

Creative Thaw in Russia

"The Thaw," by Ilya Ehrenburg (translated by Manya Harari. Henry Regnery. 230 pp. \$3.50), the latest novel of Soviet Russia's best-known writer, provides Professor Ernest J. Simmons of Columbia University's Russian Institute with an occasion to discuss the new turnings of the USSR's official policy towards the arts.

By Ernest J. Simmons

IN THE case of Ilya Ehrenburg's "The Thaw" we have a perhaps unique instance of a novel to which the publisher has added at the end a lengthy supplement concerning the work and related matters. And the procedure becomes more mystifying, at least from the publisher's point of view, when we read in the supplement, contributed by Russell Kirk: "This novel is so overpoweringly dull and formless, so flatly and falteringly written, so deficient in analysis and description of its characters, that it seems like one subtle burlesque of letters in modern Russia." The mystery is somewhat clarified, however, when we reflect that "The Thaw" is a novel by a Soviet author and that this translation of it is appearing in the United States in 1955.

The quoted judgment of Mr. Kirk seems a bit harsh. The novel is not "overpoweringly dull"; it might be more charitable to say that there is an amiable dullness about certain sections of it but that the rest sustains interest. There are at least three characters that are pretty well realized (Volodya Pukhov, his father, and Lena), and the style is not exactly flat—it has more verve in the original Russian. However, the novel is formless, and the whole gives the impression of having been written in considerable haste.

Ehrenburg is more of a journalist than a novelist. Among his Soviet rivals he lacks the profound engagement with life that so wonderfully dignifies the best fiction of Mikhail Sholokhov, nor has he anything of the sensitivity and feeling for human character of Konstantin Fedin, or the psychological density and brilliant language of Leonid Leonov, though at times he is capable of a witty, ef-

fective style in fiction. "The Thaw" cannot be compared with the often amusing and competent early tales of Ehrenburg, and it is even inferior to his war and postwar novels, such as "The Fall of Paris," "The Storm," and "The Ninth Wave."

Yet "The Thaw" deserves the attention of American readers, for it has become an historical document in the extensive postwar protest against the extremes of Communist Party dictation in the arts. Contrary to Mr. Kirk's view, this protest was not initiated by Stalin's death, though it was very much accelerated by that event.

It began, in a timid fashion to be sure, two or three years after the 1946 decree of the Central Committee of the Party on literature, a decree which was officially interpreted shortly thereafter, in a speech by the late Andrei Zhdanov, as demanding a literature that would "further the fulfilment of construction and rehabilitation plans . . . promote the development of our country's national economy," and be written in accordance with the Leninist principle of *partiinost'* ("Party spirit" or "conformity to Party dictates").

The result, of course, was a literature of hopeless sterility—"industrial" and "agricultural" fiction, drama, and poetry. The heroes and heroines were Communist supermen and superwomen, with about as much individuality as a row of telephone poles. The plots invariably involved a conflict between the positive hero's fresh ideas on production and the backwardness or "bourgeois survivals" of negative characters, and the resolution of the struggle was nearly always aided by an all-wise district secretary of the Party. The hero fulfilled his personality by completely identifying himself with society in the joy of collective labor. The Soviet reality portrayed was largely an embellished or idealized one, for Socialist realism justifies a presentation of life in the Soviet Union not as it is, but as it should be or must be—the Utopia of the Communist future.

CRITICISM of "Zhdanovism" in literature, tempered by fear and often taking the form of a "criticism of silence" on the part of some famous authors, gradually mounted. The re-

pressive censorship tactics of editors of magazines and publishing firms and of the government Committee on the Affairs of Arts were particularly singled out for attack. After Stalin's death in March 1953 this criticism was intensified and a new note was introduced which demanded that literature be humanized, that love and family life and not the need of crop rotation or the operations of the Bessemer steel process should become the themes of novels and plays. The protest reached its height at the end of 1953 with the publication of two long and remarkable critical articles.

The first was by Ehrenburg, who stressed the artist's need for creative freedom, for the right to select his own subjects and write about them as he pleased. "Is it possible," he pointedly asks, "that there exists a writer so impersonal and so indifferent to everything that one must tell him what to write about?" The second article, "Sincerity in Literature," by Vladimir Pomerantsev, insisted that sincerity must be the test by which a literary work should be judged and not ideological reliability or political loyalty.

It is in the light of this whole postwar period of protest against a literature of hypocrisy and artistic stagnation that the historical significance, if not the esthetic appeal, of "The Thaw," which first appeared in a magazine in the spring of 1954, must be appraised. Actually it had been preceded, by a few months, by Vera Panova's "Seasons of the Year," which, like Ehrenburg's novel, was fiercely attacked by the official critics because it also attempted to describe simple Soviet life and people with a minimum of embellishment. "The Thaw" differs in one major respect—it deliberately singles out the Party's



Ilya Ehrenburg—"spirit of dissent."

interference in art, which had contributed so much to the postwar debacle in Soviet literature, for scathing criticism and satire.

THE THAW" is a series of sketches of people living in a provincial Volga town and drawn from what might be called the Soviet "middle class"—factory officials, engineers, doctors, artists, teachers, and students. In their relations with one another we discover no stereotype positive hero or heroine, no romantically glorified feats of labor, and no omniscient Party secretary to play the *deus ex machina* at the end. They are not particularly happy people and their dissatisfaction seems somehow connected with the realities of Soviet life reflected in this novel and rarely anywhere else in postwar Soviet fiction—its drabness, bureaucratic injustices, the slowness with which wrongs are righted, and the constant sense of fear fed by the repressing acts of police and Party. Engineer Koroteyev remarks darkly: "We have taken a lot of trouble over half of the human being, but the other half is neglected. The result is that one half of the house is a slum."

The artists in the novel resemble, however faintly, the lonely individualists of contemporary fiction in the West; they are alienated from society. This is especially true of Volodya Pukhov, a painter who has prostituted his talent to the Party demands in art and yet cynically laughs over the official praise accorded his pot-boiling efforts. He secretly envies the highly gifted Saburov, whose model is Raphael and who is willing to starve rather than accept the official credo of Socialist realism in art. Volodya brutally reminds him: "Raphael wouldn't be admitted to the Artists' Union." Then moving on to literature Volodya declares that a writer in the Soviet Union isn't paid to have ideas: "All that happens to you with ideas is that you break your neck. What you're meant to look for in a book is ideology. If it's there what more d'you want? It's lunatics that have ideas."

There is a strong temptation to regard Volodya Pukhov as Ehrenburg's mouthpiece, although the latter firmly denied this charge when it was made in the Soviet press. "The Thaw," however, does seem to symbolize the hoped-for melting away of the ice of Party controls which for years before Stalin's death had congealed the free spirit and imagination of the creative artist. There were many adverse criticisms of the novel, but a few of them, including the most extensive and authoritative one by the



BEMELMANS AT HIS BEST: The pleasant and not-so-pleasant scenes assembled above all come from a new collection of the writings and drawings of Ludwig Bemelmans, a fellow who—in the unlikely event you haven't heard of him—is just about as funny and certainly as cosmopolitan as any American writer extant. The collection is entitled, appropriately enough, "The World of Bemelmans" (Viking, \$4.95), and it includes practically all of Mr. Bemelmans's best works—from "My War with the United States" to "I Love You, I Love You, I Love You"—and, for good measure, a few new stories which have never before been published in book form—"The Golden Opportunity" and "Paris Underworld"—in addition to a myriad new sketches.

—JOHN HAVERSTICK.

literary politician Konstantin Simonov, clearly sympathized with Ehrenburg's satiric attack on the arts and begrudgingly admitted that there was some faithfulness to the reality of Soviet life in the characters and events of "The Thaw." Ehrenburg was damned, however, for concentrating on "a-typical" Soviet people and on a slice of life that yields no optimism, no feats of labor heroism, no devotion to *partiinnost'*.

MR. KIRK, in the supplement, credits the Second Congress of Soviet Writers, called in December 1954, with quelling this long, postwar period of literary dissent, of which "The Thaw" was "the brightest flower," and he asserts that "doubtless no Soviet author will be so wrongheaded as to stumble into the pit of deviation for a great while to come." Mr. Kirk

makes some penetrating and just observations about the "death of art" in the Soviet Union. However, he is too dogmatic and sweeping about the developments of Soviet literature and the arts in the past and perhaps a bit premature and Orwellian in his stark vision of their future futility. He also tends to blame too much of "the terrible decay of Russian literature" on Marxism.

Marxism had very little to do with it. The Communist Party early realized that properly directed and controlled creative literature could be employed as a tremendously important propaganda weapon. And over the years the Party has been increasing its direction and control until they reached an intolerable degree in the postwar period. On the other hand, what is often forgotten

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