

# Cosmopolitanism

by **h o w a r d f a s t**

At this writing, no explanation has been forthcoming from the Soviet Union that would enable us to place the destruction of Jewish culture there in some sort of perspective. I do not mean that it can ever be written away; the dead remain dead, and the immensity of the acknowledged injustice can only be atoned for by a bitter memory that pledges itself that under socialism this can never happen again.

But even that pledge can only become meaningful when we have the full story of what happened and how it happened; and sooner or later, this story will be told. Until it is told, we can only examine the facts we have; few as they are, they bear reexamination—in particular the question of what is called "cosmopolitanism."



**YOU WILL REMEMBER**, perhaps, that some of the broadest and most vituperative attacks against critics and writers—the great majority of them Jewish—were rationalized under a theory called "cosmopolitanism." This name was given to the elaboration of the "sins" for which the writers were condemned, and the "theory of cosmopolitanism" was developed to characterize what the theorizers designated as an evil trend in working class culture.

If anyone had been able to make completely clear just what cosmopolitanism actually was, we would be able to discuss it now more fully and rationally; but even from the vantage point of a number of years, it retains a cloudy cloak of ambiguity. Insofar as I know or have been able to learn, Marx, Engels and Lenin appear to have been quite unaware of such a trend or even the possibility of such a trend. If anything, these three men put forth the concept of a movement dedicated to proletarian internationalism, a movement that specified the working class as a world phenomena—and looked forward to a time when mankind would unite in a brotherhood that transcends all national boundaries.

**CRITICS OF** cosmopolitanism, on the other hand, decried internationalism, and condemned "cosmopolitan" writers as victims of worldly and international sophistication. Such writers were charged with being negligent in their development of a national consciousness and all too ready to look away at what they thought were greener fields—and to envy trends and styles of writing popular in the great capitalist cities. They were given, their critics said, to praise of things foreign and to contempt of things native; and this tendency developed into imitative patterns of writing and thinking. In other words, they were absorbed with and imitative of things decadent and non-socialist.

While on the surface, cosmopolitanism would seem to be an application of internationalism, we were assured that internationalism could be turned into its opposite when it was practiced by people with bourgeois longings and contempt for Soviet civilization.

In all fairness, it must be said that there was a germ of truth in this approach—a germ which could be pyramided into a mountainous and dangerous structure of nonsense. In the first place, modern culture is an international development. No nation has any monopoly in culture, nor is the culture of any nation better than the culture of another. Culture is the result of the national experience; it exists at different levels, even as nations do, and it flowers or withers under particular historical circumstances. At a given moment, the pervading culture of one nation can be more admirable, richer, more vital than the culture of another nation; but this is symptomatic of historical development.

**IT IS QUITE** possible that Soviet writers turned their admiration to foreign developments in writing, and it is also quite possible that they admired things unworthy of admiration. And it may well be that the tradition of many—I think of the Jewish writers now—was more international than Russian, and that they were lamentably ignorant of native Russian developments. But is that either damaging or demanding of wild and savage criticism? The Jew is an international phenomena; he is scattered across the face of the earth; he has lived in all lands, and his relationship to each of them is historically conditioned. This is not in itself good or bad, any more than the insularity of the Shetland Islanders is in itself good or bad; it is simply a matter of historical fact, and with the Jew it may have turned his thoughts more sympathetically toward proletarian internationalism than would be the case with most other peoples.

**BUT WHEN** socialist leaders attack such a matter as one that seriously threatens either the system or the development of its native culture, one can be forgiven for wondering whether or not something ideologically important has gone askew. In the nineteen-twenties, we had a whole generation of intellectuals who out of either ignorance or contempt turned their backs on American culture and sought out the culture of other lands—particularly France. We survived this; our own culture did not perish as a result of this, and in certain fields, it was enriched.

We have a rich and living language, but it is polyglot, and cheerfully draws from all other tongues; our culture, likewise, is a hodgepodge of twenty cultures, planted in our soil and growing fresh roots here; my own children have five national origins and seem no worse for it. It is only when we reject these enriching tendencies and fall back into "Anglo-Saxon" sterility and the so-called, made-on-Madison-Avenue "American way of life" that our culture withers and suffers.

**I HAVE ONLY TOUCHED** on the question of cosmopolitanism, as my space here is limited, yet I think I have indicated how such a theory can lead to monstrous conclusions, if pursued far enough. It is not part of the broad international outlook that pervades every humanism, socialist or otherwise. It is the frightened theory of men who fear the open arena where truth may battle unimpeded with falsehood—and that is one arena we must never fear again.