

TOWARDS A BALANCED VIEW

a review by **SHIRLEY GRAHAM**

THE STALIN ERA, by Anna Louise Strong. *Today's Press, Altadena, California*, 1956. 128 pages. Cloth, \$2.25; paper \$1.00.

THE FACT that "intelligentsia" came into our language from the Russians is reason enough for people on this side of the Atlantic between the 25th and 49th parallels to regard that word and any of its clan with suspicion and dislike. "Egg-head" is our derisive designation for the individual who presumes to think. Yet, the ability to recognize, assimilate and assess vital and durable facts remains a product of the disciplined mind. And intelligence, rather than emotional reactions, wishful thinking, or even blind patriotism, must be exercised in accepting or rejecting any communication.

Book stores and air-ways are filled with accounts of what has happened and what is happening in the Soviet Union. Any reporter is prepared to explain the "spiritual degeneration" behind it all, commentators give stenographic descriptions of "private conferences" and "eye-witnesses" are a dime a dozen. Anyone, however honest, is hopelessly confused and bewildered without some scale of values for making distinctions. Sound knowledge of the history of Eastern Europe and Asia is needed. But, until very recently, the History Departments of our best colleges and universities offered few such courses and the number of students enrolled in them was even fewer. High Schools quickly relegated Asia, Africa and India to the nether regions of "backward peoples."

Lacking, therefore, this fundamental historical knowledge, one may ask two ques-

tions which are deeply embedded into every research student: "Who is the source of the information" and "Why should this source be accepted as authoritative?"

With these two questions in mind I should not, as one reviewer of Miss Strong's book recommended, preferably seek enlightenment on the Stalin era in the Columbia University Russian Institute's *Selection of Documents* "The Anti-Stalin Campaign and International Communism." It is clear to me that the very title of these papers is slanted and prejudicial. They will undoubtedly furnish material on the anti-Stalin campaign in the west—should one need more information on that subject. On the other hand, and after applying the same test, I recommend Anna Louise Strong's *The Stalin Era*. It's author lived in Russia most of that epoch-making period, lived there not as an outsider, but the wife of a Russian, member of a Russian family, with all this means with regard to language, historical backgrounds, traditions and mores. During the trying days when the first socialist state was being born in suffering and anguish, Anna Louise Strong took part in the birthing. She founded and edited the first English language newspaper in the new Moscow. She worked under Stalin. She knows the Stalin era; she gloried in its victories, recognized its pitfalls; she shared in its pain.

The Stalin Era is a slender volume. Historians will fill libraries on this period. Their task is not anticipated here. Anna Louise Strong is a journalist, who, while still within ear-shot of battle scribbles in her note-book. She writes rapidly, in broad, bold strokes that capture the magnitude of her theme. She writes precisely, simply, frequently referring the reader to more intensive studies for data. She does not attempt to tell everything or discuss every issue. Her responsibility at the moment is to call a halt to hysteria, to remind us of the obvious, to illumine our understanding.

"It is too soon to sum up the era," she writes in the Foreword, "and yet one must

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try to. For controversy has arisen over it and the beliefs of many around the world are being torn. It is the very best people who are most disturbed by Khrushchev's revelations of thousands of brutal injustices and harsh repression when socialism was for the first time built."

Throughout the book she stresses the task to be done—the most gigantic conceived in modern times, perhaps in any time.

"The world's first socialist state was built in a backward peasant country. By all past theory, this could not be done. Socialism implies, or was thought to imply, a more plentiful life, built on surplus, with widening freedom and culture. It was expected to come when capitalism had fully developed the mechanism of production but could not satisfactorily distribute the surplus goods. It implied technically competent workers, aware of the defects of capitalism and conscious of collective power to make plenty for all. . . . Tsarist Russia had no modern productive mechanism and no surplus. When it collapsed in World War one there were no goods and little food. Peasants lived in the Middle Ages.

"It was Joseph Stalin who formulated in August, 1924, the idea of building socialism in Russia *without outside help.*" (Italics mine)

And when the western world combined savagely to strangle the infant state still in swaddling clothes, Stalin proclaimed grimly, "Build, or be crushed in ten years by foreign invaders."

Like gladiators they stripped for the combat. Every impediment was thrown aside or ruthlessly torn away. Those who opposed or seemed to oppose The Plan were pushed aside. And, they called their head of state "Steel" after the shining, flashing Damascus blades of their ancestors. They expected him to cut through every obstacle to achieving victory. A Chinese scholar, watching the struggle going on beyond ancient walls wrote:

"The process of changing the world on the basis of scientific knowledge . . . includes the persons who are opposed to change. To be remolded they will have to go through a stage of compulsion before they enter into a stage of remolding of their own accord. When the whole of mankind, of its own accord, remolds itself and changes the world, that will be the

age of world communism." (*On Practice* by Mao Tse-tung.)

Editors of *The American Socialist* deplore "the Anna Louise Strong extreme" in denominating "a country still behind the Western world in living standards, productivity and political rights, as full blown socialism." Anna Louise Strong does not write of "full-blown" socialism. What she refers to is:

"Socialism," defined by the Oxford Dictionary, "A theory or policy of social organization which advocates the ownership and control of the means of production, capital, land, property, etc. by the community as a whole, and their administration or distribution in the interests of all."

One need only read reports made at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR to ascertain how "full-blown" socialism is in the Soviet Union. Later or private "Reports" do not change statistics.

Anna Louise Strong does not gloss over the many injustices, curtailments of individual freedoms, tyranny of organized police or loss of innocent lives during these years of carrying forward the plans.

"Socialism thus built was never the socialism men dreamed, the socialism of freedom and plenty for all; it was speckled by many flaws. How far those flaws derive from Stalin's personality, how far from the dark Russian past, how far from the Nazi fifth column and the forty-year threat of war—this will be a theme for future historians and all will differ in apportioning blame."

Since she knows the Russians (as we do not) Anna Louise Strong may well be justified in having some reservations with regard to the "Khrushchev Report," at least of that pilfered version which appeared in the western press. She fully accepts the substantiated evidence that outside the regular sessions of the Twentieth Congress, Nikita Khrushchev, head of the Soviet Communist Party, made a long and impassioned speech to a body of Communist officials. What he said, or was reported as saying, rocked the world. When a giant stumbles, the earth trembles.

Time, and sober second thoughts would seem to be shaving down Khrushchev's revelations to proper proportions. It may be that history will label the speech as an inappropriate, emotional outburst pro

duced by the same kind of tensions, pressures and anxieties that tormented and drove the aging Stalin. It is the fashion now to sit in judgment of the Soviet Union. That Anna Louise Strong does not do so is evidence to this reviewer of her broader understanding and superior intellect.

I believe most people will agree that *The Stalin Era* is correctly named. Nothing can obliterate the stamp of Joseph Stalin from this period. Nikita Khrushchev himself bears witness to this seal when he said (or, is reported as saying) on New Year's Day:

"I grew up under Stalin" (*New York Times*, Jan. 2, 1957) "Stalin made mistakes but we should share responsibility for those mistakes because we were associated with him. The imperialists call us Stalinists. Well, when it comes to fighting imperialism, we are all Stalinists."

EDITORS' NOTE

It is a sign of the times, a good sign, that we seek to present more varied opinions in our magazine these days than was always the case in the past. And it is a measure of some of the complexities of the present situation that we now feel impelled to register editorial dissent on certain matters we ourselves once most strongly defended!

Because the book by Anna Louise Strong and the above review deal with the very core of all discussions around the Soviet Union since the Khrushchev revelations about the Stalin era, we are taking the liberty of adding a brief comment.

We are honored to count Miss Strong and the distinguished writer of the review among our contributors. Our differences with them are of course, wholly friendly ones within a larger common agreement. Both writers perform an important service in helping to redress the balance in the present discussions by emphasizing the great and positive achievements of the Soviet Union. This is necessary to counter the new and dangerous wave of anti-Soviet hysteria set in motion following the Khrushchev speech.

Miss Strong, out of her own first hand knowledge, has set down an eloquent and true record of the positive side of the building of the world's first socialist state against incredible difficulties. It is to her everlasting credit that she has never per-

mitted her own sad experience to blind her in any way to all the magnificent achievements of the Soviet Union. But we cannot go along with the rationale Miss Strong presents for many of the injustices and repressions of the Stalin era, or with the implications that such methods were either due mainly to a Hitler Fifth Column within the Soviet Union, or were inevitable under Russian conditions.

While we feel that the methods whereby Khrushchev's disclosures reached the outside world were unfortunate, we cannot agree with our reviewer that the verdict of history may find the revelations themselves inappropriate, since we believe historic truth was itself responsible for bringing them out. It is our hope that some day a more fully rounded picture will come from the Soviet leaders themselves. Meantime, we feel that we must accept the facts already revealed, however painful, be prepared for more disclosures as history is further corrected, and yet maintain our own balance in our assessment of both errors and achievements of the USSR. The risk of making the revelations was great indeed, as events in Hungary have already so tragically demonstrated, but the risk to socialist progress of further concealment would have been far greater. And surely, it is to the eternal glory of the socialist system that such frank acknowledgement of past evils should have been made, as well as the best guarantee of their correction.

G. D. H. COLE ON SOCIALISM

WORLD SOCIALISM RESTATED, by G. D. H. Cole. *New Statesman and Nation*. London. 1956. 25 cents.

"THERE IS no good reason for taking the present stalemate in western democratic socialism as a sign that its impetus has been permanently lost. The case for it remains unshaken: what has happened to it is that it has allowed itself to be temporarily diverted into an anti-Communist blind alley, which prevents it both from engaging in a whole-hearted struggle against capitalism and imperialism and from being able to offer to the peoples even a substantial further improvement in their welfare."