book.



JANUARY 18, 1941

that the assault must end in failure. For this he goes to prison in St. Quentin for four years, and has the opportunity to read the great literature of the world and to work out his own philosophy. This he sums up as "The joy of life is the joy of the experience that comes from feeling one's own strength." This one revealing sentence goes far to explain why it was that years later when he had fallen into the hands of the Gestapo, Valtin stood firm in spite of terrible tortures although he was by then devoid of all illusions concerning the Communist movement or the possibility of world revolution. His sentiments then were clearly those of the Communist leader, Edgar Andree, who went to his death in Germany after saying:

When I march out my comrades will watch from the windows and say: "Look, Andree is going to the guillotine. They all want me to die as a real Bolshevik; to do that is my duty toward them. Not one of my boys will suspect that I am in truth nothing but a tired comedian of loyalty to a cause in which I have ceased to believe.

Perhaps it was Valtin's love for his wife Firelei which enabled him during his long years of service to the Comintern to preserve an inner core of sanity. Firelei, although forced to join the Party, never surrendered her personal integrity, or abandoned her instinctive desire for a normal life. Although she too accepted the most dangerous assignments given her by the Party and did not betray it when tortured, she never concealed her hatred of deceit and violence.

The story of Firelei, "the daughter of an impudent and fearless age," who abandoned her bourgeois family, lived with Valtin the conspiratorial life she loathed, gave up her beloved son and died in a Nazi prison, is beautifully told. The inevitable conflict between Valtin's love for Firelei and his Party duty is the stuff of great tragedy and the manner of the telling is restrained and fine and sincere. The reader is made to feel that their tragedy is an epitome of the mountains of wrecked lives buried beneath the epitaph: "The Party comes first."

All over the Seven Seas, in the United States, South America, Honolulu, Indo-China, China, and Europe, Valtin risked his life as he worked as a seaman in the service of the Comintern. But the core of the book, the sections of it which give it the greatest historical importance and are of greatest value to an understanding of the world of today, is his work in Germany. No other book more clearly reveals the aid which Stalin gave to Hitler before he won power, and which he must be giving today.

## Alsatian Portrait

*COUSIN HONORÉ.* By Storm Jameson. New York: Macmillan. 1941. 315 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GEORGE DANGERFIELD

MISS JAMESON tells us that this novel was begun last winter and finished just a week before the resignation of Reynaud's government; and that "On re-reading the book, I saw how many passages in it were prophetic. Others had become ironical." And, indeed, "Cousin Honoré" does indicate—often in a very telling way—some of the elements in the collapse of the French, and some of the elements which must, eventually, lead to their recovery and freedom. Yet the book does not depend upon prophecy or speculation for its success; nor yet, in spite of the author's modest statement to that effect, does it depend upon luck.

To be sure, Miss Jameson was fortunate in choosing for her theme the affairs of an Alsatian family who own an ironworks and are, therefore, deeply involved in the complexities (and, being Alsatian, in the ambiguities) of Franco-German economics. Greed, fear, privilege, short-sightedness, patriotism are the natural components of such a theme. The story begins at the end of the last war, with the suicide of the owner of the Burckheim ironworks, who has sold himself to the Germans; it ends at the beginning of this war, with the murder of a man who discovers that his selfishness and vanity

have betrayed him to the Nazis. In between we watch the gradual drift of Burckheim affairs towards Germany, in spite of the efforts of two successive managers. As for the central character, Honoré Burckheim—with his love of the soil and his indifference to what is going on beyond his personal orbit, with his passions and his limitations, his nobility and his egotism—he is not an inadequate symbol of the strength and weakness of France.

What makes the novel worth reading, however, is not the timeliness of the theme so much as the fact that Miss Jameson—here perhaps more than in any other of her novels—emerges as a really distinguished writer. One is apt to remember the novel more as a portrait of Alsations than as a story of intrigue. The fate of the ironworks is less important than the personalities who contrive or resist it. All writers, whether they are novelists or poets or historians, can only be called writers if they see, each one of them, a little differently from anyone else. There is nothing specially original about this story or its development; but there are flashes of insight, brief descriptions, meditative paragraphs, passages of dialogue which reveal the singularity of Miss Jameson's vision. They run like a remarkable thread through what would otherwise, no doubt, be just a competent piece of story-telling; and have filled one reviewer at any rate with gratitude, admiration, and delight.

## Tale of the Supernatural

*THE SURVIVOR.* By Dennis Parry. New York: Henry Holt. 1941. 318 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by N. L. ROTHMAN

MR. DENNIS PARRY has brought off, very brilliantly, one of those rare and difficult tales of the supernatural. If the list of these seems to remain ever small, it is largely because there are two hurdles, at least, to be leaped before success may be claimed: first, the writer must manage to beguile his reader into suspension of disbelief, and then, atop this, he must produce that final twist, the added pressure, what James called the turn of the screw.

Both of these Mr. Parry has achieved beyond doubt. The added turn of the screw ought not be revealed here, but the chief reason for the tale's success, the factor which breaks down any reader-resistance and sets the stage for all of its demoniacal doings, is the flaming vigor of Mr. Parry's chief

character. Dr. James Marshall is as unbridled and uncompromisingly egotistical a man as ever stamped about the world. A medical genius, a harsh wit, a fierce, jealous hoarder of life, you can feel him, in his few pages of life, making fuel of all about him for his personal furnace. And you are not surprised that death cannot end him, and that he forces his way through the wall, a survivor. For the rest, the story will tell.

The end of the book does not seem entirely in scale with the atmosphere that has been building for three hundred pages; it needed something more transcendent, something greater in echo than Mr. Parry finally produced. But it was he who created that atmosphere, with its impossible demands. His talents in this field are plain. This is his first American book (preceded by two published in Canada), and we may expect to see more in the same vein.