

W. L. White on the Russians

EDITOR'S NOTE: One of the most controversial books of the new season is W. L. White's "Report on the Russians." Because of the arguments that the book has generated, as well as the importance of the subject itself, The Saturday Review has asked a group of correspondents and writers to comment not only on the book, but on SRL's review of the book by Louis Fischer.

REPORT ON THE RUSSIANS. By W. L. White. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1945. 309 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by LOUIS FISCHER

WILLIAM L. WHITE, author of "Report on the Russians," spent about as much time in the Soviet Union as the Dean of Canterbury, author of "The Soviet Power." Mr. White, son of the late and illustrious editor from Emporia, Kansas, went to Russia in the summer of 1944 as a companion of Eric A. Johnston, and stayed six weeks. Six weeks, however, is a very short time to study Russian conditions, especially when you don't know the language, never visited the place before, and were busy eating mountains of food and drinking pools of champagne at official Soviet banquets.

Bill White is aware of these handicaps. That, of course, did not prevent him from writing a book on Russia any more than it inhibited a host of earlier fly-by-weekend tourist commentators who likewise took state-conducted trips through the Soviet Union. Usually, they look for facts which confirm their pre-tour prejudices.

Mr. White writes extremely well; you move with him as he rushes through streets, dinners, factories, concerts, farms, and conversations in European and Asiatic Russia. So complete is the reader-participation that you almost get a stomach ache at the day's fifth banquet laid by the same ubiquitous government caterer.

Because parts of White's book were printed in *The Reader's Digest* and because the Communists and their numerous intellectual vassals have attacked White's view on Russia, the impression has been created that White is a reactionary who saw no good in the Soviet Union. But he also speaks with high praise: for instance,

What we have seen of Soviet agriculture has been uniformly good. Since I come from a farming state I could not be badly fooled. True, they have shown us their best. But it is at least as good as our best.

And this passage:

The thing I liked best of all about the Soviet Union, and it is one we would do well to copy, is the intelligently decent Russian attitude toward minority races. They are helped without being patronized, and they have developed self-respect and an

understandable gratitude. If they have no freedom, neither have the Russians. While this Soviet racial-colonial policy may not be as good as our handling of the Philippine Islands, it is infinitely better than our bungling and thoughtless treatment of the Negro.

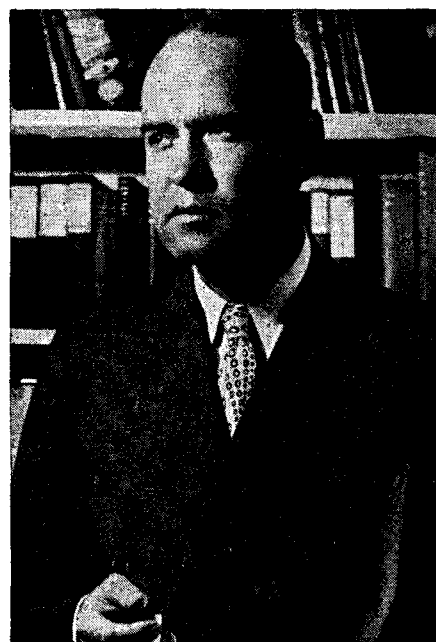
Russia is more lied about than any other country because its blinkered partisans want it to be accepted as the alternative to capitalist democracy; therefore it must be presented as unblemished perfection. Its detractors, on the other hand, fear the West's adoption of the Soviet system or of its essential features. More often than not, accordingly, reports on Russia are skirmishes in the war for the heart and mind of America. Of late, too, the purpose of pro-Soviet propaganda is to reduce foreign resistance to Russia's expansionist policy. Hence the helplessness of the average mortal reader who would really like to understand just what Russia is and what has been happening there. Soviet Russia should be moved into the zone of objective criticism. Condemnation of certain Soviet practices should not be considered as blasphemy nor intelligent approval as treason to America.

Bill White has three chief complaints against Soviet Russia:

- (1) the low standard of living.
- (2) the inefficiency of government industries.
- (3) the absence of personal liberty.

It is well to suspend judgment on Soviet living standards. They are extremely low and have improved less since 1917 than in many capitalist countries. The reasons are the turmoil of revolution and civil war, the dislocation due to purges, and the high cost of speedily developing new basic industries in a backward nation. I think we do not yet possess sufficient data to decide whether full employment and low real wages in Soviet Russia are the effects of inflation and war preparations or of socialist planning and Soviet methods of production and distribution. Stand-pat Stalinists will regard this statement as heresy to their theories. But they cannot disprove it. I go by Soviet experience. It is not unlike the experience of capitalist countries during periods of inflation and of production for export, for domestic capital investment or for war.

Now as to inefficiency in Soviet in-



W. L. White

—Photo by Arni

dustries. White has a keen eye and he notes many phenomena which have eluded observers long resident in Moscow. But with all his talent, Mr. White is merely viewing a split in the life of Russia and he cannot follow trends. He and apparently Eric Johnston as well were upset, for example, by the dirt in Soviet factories and by the disorder which raises production costs. But for many years the Soviet authorities fought this slovenliness and achieved considerable success until the war lifted Russia's best managers, most devoted Communists, and, above all, the workers with good working habits out of the plants and set them down at the fronts. Their places have been taken—eighty per cent in some factories—by women straight from villages and kitchens or by boys. Mr. White saw twelve-year-old kids holding down factory jobs. "You see absolutely no men between sixteen and forty at the factory benches," writes White. Wouldn't their absence explain a great deal of inefficiency, Bill?

Nor is it correct to attribute drab window displays to the elimination of commercial competition. Before the war, window decorations were often strikingly good-looking, in fact, too beautiful for the empty shelves inside.

Inefficiency does flourish everywhere in the Soviet economic system. But the question is whether it comes from non-competitive, government management, as Mr. White seems to believe, or from the frequent zigzags in the Kremlin's political policies, the constant shifting of political appointees in economic jobs, the purges and trials, the huge overhead for office-holders, bookkeepers, and clerks in industry, the cheapness of labor in a country which abandoned collective bargaining

in December, 1935, and the cheapness of life under a dictatorship.

What riled White most in Russia, however, was the suppression of personal freedom and of civil liberties. He passes on the information, gleaned from others, that with each year of revolution the amount of freedom has diminished. White is a Kansas liberal who loves liberty. This explains his reaction against Russia. He resented, first, the uninterrupted surveillance to which he and the members of his group were subjected. They were watched every waking moment. People they met by chance were told what to say to them and, invariably, this included the glorification of Stalin. Only once did White and his fellow-travellers enter a Soviet home, the sumptuous villa of a high official. But all this pales against White's red-hot denunciation of the manner in which Soviet citizens are transported from cultured European cities in Russia and told to spend the rest of their lives in a bleak desert in central Asia. He fumes at every encounter with slave labor. He dislikes the Communist czars he meets in various regions; they make him think of Tammany bosses only they have more power and imitate Oriental potentates. White feels that the Soviet individual is powerless to resist not only the terror of the ubiquitous secret police but also the pressure of Soviet propaganda. "Public opinion," he declares, "is handled with the consummate skill of an artist on a giant concert organ, whose hands run deftly over many keys to produce one marching series of harmonies." The individual does not think; he merely obeys and lives a lie to keep alive. "The workers," he says cynically, "want to live wherever Moscow decides they are most useful."

Summarizing his Russian observations, Mr. White asserts: "On one side of the picture this is a slave empire. On the other side it is a vigorous, dynamic empire—moving on." White fears it.

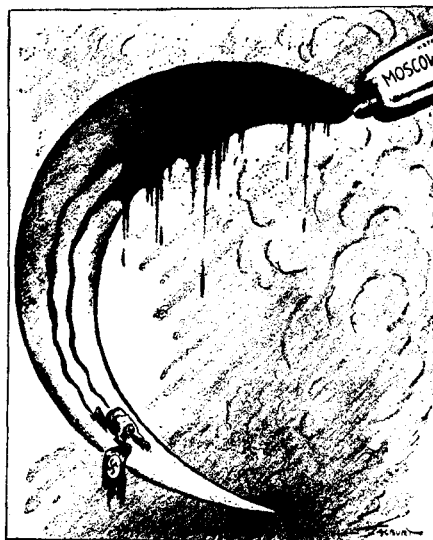
William L. White's "Report on the Russians" is an antidote to the slobbering hosannahs of passionate partisans of Stalin's nationalistic, socialistic, militaristic, caste-ridden, bureaucracy-ridden, conventional, regimented, success-minded, Czarist-minded, poor, terrorized, aggressive Russia. But White's report in turn needs an antidote which emphasizes the Soviet Union's achievements in science, in collectivized agriculture, in education (unaccompanied, however, by a parallel advance in the capacity to think), in the elimination of the idle rich and the idle poor, in the encouragement of individual ability and talent, in public health service, in child care, etc.

Russia is no longer red, but neither, Mr. White, is it black.

John Hersey:

LOUIS FISCHER'S comments on "Report on the Russians" are generous. Mr. Fischer suggests that W. L. White was impartial, for he says that White "also" speaks with high praise for the Soviet Union. Besides the two brief tributes to Soviet agriculture and the Russian attitude toward minorities, which Fischer quotes, I was able to find high and not-so-high praise for Russian salted cucumbers, for the ballet, for certain cities of Siberia, for a song called "Lubymy Gorod," for the way two fifteen-year-old Turkoman jockeys sat their horses, for a political boss named Mike Kulagin (who, however, seemed "strikingly un-Russian" to White), and for a "charming, unaffected child" of a movie actress (whom he liked because she had no gold teeth). These things Bill White liked. But these are just about all. The book is 309 pages long. The moments of high praise may consume altogether 309 words. The book is not impartial.

I hope Mr. Fischer will not object to my supplementing his review with some points he did not mention. This will be a long paragraph. Item: the book is insulting, and whatever one's views may be about the Soviet system, this moment of history, when the committed policy of our nation and of Great Britain is to try to find a *modus vivendi* with Russia, seems a peculiarly inappropriate one for an attitude of smug superiority. White characterizes almost every Russian he meets with a derogatory image. One is "stony-faced," one is like a "cold pail of lard," Mikoyan is like an "Oriental rug salesman," Molotov is like an "Indian Chief," portraits of Lenin and Stalin seem to have been painted "by the same artist who does the portraits of the tattooed man, the snake



—By Talburt in the Houston (Texas) Times
"The Road Back"

charmer and the two-headed baby for the side-show"—good reading but hardly good taste. Russian officers with their close haircuts, White fancies, look Prussian—a gratuitous slap under the circumstances. Russians seemed to him no better off than the inmates of the Kansas State Penitentiary; Russians eat garbage. Item: the book applies American standards to everything Russian. It does not follow that because Russians walk around in suits which look to White like American mail-order suits boiled and lightly pressed, that they are, *ipso facto*, slaves. Item: White's report differs sharply from the reports of his host, Eric Johnston, who has felt it necessary to disavow the book publicly, and of his travelling companions Joyce O'Hara, William Lawrence of *The New York Times*, Richard Lauterbach of *Time* and *Life*, and Robert Magidoff of NBC. Item: by the account of persons quoted by White, he occasionally made up statements and put them into their mouths; some of the things he attributed to other people, he said himself. One alleged "interview" with two American engineers called "Tex" and "Ed" in Eastern Russia never took place; its "facts" were derived from a foreigner in Moscow who for personal reasons hates everything Soviet, and were then put in the convenient context, very readably. Item: many of White's sources were unreliable. He took the grouching of the correspondents in the Metropole far more literally and seriously than the correspondents themselves did. His account of the "panic" in Moscow at the time of the Germans' approach in 1941 was derived from the same bitter man who supplied the engineers' "interview." His account of the Katyn Forest massacres is obviously from sources sympathetic to the London Poles, and makes no pretense at being impartial; it sounds very much like the Berlin radio. Item: White selects his facts unfairly. In reporting prices he devotes only forty-nine words, as an afterthought, to the ration stores where food prices are, by and large, cheaper than in the United States, but spends several pages itemizing the prices in the Commission Shops and Commercial Stores, where the Government purposely pegs prices very high to absorb inflationary rubles. Item: he scarcely mentions the war; it should not be necessary to elaborate this incredible oversight. Item: he belittles. He is willing to grant "effortless beauty" in the Moscow subway, but asks why it is so small. He says: "The Red Army is good," and then goes on to argue that the reason it is good is simply Russia's high birth rate. Item: some of his statements are not true. He says, for instance, that the Allied