

"A Sort of Traitors"

The New Meaning of Treason, by Rebecca West. New York: The Viking Press, 1964. viii+374pp. \$6.95.

THERE ARE spies and traitors all about us," Whittaker Chambers remarked in the crepuscular days of the Hiss case. Mr. Walter Lippmann was appalled and the *New York Times* has yet to recover. This statement, it was charged, constituted a blanket condemnation of liberal society, with an implicit assumption held that the glorious welfarism of the Webbs was but an introduction to Communist betrayal. The blast of the liberals was denied by the anti-Communists who parsed what Mr. Chambers had said and emerged logically triumphant.

But the liberals had correctly assessed the import of that provocative assertion. It has been left to Rebecca West, a highly perceptive and brilliant practitioner of personal journalism, to amplify and document what Whittaker Chambers had almost casually noted. Treason is her subject, in a new book which is less a formal presentation than a series of *causeries* on the time's plague. She has called this book *The New Meaning of Treason*—first to mark her debt to the older, more limited *Meaning of Treason* and second to underscore her thesis.

The earlier book dealt with the picayune betrayals and *opéra bouffe* manipulations of Lord Haw-Haw and the other British traitors who were tried and condemned for openly calling on their countrymen to desert the Crown and cleave to the Rome-Berlin Axis. Some of these traitors were of little consequence, others clearly deranged, and none had any measurable effect on the outcome of the second World War. Their old-fashioned treason was a product of alienation, ambition, greed, or frustration—and none, when faced by his crimes at the Old Bailey, muttered that it was a far, far better thing that he did.

The thrust of Miss West's book and its most operative word is "new." Since the days of the October Revolution, treason has indeed found a new dimension. It has attained respectability in the eyes of the intellectual elite. Particularly in the scientific community, the word traitor is no longer clothed in a normal repugnance. Treason, we are told, is in the eye of the beholder. An elaborate defense of each new Communist espionage agent has been devised and presumably reasonable men, shutting out moun-

tains of evidence, accept it passionately. In time, the traitor has assumed more status than those who sought to root him out of our society.

This is what has fascinated Miss West. She risked—and in many instances lost—the respect of her colleagues by attempting to light up the dark corners of the Hiss case. She wrote of Soviet espionage in terms of fact. Her intuitive and penetrating reportage of the trials of Alan Nunn May and Klaus Emil Fuchs cut through to a core neglected by newspapermen who failed to understand or preferred to take up the hue-and-cry of those devious men who manipulate our culture from hidden command posts. All of this she did writing as a careful and humane observer, not as an expert on the organizational minutiae of the *apparat*.

The New Meaning of Treason goes far deeper than the acts and motivations of those arrogant men who took it upon themselves to offer up Western civilization to the Communists; the men who working furtively changed the course of history and may have written the first chapters of our doom. It is more than an indictment of the British and American security systems—with emphasis on the deliberate blindness of the British—though this aspect of her book seems to have struck reviewers like Sydney Hook most forcibly.

The major contribution of this book is its analysis of the political and social climate which made Communist espionage possible—and still does—and its attack on the assumptions of scientific minds to a godlike omniscience which sets them above morality and the laws of men. It is here that Miss West reaches the quick of liberal touchiness—as she did in England when, in print, she proclaimed that the kissing had to stop. Few have said as well what needs to be said about the liberal ethic and the susceptibility of scientists to the Communist approach.

Almost with tolerance, she demonstrates how the liberal-cum-socialist ambience gives the intellectuals the delicious feeling of fighting dangerously against the capitalist beast when, in fact, "rebellion" was "the pink of conformity" and the source of considerable material advantage. She sees them as "doubly sealed in fantasy," their relation to the world as it is remaining forever infantile.

"Communism," Rebecca West notes, "offers a haven to the infantalist, and since it is perfectly possible for a highly gifted intellectual to be an infantalist, it appeared not surprising that a prominent English scientist should be a Communist and therefore, since every Communist is bound to regard disloyalty as one of his party duties, disloyal."

It is, of course, not as simple as that. Those who

defend disloyalty—as we have seen in the case of our own atomic scientists—must themselves have little commitment to the country they live in. The alienation goes back directly to the shift in the political and economic balance which followed the industrial revolution. At that time, and since then, the intellectual has seen himself as the perpetually frustrated Pretender to power. The scientific revolution of the 1940's has projected the scientist-intellectual into an eminence hitherto unknown to him. The scientist has accepted that eminence as a mandate to accept or veto the rules of the state and the will of the body politic.

The belief in this mandate depends on an “unsound assumption that the man who possesses a special gift will possess also a universal wisdom which will enable him to impose an order on the state superior to that contrived by the consultative system known as democracy; which will enable him, in fact, to know other people's business better than they do themselves.”

This explains Fuchs, Bruno Pontecorvo, Nunn May, and the other scientists who took the law into their own hands. It negates the claims of those who argue that nuclear theory and technology were supplied to the Communists in the interest of free scientific interchange. It focuses a beam of light on the tragic murk of the Oppenheimer case.

For all the fascination of Miss West's account, and for all the wealth of detail she brings to the sordid tale, her probe of the scientific mind may, however, contradict her contention that its treason is “new.” Is it not, after all, simply a translation into modern ideology of the *trahison des clercs*?

Reviewed by RALPH DE TOLEDANO