Roads to Communism and Back: Six Personal Histories

THE GOD THAT FAILED. A Confession. By Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, Richard Wright, Andre Gide, Louis Fischer and Stephen Spender. Edited by Richard Crossman. 273 pp. New York: Harper & Bros. \$3.50.

By REBECCA WEST

THERE is no subject on which it is more difficult to establish communication with one's fellow creatures than anti-communism; and here the gulf yawns particularly wide between Europeans and Americans. Europeans steeped in political activities of a minor sort according to the habit of their kind may speak of Communists with the tart exasperation which comes of frustrating experience. Without number are the ways they may have been done in the eye by the comrades, and all are disagreeable.

For example, take the case of a member of the Labor party who has worked for a Labor candidate and seen him returned to Parliament, only to find that the constituency suddenly becomes riddled with ostensibly Labor activities which turn out to be, in effect, hostile to the Labor Govern-ment and to this particular member of Parliament; and it turns out that the promoter of these activities is none other than the candidate's election agent, who proves to be a member of the Communist party, though before he was admitted to the Labor party he had signed a declaration that he was not a Communist. Nobody likes to be told lies or to be cheated and a community would be in a poor way when it lost this instinctive reaction.

Europeans smarting from such experiences are apt to be indignant and impatient when they allude to communism as a pernicious nuisance and are looked at by their listeners as if their slips were showing. The idea, which has been successfully put over in some quarters, that anti-communism is dowdy seems to them cheap and frivolous. But equally, they feel repelled by the kind of sympathy they may involuntarily attract.

HEY have no desire to hold hands with their afflicted brothers and sisters who think that Russians are putting poison in their food; or who wish to suspend the protection given to all citizens by law in the case of suspected or proven Communists; or who want to make war on the airy offchance that it may prevent another one. Above all, they do not want to be linked with people who hope to freeze the social system in its present state and so perpetuate injus-

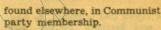
Rebecca West's incisive reports on Communist and Fascist movements in England have appeared in both American and British magazines. Her most recent book is "The Meaning of Treason."

deed anti-Communist because they believe Communists are one of the chief forces which prevent the transformation of the world into a commonwealth. This book of essays, by four

tice and cruelty. They are in-

former members of the Communist party and two onetime friends of the party (André Gide and Louis Fischer), tells that European story. It is true that two of the essays are by Americans (Mr. Fischer and Richard Wright) and one of those describes an American situation; and that essay by Richard Wright is most part of him, as tough and jaunty as a racetrack gambler, looks over the wall at this protean struggle quite unimpressed and comments on it with ribald wit. Here he recreates the most formative experience of his life, analyzes it, mocks it.

At 26 he was in Berlin working in the great liberal and anti-militarist publishing house of Ullstein. He was an old 26. Up till the age of 9 ne had lived in the sort of cushioned and cultured home that was maintained by the Jewish mercantile class in Hungary. Then his father, who was an He undertook to support this tottering civilization as he had taken on the care of his parents and to that end he joined the Communist party. Membership never came easy to him. The poet was scandalized by party jargon which stultified thought. The critic had to blink before he could swallow the policy forced on German Communists by Moscow, which, as he shows in some of the most interesting pages of this essay, never missed a trick in helping Hitler to power; the puerilities by which the Communists split the progressive vote and let



Obviously, one reason for this lay in the relief felt by a man who after having been overburdened with responsibility since his childhood surrenders his will to a powerful organization. But also it was a way of life which promised full employment to both body and soul in a world where unemployment in the sense of the inability of the body to work and the soul to believe was a constant overhanging danger. Perhaps the party's strongest card was that it pleased pride by demanding constant self-sacrifice beyond the point of enduring poverty and life on the run to prison cell and gallows.

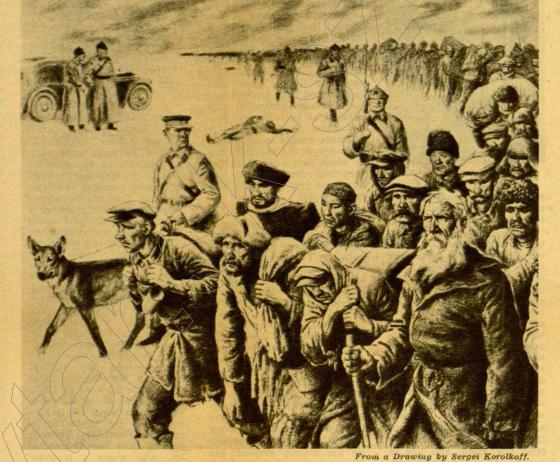
MR. KOESTLER is frank about the rewards that are open to the Communist writer; he gives an illuminating account of his journey through Soviet Russia in 1932, when eight of ten local state publishing trusts bought the rights of the same short story (always at something well over ten times the monthly salary of an average Soviet wage earner) and paid him advances on the Russian, German, Ukrainian, Georgian and Armenian rights of his unwritten book on the Soviet Union "which amounted to a small fortune." At that time he had not published a single book.

But it was plainly not this baksheesh that won him. It was working on that anti-Fascist propaganda for ten to twelve hours a day unpaid, with little food but a dish of thick pea soup at noon and walking several miles a day to the only free lodging he could find—a hayloft.

He liked best of all his service in the Spanish Civil War, which ended for him in four months in Spanish prisons, most of the time in solitary confinement and in expectation of being shot. There he found a peaceful ecstasy. Nevertheless, he left the Communist party, which had given him all these experiences. It was so great a wrench that he has plainly felt himself a maimed man ever since.

BUT it had been part of the revelation he had received in prison to discover "that the end justifies the means only within very narrow limits, that ethics is not a function of social utility and charity not a petty bourgeois sentiment but a gravitational force which keeps civilization in its orbit." This forbade him to pretend that the members of POUM, the Trotskyite splinter group that was participating in the Spanish Civil War, were traitors and agents of Franco, as the Communist party line pretended.

It made him suddenly revolt against purges and fight for the lives of two friends who were suddenly arrested on



En Route to the "Arctic Subcontinent of Forced Labor Camps."

moving of all. But the others relate to this specifically European exasperation which so often becomes tongue-tied when it ought to justify itself. One of them, indeed, may become a classic by reason of its subtle and candid and comprehensive statement of this typical experience of this age.

Arthur Koestler's essay is one of the most handsome presents that has ever been given to future historians of our time. He is, of course, always an interesting writer. His work is three-dimensional because he is three people. In him there is a believing poet who perpetually changes into an unbelieving critic savagely eager to tear up all evidence of his previous manifestations of faith but never able to complete the work of destruction before he changes back into the poet who is equally eager to fill the wastepaper basket with all evidences of the critic's skepticism; while another agent for British and German textiles, was reduced to poverty by World War I and was finally rendered completely destitute by the Austrian inflation of the early Twenties. At 21 Arthur Koestler left home to become the sole financial support of his parents.

Now he had established himself firmly in a community that had nothing firm about Around him stretched the it. peculiar panorama of the Weimar Republic in its last days: such a tatty and disordered landscape with here and there undertaking (such as Ullstein's) looming up in unquestionable magnificence; such an infantile population that while a trumpet of doom echoed from the skies formed itself into a cops-and-robber game from which individual players sometimes detached themselves to engage in artistic intellectual achievement not to be surpassed in any other country.

the Nazis in will seem incredible if it is not borne in mind by the reader that the U.S.S.R. radio was every day blaring out its conviction that the threat to European peace lay in the armed might and the imperialist philosophy of France.

Also, the ribald part of Mr. Koestler was greatly amused by such naïveté as that of the Communist propaganda chief who, to keep his mind pure, only read the official party organ.

Certainly Mr. Koestler noticed all these follies: for he can now recall his strangulated doubts regarding them. But he noticed them only as a partially anesthetized patient notices what is going on in his sickroom, and the name of the anesthetic was contentment. There is no doubt that this supremely gifted man found deep satisfaction, greater perhaps than any he has ever

BOOK REVIEW, JANUARY 8, 1950.

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Hart Stilwell.

Jazz Age Collegian

CAMPUS TOWN. By Hart Stilwell. 288 pp. New York: Doubleday & Co. \$3.

By JAMES KELLY

DETERMINEDLY placing wanton people in a "Stover at Yale" setting, Mr. Stilwell manages some startling effects as he takes his turn at the well-worn subject of flaming youth in the early Jazz Age. Through the campus adventures of Lefty Mason, a hot-eyed, tormented underhot-eyed, tormented under-graduate, the author pictures

the confused morals and mores of the period. At the wanton level, we see Lefty and his friends in me-

FRANCES. By Catherine Hut 299 pp. New York: W. W. ton & Co. \$3. By GRANVILLE HICKS THE Frances of Miss F bell's story is the o bell's story is the child of an unhappy marri between a society woman a stolid, colorless lawyer. loved by her parents, Fran grows up, as any psycholo would have predicted, w strong feelings of insecur The consequences are a d The consequences are a di cult adolescence, an unsa factory marriage, a bout v alcoholism, a romantic hopeless love affair, and t another defast in low another defeat in love.

This summary makes "Fr ces" sound like a case stu and on one level that is w it is. But it is also a she authentic account of life upper stratum the of York society, from the mic Twenties to the end of war. There is a larger dram too, in which the central ch acter is not Frances but Ray Hewitt, with whom France in love — as are her mot and her mother's two clos friends.

Randy remains through



Upper-Cru Communism Daughten -- And Back

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fantastic charges after having spent their lives in the serv-ice of the Soviet Union. Of this he writes bitterly, accus-ing all Communists and fellow travelers of participation in blood emilte blood-guilt:

Every single one of us knows of at least one friend knows of at least one friend, who perished in the Arctic subcontinent of forced labor camps, was shot as a spy or vanished without trace. How our voices boomed with righteous indignation, de-nouncing flaws in the pro-cedure of justice in our com-fortable democracies; and how silent we were when our contrades, without trial or conviction, were liquidat-ed in the Socialist sixth of the earth. Each of us car-ries a skeleton in the cupries a skeleton in the cupboard of his conscience; added together, they would form galleries of bones more labyrinthine than the Paris catacombs.

The Ribbentrop-Molotov pact severed the last shred of his contact with communism. He had given seven years of his life to the party and it was his conviction that every mo-ment of those years had been wasted. The means employed by the party only served to extend the sphere of those means. They never brought the ostensible end any nearer.

HIS story of the dissipation of vital energy on an in-tricate and useless technique is retold by the novelist Ignazio Silone, whose contribution includes a most interesting account of a Comintern meeting in 1927, where Stalin and Thälmann and Kuusinen and Kolarov wasted time and force on attempting to get him and two non-Russian colleagues to pass a resolution condemning a document by Trotsky which nobody but the Russians had read, a resolution which could by no conceivable process have

the smallest practical effect. The same story is retold again by Richard Wright,



though he almost steps out of though he almost steps out of the volume by reason of his preoccupation with people just as people. This beautiful writer uses a bare style, but the men and women in his pages are there in their flesh; the economical dialogue is delivered in their several and unique voices.

It is retold again by the poet Stephen Spender in an essay which seems more hesitant and diffuse than others, but which contains pictures of intellectuals in the British Com-



Arthur Koestler.

munist party so lively that they make Mr. Koestler seem a gentle soul. Here, too, is a most serious discussion of the moral consequences of a bigotry which is repelled by atrocities only when they are committed by the opposition. ("It was clear to me that unless I cared about every murdered child impartially, I did not really care about children being murdered at all. I was performing an obscene mental act on certain corpses which became the fuel for propa-gandist passions * * *.")

MR. SPENDER debates extreme seriousness and intelligence the problem of what the anti-Communist should do to make his faith positive. He sees that the people and nations who love lib-erty must "lead a movement throughout the world to im-prove the conditions of the millions of people who care more for bread than for freedom, thus raising them to a level of existence where they can care for freedom."

At times the essayists seem to claim too much for them-selves. Richard Crossman, as-sistant editor of The New Statesman and Nation, whose happy idea it was to compile the second second second second second the second this volume, and Mr. Koestler both arrive at the conclusion that people who are most likely to set the world at rights are ex-Communists, on the theory that one who has de-scended into hell will thirst all the more for heaven. But this is disproved here by the only platitudinous essay in the book: André Gide's enthusi-asm for communism seems to have been a superficial experi-ence and his disenchantment with it no more profound.

T must be remembered that all the writers of these essays, with the exception of Richard Wright, could have learned from others what they had learned for themselves about communism. The information was already available, and some lack of shrewdness, some masochistic urge must have led them to disregard it.

The value of this book is not that its authors showed themselves outstanding, but that they were typical. It is a truly contemporary book; it shows how at the moment Euro-peans of this kind regard communism.

thodical pursuit of co-eds, aid-ed by the standard props of red roadsters, bootleg gin, and dark roads. At the Stover