

The Past and the Future

HIROSHIMA. By John Hersey. Alfred A. Knopf, \$1.75.

JOHN HERSEY'S story of what happened to six ordinary persons at Hiroshima has been read all over America and heard by great radio audiences. Its stark simplicity has brought home to hundreds of thousands of persons what it meant to drop an atomic bomb on a great city. Some Americans have reacted with painful guilt at the thought that they belonged to the nation which catapulted this horror into the houses and streets of a city of whose very existence they had previously never heard. Many more have read it as the handwriting on the wall, prophesying the agony of the day when they will be citizens of a city marked for atomic destruction. Neither those who have read the book as a record of things past nor those who have read it as a portent of things to come have been able afterward to dismiss the negotiations of atomic commissions as if these statesmen were playing a mere impersonal game of diplomatic chess. The matter at issue has become for them scenes of the burned and wounded staggering endlessly along the roads, of living burial under fallen timbers and rubble, of vomit and suppuration and lingering death.

The hour-by-hour, day-by-day account of the experiences of a seamstress, a clerk, a Jesuit priest, a Japanese Methodist preacher, and two doctors is written with complete simplicity, and the calmness of the narrative throws into relief the nightmare magnitude of the destructive power the brains of man have brought into being. There is no preaching in this book. Not a single sentence "views with alarm." Even the page which calls attention to the fact that the bomb which destroyed Hiroshima was a mere feeler, one-tenth or one-twentieth as powerful as possible atomic bombs which could be developed in the future, is a matter-of-fact account of what well-equipped Japanese nuclear physicists learned about the nature of the bomb by investigating the ruins of the city. They mimeographed their findings in little books for private circulation in Japan during the months when the American authorities were maintaining security on the subject of atomic fission.

Now that John Hersey's book has been issued between covers it will be read by another vast audience. The fascination of the subject of atomic destruction and the pure human interest of the theory will put it high on the best-seller lists. It will stir a new set of readers to an understanding that all other issues in the world today pale beside the necessity of outlawing war among the nations.

Even at this moment, when the topical interest of John Hersey's story overshadows all else, "Hiroshima" is important on other counts. It is a capsule of Japanese life, and it tells more about our ex-enemy Japan than many learned books. Because so many people will identify themselves with the sufferers in Hiroshima, seeing their own dread foreshadowed in what has already happened there, they will miss the importance of this little volume as a sourcebook on Japanese behavior. But it is that too. The story is not a preview of what people would do if New York or Chicago were devastated by an atomic bomb. It is a story of how people in a Japanese city behaved. The record would be important because of this fact, even if it did not also tell the

tale of how the curtain was raised upon the new Atomic Age.

For the Japanese did not behave as many Westerners had imagined they would. Even the German priests in the Novitiate three miles from the center of the city, one of them has said elsewhere, feared, until a messenger was dispatched to them, to go to the rescue of their brothers who were stationed in Hiroshima itself. They thought the populace might attack any Westerner. It was a reasonable fear; Westerners had dropped the bomb. But when they went into the city, no hand or voice was raised against them. A band of soldiers challenged them, on the theory that they might be American parachutists, and, when the priests identified themselves, the soldiers apologized. That was all. As the seamstress, a poor widow, said of the bombing, "It was war and we had to expect it." Hostility against Westerners was not shown in Hiroshima then or since. The first military commission after V-J Day was met at the airport by the Japanese officials drawn up in due order and invited to drink tea with their hosts. A year after the bombing the Hiroshima Planning Conference discussed plans for "erecting a group of buildings as a monument to the disaster and naming them the Institute of International Amity."

Nor was there mass hysteria among the sufferers at Hiroshima. Some Westerners had believed that toward the close of the war the time was ripe for such behavior among the Japanese in the homeland. It did not happen. With their leaders and doctors decimated and offices and hospitals destroyed, the populace acted, indeed, as sheep without shepherds. The able-bodied, during that first day, did not organize themselves into rescue teams. "Under many homes people screamed for help, but no one helped; in general survivors that day assisted only relatives or immediate friends, for they could not comprehend or tolerate a wider circle of misery." Nor did sufferers expect such help. In the parks and along the rivers where people streamed for refuge "it was not easy to distinguish the living from the dead, for most of the people lay still, with their eyes open. To Father Kleinsorge, an Occidental, the silence in the grove by the river, where hundreds of gruesomely wounded suffered together, was one of the most dreadful and awesome phenomena of his whole existence. The hurt ones were quiet; no one wept, much less screamed in pain; no one complained; none of the many who died did so noisily; not even children cried; very few people even spoke. And when Father Kleinsorge gave water to some whose faces had been almost blotted out by flash burns, they took their share and then raised themselves a little and bowed to him, in thanks."

Even the Reverend Mr. Tanimoto, the Methodist preacher who had studied theology in the United States, and who organized himself as a committee of one to carry water to the wounded and to ferry them across the river out of the way of the flames, was "as a Christian filled with compassion for those who were trapped," but "as a Japanese he was overwhelmed by the shame of being unhurt." "In his guilt he turned from right to left as he hurried and said to some of them, 'Excuse me for having no burden like yours.'"

Nine days after the bomb was dropped the Emperor spoke over the radio. In accepting defeat, he said, his people were to resolve "to bear the unbearable and to tolerate the in-

tolerable and thus leave an imperishable foundation for generations to come." Over the radio in America his words seemed a kind of whistling in the dark. They did not seem to promise any specific kind of behavior. In Japanese eyes, however, they did. They promised a continuance of a behavior inculcated for centuries in Japan and expressed at Hiroshima when man by man and woman by woman they had "borne the unbearable" with patient fortitude. For the Japanese do not fight against circumstance; the bombing was a risk they had taken when they entered into war and "they had to expect it." Their duty is to fight weakness in themselves and to control their pain and personal sufferings. They do not have to reason why or to rail at a universe which requires such discipline. Westerners had doubted whether Japan could surrender; the Japanese knew that they could take capitulation with the same self-control the wounded and dying had showed at Hiroshima. If they could maintain such proprieties, they would not lose their self-respect in their own eyes.

RUTH BENEDICT

Russia, Russia!

THE GREAT CHALLENGE. By Louis Fischer. Duell, Sloan, and Pearce. \$4.

ONE might plunge right into the substance of this powerful and impassioned book by asking the question: What is the great challenge? "Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito challenged the democratic world," Louis Fischer says on page 329. "We smashed the challengers. Now Russia challenges the democratic world. This is the greatest challenge the democracies have ever confronted: It is a challenge to improve or succumb." I have chosen this quotation rather than a score of others because its last sentence indicates the philosophical base on which the author sincerely intends to rest his scathing criticism, his violent rejection of Russia and all that country's works, methods, and thoughts. In its implications of tragedy it discloses, too, in what I believe to be a defective manner, the nature of the choice before us.

I will say at once that I have no intention of trying to rebut the author's analysis of Russian developments. Stalin has undoubtedly incorporated nationalism into his Marxist philosophy, and the result has been both a sharpening of the international crisis and a source of confusion for the European left. But the author constantly overplays the importance of this nationalism. For had the revolution developed in accordance with its early promise, the opposition in the West, supposing the present or another equally grave crisis to exist, might very well be sharper than it is. Moreover, the Soviets would still be in a position to "exploit," to use the author's word, the real needs of men. As Louis Fischer is fully aware, those needs antedate the Russian Revolution and the form it has taken. The fact is that, in considerable measure, it is the economic message of the Soviet Union, in conjunction with its emergence to power, that awakens hostility. Its forms and its means often confuse and divide, but there was always a specter haunting Europe.

Basically Louis Fischer's values remain the same; yet in all that he has written since his revulsion from Russia I have been astonished at the increasing parsimony with which

he uses the social philosophy which he sincerely believes himself to believe. Take, for example, his formulation of what he regards as the correct policy for the Western powers. On page 335 he rejects the proposal to fight Russia now. He scorns appeasement of the U. S. S. R. because he says it will compel us to fight that country later on. His own policy is described in these words, "Block Russia's territorial expansion by an effective international organization and block Russia's ideological expansion by increasing the contentment and cohesion of the countries in her path."

At first sight this appears to be a socialist version of "Stop Russia." The old Louis Fischer would have been very quick to say that a policy of stopping Russia "by an effective international organization" runs a great danger of becoming one of building an international organization in such a way that it will stop Russia and everything else on the left. That is what is likely to happen; what is happening. The intention of the Stop Russia powers is all too clear. It is to use the United Nations in exactly the way the League of Nations was used, as an instrument not only for checking Russian expansion but for stabilizing and even extending those empires which Louis Fischer believes constitute a major cause of war.

As things are now, there is no such thing as an ideal Stop Russia policy; there is just one policy conditioned and characterized by the nature of the social forces it most naturally rallies to itself. That the liberal forces which have committed themselves to the present conservative leadership of the United States will be able to modify the major aspect of the present policy, I cannot believe. Nothing in the mathematics of probability and nothing in the history of the inter-war period encourages that hope. The contents of the book itself seem to support me. One can register a dissent from imperialism very impressively by writing about India as Louis Fischer does. But the indignant expression of dissent is no substitute for a close and extensive survey of the general problem. For all its vehemence "The Great Challenge" provides no clear picture of the real world of politics within which the struggle for Louis Fischer's values goes on. Indeed, because this book presents no systematic analysis of Western policy but concentrates by far the greater part of its fire on the Soviet Union, it is rather worse than a passionate abstraction. A foreign policy truly expressing socialist intentions will not consist of measures universally acceptable to the right plus a protestant rider. Louis Fischer's jockey, who wears the colors of civil liberty, is an excitable and voluble idealist, but his mount is out of control.

"The Great Challenge" contains little about issues that once agitated its author deeply. There is almost nothing about Spain, for example. To be exact, there is one sustained half-page on Spain, in which Louis Fischer rejects the idea of an armed invasion to liberate that country. Why this shying away from the question? Is it that the author fears communism in Spain also? And why the unsatisfactory reference to Greece? And why, in a section that discusses the Far East almost wholly in terms of Stop Russia, does he dismiss consideration of Chiang Kai-shek's regime by what I can only call a frivolous anecdote?

In his section on India the author has pointed out the strategic reasons for Britain's maintenance of the puppet princedoms. They are there to prevent revolts within India,

Copyright of Nation is the property of Nation Company, L. P. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.