

Books

Dahlberg's New Novel

THOSE WHO PERISH, by Edward Dahlberg. The John Day Company. \$2.

READERS following the career of Edward Dahlberg know that he is a fellow-traveler who has been constantly drawing closer to the revolutionary movement, that he has been engaged in revolutionary activity from time to time. Those who have heard him as a lecturer affirm his support of the proletarian revolution know to which camp he belongs. And yet because neither his *Bottom Dogs* nor *From Flushing to Calvary* were revolutionary novels, there has been uncertainty as to Dahlberg's position as a writer. Could this novelist who as a critic stands opposed to the proletarian fiction of so talked about a writer as, for example, Jack Conroy, himself produce a novel entitled to be called revolutionary? Could Dahlberg's talents which have thus far been confined to recreating cross-sections of decay, broaden and deepen enough to penetrate to the forces actuating his characters? Between the covers of his third novel *Those Who Perish* are the answers to these questions.

It is a brief book covering little more than a year in the lives of employes and directors of the Jewish Community Center of New Republic, N. J. Of the four chief characters, three begin as members of the middle class and all four are Jewish. No immediate struggles of the working class against its exploiters; not a strike, not a clash between workers and police! Can a novel be revolutionary and fail to deal with such express material?

Regina Gordon, middle-aged educational director of the Center, has received a letter from Zurich, advising that her cousin's body "the fingers scissored, the chest a network of splinters tattooed with the Hakenkreuz sign, had been returned in a black Swastika coffin to his parents," and his father thrown into a concentration camp. Almost overnight sensational reports of the Nazi anti-Semitic terror flash before New Republic Jewry the Hitler phenomenon; and, of course, the directors of the Community Center, as self-constituted spokesmen for New Republic Jews, meet to remedy the situation. President Harry Rosenzweig (one of the directors of the New Republic Manufacturers' Trust Company), an American Russian Jew who has always been snubbed (according to the Jews' own racial hierarchy) by American German Jews, although not entirely displeased that German Jews are being taught "a lesson," nevertheless is sure that something ought to be done—and is all for the Jewish boycott. Not so Joshua Boaz, executive director of the Center, Zionist, and Regina Gordon's lover. When a ubiquitous rabbi thunders the usual "We Jews are being persecuted because we have always been the torch-bearers of culture," Joshua

Boaz thinks of all the manufacturers, insurance agents, Jewish delicatessen-store keepers, the hardware dealers and the Babbitt-like merchants "who were being oppressed because they were the torch-bearers of culture." A suave speech by an itinerant representative of the United Jewish Committee manages to sell the directors the boycott:

"We must not help Communism. In the long run the Communists will be more dangerous to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness than Hitler." Etc., etc.

Life goes on in New Republic much as before, for isn't Hitlerism still three thousand miles away? . . . But the idyl of Boaz's life is interrupted when his cousin, Eli Melamed, comes to borrow \$500. Melamed hasn't had a job drumming for expensive perfume for two years. Hearing from Boaz that "Franklin Delano Roosevelt is a cross between Woodrow Wilson and Eugene V. Debs . . . quite without Debs' guttersnipe characteristics which radicals always seem to have," Melamed confesses that Communists in general embarrass him, their street affairs being too "brassy and exhibitionistic" for his sensibilities. Convinced by his creditor that the New Deal "is already beginning to percolate," Melamed steps forth into the business world anew—and as months go on that world is just as unconcerned about him as ever. By a series of representative experiences, Dahlberg traces the declassing of this once successful member of the middle class, uncovering the diversities of his emotional experience during the gradual frustration of faith in the *status quo*. Unable to identify himself with the forces of revolution, his body a bundle of exposed nerves, Melamed finally overcomes racial self-consciousness and offers himself "to his own people," his further frustration following.

When Boaz learns of Melamed's death, he has already suffered too much to care. Regina, brooding on the Nazi persecutions to a point of near hysteria, comes to understand the problems of racial groups; she attains to an affirmation of a new society, the Socialist world. The inevitable clash with her lover sends him reeling into a physical breakdown and herself striving with the need to identify herself actively with the forces endorsed by her mind. Unlike Melamed, Regina knows where her fighting forces belong; but like him she is unable to transcend the remnants of her past experience: the sense of personal pain eventually relaxes into the inactivity of nostalgia, despite her one violent outburst against a propaganda film shown in a theatre owned by one of the culture-bearing Community Center directors!

Racked by the promise of futility all around him and giddy to possess Regina once more, Boaz goes to her, offering a future with him in Palestine. Regina:

"What will you do in the Promised Land? Be a parasitic country squire on a lemon grove, and live off the usurious interest on money loaned to the Cholutzim? Exploit the Arab workers as all good Zionists do, and leave the unemployed Jews to live off the climate as they do in California? . . . Go back to what? As if there were anything to return to except this cemetery society. . . . Away—where to? . . . Would you like to watch a procession of workers in Peiping having their tongues torn out of their mouths by Chiang Kai-shek's storm troopers? . . . You are tired and you want peace . . . but there is no peace for us. . . . We must stay and struggle against the murderers for the tomorrows of our little children."

And when Boaz charges that she wants him to be a Communist, she replies finally: "As for myself, I propose to fight this grave-digger's menace to the finish. . . . We must stay here . . . here and struggle . . . Otherwise . . . we will perish."

* But she is not equal to her decision. When the sick Boaz falls dead after their embrace, she appraises the situation. She poisons her daughter and herself.

It is clear that Dahlberg, having penetrated the problems involved in his material, has propounded the revolutionary solution. Approaching the necessity for Communism from the problem of anti-Semitism, he has presented a revolutionary treatment; and on this basis *Those Who Perish* must be included as revolutionary fiction.

Within the confines of his novel Dahlberg broadly indulges the prose which has come to be recognizable as his idiom. Based on the indivisibility of all the elements of personality—from obvious physical characteristics to subtleties of undeliberate movements—Dahlberg's method of character-portraiture follows in centrifugal pattern: the concrete action of a character is supplemented by the change in the physical personality which this new action has effected. Thus the protagonists are continually evolving. To this method Dahlberg's often brilliant imagery adds a quality of delight infrequent in literature today. One danger of Dahlberg's style lies in its overabundance of figures of speech which sometimes become a barrier to communication, and a certain limitation to the framework to which the images refer. And yet the economy of his writing is clear in that few paragraphs often suffice for etching an episode or a character.

Those Who Perish shows a deepening and a growth. No longer content to write at the expense of his characters, Dahlberg's vituperation has now become channelized in the directions consistent with his political beliefs. And to his former range must be added something that comes as a surprise: a pity and tenderness illuminating the impotent muteness of Melamed no less than the denuded sensibilities of Regina. Furthermore, unlike his second novel, *Those Who Perish* maintains a steady drive of interest.

Dahlberg has limited himself, however, to characters unable to accept the revolution in an active sense, who live and die outside its

framework. As such *Those Who Perish* cannot be representative of the main current of revolutionary fiction which logically must concern itself with people and events actively building revolution. Dahlberg's present position thus becomes clear: a progression from the pictures of decay (*From Flushing to Calvary*) to the struggle within complex middle-class individuals between impotence and a vibrant future. Dahlberg's deepened approach and his frequently brilliant craftsmanship make one somewhat regretful of the limitations of *Those Who Perish*. But more important is the fact that he has made a memorable addition to American revolutionary literature.

STANLEY BURNSHAW.

Epic of Soviet China

THE CHINESE SOVIETS, by Victor A. Yakhontoff. Coward-McCann. \$2.75.

So measured and calm and studious is the tone of this book that even the New York Times reviewer has written approvingly of it. Elsewhere in the bourgeois press it has been searched thoroughly for some comforting offsets to Yakhontoff's conclusions dismaying to bourgeois minds, that: "Undoubtedly foreign help to Nanking and to other enemies of Soviet China has prolonged the struggle. But, judging by what the Chinese Soviets have accomplished in spite of it, one may suppose that were this support withdrawn, most, if not all, of China would turn Communist, probably within a very short time."

Yakhontoff, once a Czarist general and minister of war in the Kerensky cabinet has, like Prince Mirsky, left his exile and turned to the Russian people. He has studied the Far Eastern situation at first hand and his book, *Russia and the Far East*, exposed the libels of the political theoreticians of capitalists who like to insinuate that the International line of Russia under the Soviets is a continuation of the old Czarist diplomacy.

General Yakhontoff begins his account, properly, with a description of the Taiping Rebellion, in the years between 1850-1860. It was a gigantic upheaval opening as a religious movement with a mission-Christian class of ideas receiving reinforcement from Secret Societies and the nationalist hatred in the South of the Manchu Dynasty, but receiving its real strength from goaded and rebellious masses, who were suffering most from the economic burdens and social dislocations produced in China by Western Imperialist penetration. The Taipings were halted at Shanghai by the foreign powers who collaborated with the Chinese bourgeoisie. Shanghai bankers lured the American adventurer, Ward, to organize a garrison. Under Ward Chinese troops were first armed and trained in the Western fashion. Afterwards, "Chinese Gordon" was lent by England to the Peking government as the Fascist General von Seeckt is lent to the Nanking government. Under this pressure, but still more through its own ideological weakness—its program evaporated into mysticism and degenerated in luxury—the Taiping move-

ment collapsed. Yet, in many ways, the rebellion was not ended then but has gone on to its obvious ripening and approaching fulfillment in the Chinese Soviets. Since the defeat of the Taiping more than eighty years ago there has scarcely been one year of domestic peace in China. The American style, democratic revolution of 1911, led by Sun Yat Sen but appropriated by the Mandarin, Yuan Shi Kai, to whom Sun unwisely gave up the presidency, and who attempted to found a dynasty, cracked China into pieces. The pieces came under the control of regional commanders after the overthrow and death of Yuan. Sun Yat Sen naively imagined that the capitalist powers would want to see China unified and strong, and solicited their help in money and in the services of experts. Disillusioned, he turned finally to Soviet Russia which supplied him with Marxist-Leninist technique of revolution. To Sun Yat Sen's party, the Kuomintang, the young Chinese Communist Party of China, stiffened with experienced Bolshevik *actives* from Russia, joined itself.

The revolution triumphed, to the great alarm of the Chinese bourgeoisie and the imperialists in the foreign concessions. The northward march had demonstrated the revolutionary temper of the people. In the cities the militant trade unions; in the fields the militant peasants' unions had risen in their strength! In the metropolis itself, in rich Shanghai, in the very face of the Western Concessions the workers had armed themselves, captured the arsenals and police posts and won control. To Chiang Kai Shek, military head of the Kuomintang, the hour of decision had arrived to go to the Right or to the Left. He chose the Right, turned upon his Communist comrades, and upon the revolution itself. The suppression was murderous. Western Imperialists turned aside from the stench of the most appalling butchery in contemporary history,—and breathed a sigh of relief that Chiang had entered their service and done his first job well. Communism was considered finished, until from the interior, led by its undefeatable working-class leaders, the Communist revolution spread again, arming itself from the futile expeditions sent against it, and named derisively by the Red Soldiers "our transport service." In the Kuomintang reaction Russians were deported; China was "cleansed" of Soviet influences. Yet in the report of Mao Tse Tsung, president of the Chinese Soviets, reprinted in the valuable appendix with which this valuable book closes, there is the clearest evidence of how rooted Marxist-Leninist principles have become. The Communist principles, firm yet flexible, have been applied to fit Chinese conditions among more than eighty million people in a territory larger than that of France.

Yakhontoff tells this story unemotionally, in a steady, careful structure of substantial facts which builds up that remote and hopeful reality called Soviet China solidly upon our vision. No Westerner, and few Chinese can enter Soviet China, surrounded as yet by enemies and impassable desert and mountain

range. His sources, therefore have been mainly documentary, and second hand, but he has made excellent use of this material, extracting the important and the significant. His method of dealing with aspects of the Chinese revolutionary movement and the Soviets one by one, has led some readers into a misapprehension which should be warned against. When the Agrarian movement is dealt with, some readers who have not read on, have gathered the impression that the Chinese Soviet movement is predominantly Agrarian. As Yakhontoff point out, the movement in the industrial centers survives and grows in spite of the most terrible repression; and from the working-classes in the cities the movement, as a whole, has drawn its leadership. Within the Soviet areas industrialization is being fostered with all the vigor and resources possible.

In Yakhontoff's book the Chinese Soviet Movement up to the present has had its inventory before it has had its epic. But the inventory, because of the heroic entries, reads like an epic.

ISIDOR SCHNEIDER.

A Primer for Lambs

SECURITY SPECULATION, by John T. Flynn. Harcourt, Brace and Co. \$3.

Most books written on the subject of stock trading confine themselves to the technique of buying and selling. Their general aim is to tell the reader how to make money in the stock market without doing any work. Mr. Flynn notes this fact at the beginning of his book and on the first page of the text promises his readers to confine himself to "the economic effect of speculation in securities." He disclaims any intention of discussing the social or moral aspects of stock speculation. Mr. Flynn thus limits his study to one specific field, in which he has almost as much freedom of movement as Admiral Byrd in the Antarctic. So far as the reviewer is aware, the economics of stock speculation has never been adequately analyzed. Unfortunately, Mr. Flynn has failed completely to do the job.

The book gets off lamely with a long section on speculation and gambling. Descriptions of the implements of speculation follow, with a detailed account of the various classes of securities. The chapter ends with a fourteen line statement about money. The third chapter, like most other portions of the book, contains an admirably detailed presentation of factual material, well selected and excellently arranged. The reader, however, finishes without so much as an inkling of the fundamental economic questions raised by stock speculation.

"The economic functions of speculations" is the subject of Part Two. Mr. Flynn can find only "one great argument" in support of security speculation. "Simply stated, the argument is this—that security speculation is essential to keeping in flow the needed supplies of capital funds for our corporate industry." The author divides this general argument into three parts: (1) Speculation offers the only