

Books

The Road to Yalta, Soviet Foreign Relations 1941-1945 by Louis Fischer

(Harper and Row; 238 pp.; \$8.95)

Alger Hiss

The New Yorker's long-winded lady entertains partly because her monologues appear in that section of the magazine dedicated to snippets of journalism. The reader therefore knows that the compulsive talker is, by editorial fiat, limited to a vaudeville-like turn. Compulsive writers of a journalistic persuasion who escape editorial limitations by writing books are less entertaining, at least in this respect--and in a larger sense, too, if their need to write is coupled with an evangelistic *trope*, as is the case with the late Louis Fischer.

Fischer wrote many books (his publisher lists twenty-two plus two more of which he was editor). *The Road to Yalta*, published posthumously, is presumably the last. I say "presumably," because one had made that same assumption often before only to find out all too soon that the assumption was unwarranted.

It is not only in this sense, however, that there is a quality of *déjà vu* about *The Road to Yalta*. Mr. Fischer here gives rein to his long-standing preoccupation with communism of the Soviet variety and Joseph Stalin. And the feeling of recognition is enhanced not only by the faithfulness with which Mr. Fischer repeats his familiar observations and devoutly held opinions: At a rough count I find eight citations to previously published books by Mr. Fischer (rather more references, I would hazard, than to any other of his secondary sources,

except Sir Winston Churchill).

In essence this is a quick run-through not so much of Soviet foreign relations, as the subtitle puts it, as of the history of the Second World War. In 218 pages the reader should hardly expect much new or closely argued analysis or much use of newly available archival material. In these expectations the reader will not be disappointed.

Professor/Ambassador George F. Kennan contributes a Foreword. In the opening sentence he writes that his purpose is "to say some things about Louis Fischer as a historian." The Foreword is a reprinting of a speech at the Memorial Service for Mr. Fischer held on January 23, 1970, in the Auditorium of Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey. Kennan's appreciation of Louis Fischer as historian goes beyond Mr. Fischer's many books and makes reference to "literally thousands of written and spoken efforts." Kennan first met Fischer in Moscow in 1933 when the latter "was already a well-known writer." He acknowledges Fischer's influence on him over the subsequent years and records their ultimate convergence of views "to a point where we could see things, and particularly Russian things, very much alike and collaborate happily" (presumably during recent years when they were both residents of Princeton).

Had Professor Kennan, a distinguished historian, limited himself in

his Foreword to the book in which it is printed, it is unlikely that he would have emphasized Louis Fischer as an historian. Later in the Foreword, Kennan notes that "it was the journalist that developed first and dominated the earlier years of his mature activity." Kennan also says, late in his memorial eulogy, that for Fischer "the history he wrote was largely a matter of his own experience. Historical evidence and personal experience were for him inseparable. He saw history in terms of great people and great events. He knew most of the people. He had experienced, in one way or another, most of the events. He treated them all with a broad brush."

There is no trace of the professional historian in *The Road to Yalta*, though the broad brush is fully evident. Scholars will find little new to help them in ascertaining the origins of the cold war that has dominated world affairs from Yalta onward. Mr. Fischer, *qua* historian, is certainly *not* revisionist nor even novel. Prominent among those who have written books of an historical nature he cites with seeming approval Churchill, Secretary Hull (Memoirs), Herbert Feis (also a resident of Princeton in his later years), David Dallin, Vladimir Dedijer, Djilas, Professor Kennan, Robert Sherwood, Harrison Salisbury, Henry L. Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, Alexander Worth, Dean Acheson, Lord Avon (Anthony Eden), Frances Perkins, Sumner Welles, Mikolajczyk, Eisenhower. There are additional, if lesser known, secondary sources cited by Mr. Fischer, chiefly British, Polish, Czech, Russian.

As a journalist who had ready access to many people of prominence, Fischer (like Cyrus Sulzberger) is able to record some remarks of minor historical interest that would not otherwise be available to historians. Some of the statements of this kind were made available by Mr. Fischer in earlier books of his, so that even this aspect of his role as historian is somewhat lessened here. He quotes Djilas, repeating (no date given) Dimitroff (as of 1944) quoting Stalin

(as of 1941), triple hearsay; Welles's assumptions in May, 1943, as to reasons for British policy; queries by Halifax in January, 1944, as to what the Russians were up to; and he paraphrases talks in the following days with Hull, Stettinius, Berle and "other American diplomats" as disclosing that they were "equally puzzled" (though they seem to have been less so than Halifax who "began biting the fingernails of his one hand"). He also quotes Benes in September, 1941 (Fischer had "met" him in the 1930's but this book says no more of that meeting or those meetings) and May, 1943 (both of these revelations, somewhat less than striking, are repeated from an earlier volume). John Strachey in May, 1941, at mess at an airfield near Bath, apparently said nothing worth recording, but after lunch many of Strachey's fellow officers listened in the lobby to "Lord Haw Haw" on the radio and laughed. Fischer saw General Clay three times in September, 1946 (nineteen months after Yalta, the terminal date of this book's story line) when the General on each occasion expressed the hope of achieving a unification of the four occupational zones in Germany (which occasions also had already been reported in an earlier Fischer work).

Louis Fischer had some amiable prejudices. For example, he evidently did not like William Bullitt. In retelling (with surprising restraint for a journalist) the ugly story of Bullitt's self-interested spreading of unsavory gossip about Sumner Welles, he pulls an apt and typically acrid plum from Dean Acheson, who referred to Welles's "malign enemy, William Christian Bullitt, a singularly ironic middle name."

But his hard-ridden hobby-horse (really a hobby night-mare), Soviet communism, leads him to less endearing asides. For instance, a brief (three and a half pages) and irrelevant chapter is devoted to Harry Dexter White, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury and the architect of the Bretton Woods Agreements, under which the international monetary relations of the Western world

have been conducted since the end of the war. White, a gallant and voluntary witness in Washington before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee in August, 1948, was denied a five- or ten-minute rest after each hour of grilling, privately requested because he was recovering from a severe heart attack. Three days later he died of this ailment. Fischer, with admirable journalistic precision, recites that, after his testimony, Harry White went by train to New York, where he was ordered by a doctor to go home and stay in bed. The following day he went by train to his country place in New Hampshire and on arrival called a doctor. The following day two doctors came; an electrocardiogram showed definite heart trouble. And the next day, after his physician had visited him twice, White died. At this point precision deserted Fischer. Picking up an item of three months later from the *Boston Globe* in which White's doctor is quoted as saying, "There is nothing to this suicide

talk," Fischer gratuitously comments: "The story of Harry Dexter White's suicide is not proven" (italics added).

As one who remembers with some vividness Mr. White's testimony and sudden death, which occasioned a great deal of public notice, I am led by this shoddy bit of prejudice to point out that—not having seen the stated item in the *Globe*—this is the first time I ever heard that there was any "story" of Harry White's having taken his own life. And I am less than persuaded by Fischer that there was any such story.

In summarizing the quality of *The Road to Yalta*, I cannot resist the temptation to borrow from George Dangerfield, an elegant historian who has also had some connection with Princeton. In a recent review of another book that purports to deal with history he wrote: "As history, it has almost no meaning. . . . one puts it down with an empty feeling."

Felled Oaks: Conversation with de Gaulle by André Malraux

(Holt, Rinehart and Winston; 128 pp.; \$6.95)

Peter P. Witonski

"What is one to do with one's soul if neither God nor Christ exists?" asked the precocious André Malraux in his second novel, *The Royal Way*. Like the other young intellectuals in his milieu he was not particularly concerned with the theological niceties of his conundrum. He had read his Nietzsche and had come to accept the Death of God as a *fait accompli*. Unlike many of his contemporaries he believed that he knew the solution to his own difficult question. Since God is most certainly dead, Man has only one truly meaningful alternative: he must embrace heroism. This was Malraux's answer to his own question, and it was a theme he was to elaborate on in the best of

his early writings, particularly in *Man's Fate*.

But heroism is nothing more than a young man's answer to a young man's question. Ultimately, as Malraux seems to have discovered in his waning years, it is a totally inadequate answer. Malraux's heroic friend Antoine de Saint-Exupéry had wisely declared that heroism was nothing more than the manifestation of one's youthful sense of invulnerability. Old men, like Malraux, are too vulnerable for heroism, although they can still play at being heroes, often with terrible consequences. Old heroes who succumb to such fanciful playacting become Walter Mitty-like travesties of their former