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# FACES OF BETRAYERS

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THE NEW MEANING OF TREASON. By Rebecca West. 374 pp. New York: The Viking Press. \$6.95.

CPYRGHT By SIDNEY HOOK



Rebecca West.

**"N**EW is the significant word in the title of this revised and expanded edition of Rebecca West's now-classic study of the English wartime Fascist traitors, first published here in 1947. The "new" meaning of treason refers mainly to Communist postwar betrayals of trust whose roots go back to the prewar period. It differs from the treason of the William Joyces and the John Amerys in its more pronounced ideological character, the form its apostasy takes—espionage and conspiracy on an organized scale beyond the capacities of most Fascist groups—and by the superior types of personality, and intelligence involved.

With rare courage and independence of judgment, Miss West gives us a complex, nuanced and highly knowledgeable account of a dreadful phenomenon that inspires, in many minds, an aversion so deep as to prevent understanding. She believes that the new forms of treason in a thermonuclear age constitute a vastly greater danger to the peace and survival of the open society than previous varieties. This is not only because of their grave menace to security at a time when the sudden death of cultures is possible. To some degree, danger also lurks in the measures a free society may be goaded into accepting when, in frenzied reaction to laxness in its security system, it hunts for scapegoats and paralyzes its own defense with an impossible quest for total security.

**U**NDoubtedly there are individuals who are better informed than Rebecca West about the techniques, stratagems and organizational structure of the Soviet espionage apparatus, whose web of subversion embraces the entire world. What is distinctive about her study is its profound psychological insight, its cool analysis of the "philosophy" of ideological treason, of the rationalizations of those who extenuate it—and of the

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willful blindness of those who dismiss the whole subject as inconsequential. In reading her deft probing of the inner life of the creatures of the political underworld, one cannot help feeling that she would make a wonderful biographer of the damned. Her guided tour of the Inferno would be worth the pains of the descent. No matter how evil or vile an individual may appear to be, despite our revulsion she makes us see him through her wise and compassionate eyes as still a credible, sometimes a pitiable, fellow-human.

She takes the starch out of the self-righteousness of the virtuous who, by avoiding all political risk have escaped all political temptation. And she does this without being maudlin or sentimental, without getting trapped in the sophisms of subjective, moral relativism. She writes with a noble indignation against those who confuse heresy with conspiracy, with humor and scorn against the slackness and stupidity in whose protective shadow treason flourishes. Pervading the whole book is a buoyant and refreshing common sense so notably absent in the very clever people she writes about.

**T**O those inclined to scoff at the gravity of the problem of ideological espionage, the extraordinary public tribute recently paid to Richard Sorge in the Soviet press should be instructive. As a rule the Kremlin preserves an impenetrable silence about the triumphs of its espionage agents. But Sorge's services were so great that unwonted posthumous honors were bestowed on him. It was he who had ferreted out (through the German Embassy in Tokyo) not only the date of the Nazi invasion of Russia—disregarded by Stalin—but the news of the Japanese decision to strike at the United States and not the Soviet Union, as well as the approximate date of Pearl Harbor.

This information, accepted by the Kremlin as reliable because events had confirmed his prior dispatches, enabled Stalin to save Moscow from Hitler by transferring troops originally stationed in Siberia to withstand expected Japanese attack. (The news about the forthcoming strike against the United States was not communicated, despite the fact that

the United States had already pledged its aid to the Soviet Union to repel the Nazi invasion.)

Rebecca West restricts her story primarily to the Soviet espionage rings in Great Britain. She spells out in detail why in an age of modern scientific weapons and total war, treason has consequences unimaginable in the days of conventional warfare. She shreds into nothingness the arguments—whose echoes were also heard here—in extenuation of the guilt of Communist scientists who betrayed their trust.

First it was asserted that there were no "secrets" in science—this, despite the elaborate precautions to keep not only the secrets of the Manhattan Project from the Nazis but news of its very existence. Then it was alleged that the information transmitted was of purely scientific character having no bearing on weap-

ons; the truth was it concerned processes and inventions central to the technology of weapons. When this was established, the claim was made that the scientists had been moved to purloin atomic secrets only to enable the Soviet Union to combat Hitler. The truth was that they had transmitted most of the information after the defeat of Nazism.

It was then urged that the acts of treason were episodes inspired by a misguided idealism for a good cause—somewhat like "stealing flowers from a park to give to patients in a hospital." The truth was that most of the traitors were members of the Communist party of long standing. These were men who had remained loyal to the Kremlin during the Nazi-Soviet Pact, when Stalin was helping Hitler with supplies and propaganda. Their espionage career, as sleepers' of the ac-

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tivists, had nothing to do with the vicissitudes of the Kremlin's foreign policy. Most were "true believers" for whom Stalin could do no wrong.

Miss West recognizes the fundamental difference between the spy and the traitor. The spy is an enemy soldier behind our lines, doing a professional and dangerous piece of work—like the captured Russian spy, Col. Rudolf Abel, whom we traded to Moscow in exchange for our U-2 pilot, Francis Gary Powers. Until war is outlawed by a world authority, all nations must employ such agents for their own defense. We can even admire their courage and respect them for the totality of their sacrifice. But a traitor in a democracy is a man who has turned against his own country and culture, his friends and colleagues, in behalf of a totalitarian regime which would destroy the very freedoms from which he has benefited.

He introduces the poisons of doubt and mutual suspicion so that the distinction between honest error and calculated treason is gradually eroded and the community changed "into a desert haunted by fear." Morally, there is a double case against him. "If a state gives a citizen protection, it has claims to his allegiance." All the more so when, as in the case of Klaus Fuchs, it has given him a refuge from persecution. Even if a citizen refuses the protection of a democratic state he may have a right to rebel but not to conspire secretly. He is not absolved from the duties and the basic decencies of moral life.

What emerges from Rebecca West's study of treason in England—and she carries her story down to the Stephen Ward case—is the decline of the amateur and idealist, who still had some honor to lose, and the growing use of the professional who knows no other career. This is partly a result of the technical demands which flow from the character of modern security. It requires some training to know what and how to steal.

**A** MORE interesting difference appears between Fascist traitors and Communist traitors. The first, as a rule, were declared and open enemies of the free society. They were Quislings. Temperamentally and intellectually, most of them were incapable of acting as espionage agents burrowing silently into strategic places in order to undermine free society while professing allegiance to it. Communist espionage agents, on the other hand, were sustained more by their ideology than by their personal resentments. In virtue of their intelligence, their milieu, status and access to strategic information and personnel, they are depicted as much more dangerous than the Fascist traitors, who were an assorted collection of crackpots and eccentrics.

Of William Joyce, who was the toughest and most intelligent of the Fascist traitors, it is reported he demanded "that any social evening he spent with his friends, even the quietest, should end with the singing of the National Anthem." (He must have been kin to an American jingoist who wanted to divorce his wife because she wouldn't get up from the marriage bed to stand at attention when strains of "The Star-Spangled Banner" came through the window.) Many people who thought Joyce was vile believed he should not have been hanged. Joyce himself, however, according to Miss West, denied he was vile "but thought England was right in hanging him." One of his followers who had helped Joyce with his broadcast scripts, a pilot officer in the R.A.F., sentenced to 10 years for an action that could have been interpreted as a capital offense, burst out indignantly: "This just shows how rotten this democratic country is! The Germans would have had the honesty to shoot me!" No democratic society need have great fear of men of this kind. Unless they are given power by "respectable" elements, as in Germany, they are destroyed by their own paranoia.

**T**HE merit of Miss West's fascinating book is that she focuses attention on the general questions involved and sometimes obscured by the dramatic events she describes. One of them is: How can an open society defend itself against a secret, conspiratorial society in a time of international tension and ideological hostility? She compares the situation to a body whose healthy cells are attacked by others. When unchecked, we call it a case of cancer. I do not believe the analogy is apposite. An open society can tolerate many secret societies. It depends on the kind they are. They are dangerous only when controlled by a foreign power dedicated to the destruction of a free society. Whether secret or open, Communism has never been a domestic problem.

Nonetheless, Miss West is right in denying that our choice is between tolerating Communist conspiracy, no matter how harmful, and sacrificing our own liberties in the attempt to curb subversion. This is an absurd antithesis. Almost every case of ideological espionage which has come to light—and many obviously have not—could have been quietly prevented by intelligent security measures. Most of the discoveries of Communist espionage

in the West we owe not to the workings of our own protective agencies but to defectors from Communism whose reception is such that it is not likely to encourage others. Prevention, not punishment after the horse is stolen, is the key. And one of the important operating maxims of prevention is a principle enunciated by Roger Baldwin, former head of the American Civil Liberties Union: "A superior loyalty to a foreign government disqualifies a citizen from service to our own." It doesn't of course, disqualify him from the protection of the Bill of Rights.

What stands out in most shocking relief from Miss West's book is her indictment of the British security system. Her account of the Burgess and MacLean incidents, the story of Fuchs, Bruno Pontecorvo and Harold Philby, would be in-

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credible were it not based on the record. Great Britain must have been under the special safeguard of Providence to have survived her security system. Had Hitler's agents enjoyed the same free run of Britain's research laboratories and Foreign Office files, she might not have survived her greatest ordeal.

The irony of the situation is that with respect to Bruno Pontecorvo, a man much abler than Fuchs, who played a leading, if not crucial, role in the development of Soviet (and Chinese) nuclear weapons, the case is even worse than she states. For there is evidence that Pontecorvo's membership in the Communist party was disclosed to American security agencies, by a former member of the same Communist Paris cell to which Pontecorvo had belonged, at the time of his trip to American and Canadian nuclear research laboratories around 1943. This information was transmitted to English security forces long before Pontecorvo returned to England and then disappeared behind the Iron Curtain with the cumulative results of costly years of research. This seems to sustain her conclusion: "It is hard to avoid the suspicion that someone in security knew the truth, and the whole truth about Pontecorvo, and decided to ignore it."

Miss West's hypothesis that the Soviet espionage center deliberately set out to undermine the trust of the Americans in the entire British security system to prevent cooperation between the two countries seems implausible to me. Such an operation would be too risky. She underestimates the extent and effects of natural stupidity made more stubborn and spiteful when vanity is wounded. The English never understood politics based on a *Weltanschauung*. As incurable empiricists, they knew — bless their hearts! — that ideologies were all stuff and nonsense. If only those chaps,

Hitler, Stalin, and Mao had also known it! It took some time for the idea to penetrate that some ties were stronger than the old school tie.

Miss West points to a curious difference between trials of Communist traitors in England and America. In England they always confess; in America they almost never do, no matter how strong the evidence against them. This difference in strategy is adopted by the Communists, according to the author, because the law in England moves quickly, and they wish to conceal from the English public the startling facts about espionage activity. In the United States the law, press, and Congressional committees make it difficult to conceal information. The strategy therefore is to exploit the law's delay, to impugn verdicts of guilt, and always to charge the Justice Department, the Courts and the F.B.I. with legal frame-ups.

It is safe to predict that if multilateral disarmament continues, the nuclear test ban is extended and Communist polycentrism grows, ideological treason may lose its importance. The economic costs of supporting it and countering it must be fearfully high. Some day they may be devoted to better purposes. Until then survival requires vigilance.

The worst thing that can happen in the discussion of the problem is for it to become a political football, as it did in the McCarthy era. The preeminent concern of American liberals has rightly been with the questions of civil rights. Unfortunately, this was accompanied by a taboo against also considering problems of security. In consequence, these problems were left to the police or military or investment-broker mind, which seems constitutionally incapable of distinguishing between heretics (whose criticism is essential to the health of an open society) and conspirators playing outside the rules of the game. The cure of the abuses of a security system

is neither, a witch-hunt nor a demand to abolish it—both are expressions of hysteria—but a more intelligent system.

**T**HIS book tells part of the English story. The American story still remains to be properly told. It is to be hoped that someone with Rebecca West's literary gifts, and Helen MacInnes's expertise and eye for the problems, will work up the American source material—which is both richer and more disheartening than its English counterpart.

My chief point of disagreement with Miss West is with the harshness of her judgment on the scientific mind in politics and human affairs. Very few scientists thought that their expertness with the ways of things made them an authority about the ways of men—especially political men in the grip of a totalitarian ideology. And only a minuscule element thought that their scientific achievement absolved them from their moral obligations or made their treason less odious. The "scientific" mind in politics is *not* the laboratory mind with its ethos of openness and trust that can be as easily abused by a Communist agent as by a canny medium bringing reports from another world.

The scientific mind in politics is steeped in knowledge of ideas, personalities, interests and history. It knows the face of political evil and the limits of *Realpolitik*. It knows how to assess the promises of dictators where there are no controls on their performance. It is skeptical without being cynical, and open to evidence of change without being naive. And it is free of the arrogance of assuming that scientists know better than their own democratic fellow-citizens what their best interests are.