

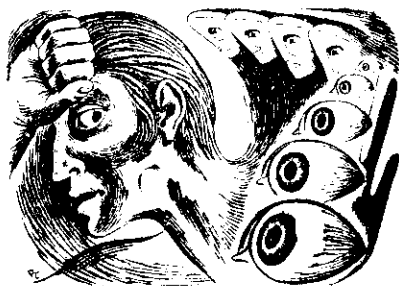
The Brain-Washers

BATTLE FOR THE MIND, by William Sargant; Heinemann, N.Z. price 25/-.

(Reviewed by Harold Bourne)

AMONG the few peculiarities of our species, its liability to guilt is most characteristic. Others—the upright posture, sexual sublimation, prolonged immaturity, vocal and symbolical communication—are distinctive but less singular. The only animal given to remorse, religion, pain-seeking, and suicide is man. Self-accusation, consequently, is as deep seated in human nature as is transgression itself and delusory confessions were misleading judges long before psychiatry ever made itself heard. By no means all the myriad admissions of witchcraft in the centuries of the Inquisition were extracted by torture or disowned before execution by those it burnt alive.

However, six generations later, when the Moscow trials were staged for an astonished world of the 1930's, the memory of the Inquisition had faded. The least likely explanation for the avowals by the Bolshevik old guard of counter-revolutionary conspiracy was that they were true; indeed, they were demonstrably fictitious. Nevertheless, it was the one accepted by the American ambassador, President Roosevelt, and Sir Winston Churchill. The most likely was that they were extorted by a Stalinist refinement of the police practices



Herzen noted a century earlier for pressing Tsar Nikolai's opponents into self-condemnation (practices from which the American and British police are not immune.) The most sensational explanation was that Russian scientists had discovered some novel technique for destroying the mind.

In the 20 years since, information has immensely accumulated to support the theory that seemed probable originally. Experimental isolation and artificial insomnia in the psychologist's laboratory will devastate the mental faculties, and, in prison, these combined with physical privations and incessant interrogation, must ultimately break down the strongest and unleash unconscious guilt of all kinds. After months or years of this, the brainwashed subject will confess to anything, though even then he may not remain "reliable" enough for a public trial, where retractions are commoner than is generally supposed. In fact, it

is clear now that through the Russian purges, for every individual brought into open court, thousands were disposed of behind the scenes, after signing confessions as a formality.

The upheaval in Communist society (and in world affairs) associated with these events is one of the more grotesque episodes in civilised history. For posterity, its artistic monuments will be an extraordinary novel, Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, and a great biography, Weissberg's *Conspiracy of Silence*. Meanwhile, in the age of the concentration camp, psychiatrists cannot overlook the scientific problems it offers in deviant human behaviour.

Dr Sargant, a London psychiatrist, advances a new interpretation of the brain-washing process. As a scientific contribution, his book is unconventional since it is based on no personal observation of the phenomena to be explained, and yet almost ignores the opinions of those on whose accounts he depends for his facts—victims of the Communist penal system and those who have examined such victims. The outcome is a theory with ingredients from those mentioned before as the most probable and the most sensational.

Dr Sargant's points of departure were his experiences with neurotic casualties of battles and air-raids, and his coincident discovery of the theories of Pavlov. By the time, a few years ago, that Soviet biologists were terrorised into obedience to the absurd genetics of Lysenko, Soviet medicine had been, with less publicity, securely placed in a Pavlovian strait jacket. Unlike most of his Western colleagues, who were remote from compulsion in the matter, Dr Sargant

also swallowed Pavlov hook, line and sinker. Since Pavlov could see no unconscious mind in his neurotic dogs, Dr Sargant, in parody of Darwinism, dispensed with it in his neurotic soldiers. Soon he found it unnecessary for understanding them to theorise about their minds at all, when the electrical patterns supposed by Pavlov to exist in the brain, seemed to make everything intelligible.

Simultaneously with finding Pavlov, he turned "accidentally" to an interest in the dramatic religious conversions of John Wesley, at once detecting both a similarity to his bomb-shocked patients and further support for Pavlov. Finally, it dawned on him that his new insights into cerebral workings would not only account for the effects of psychoanalysis and shock treatment, but also that they were available to the Soviet authorities and secret police. Brain-washing is revealed as an applied exercise in conversion by simple Pavlovism. All this is illustrated by a scissors-and-paste account of religious conversion—including St Paul with "inhibitory hysterical manifestations" on the road to Damascus, Voodoo, and other social excitements down to Rock 'n' Roll.

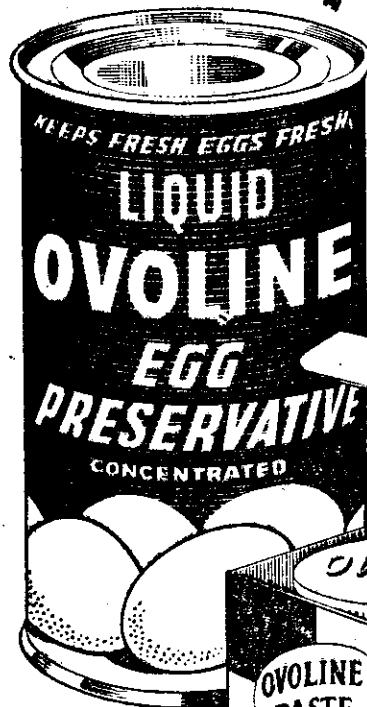
My own impression from individuals who "confessed" in Russia is of nothing so colourful. Drs Hinkle and Wolff, psychiatrists with unrivalled access to purge victims while working for the American intelligence services, are emphatic that the "confessions" are a readily understandable result of police practices elaborated from Tsarist times and dependent on no Pavlovian finesse in the N.K.V.D.

Dr Sargant is a religious man and his effort, if mechanistic, is a sincere one

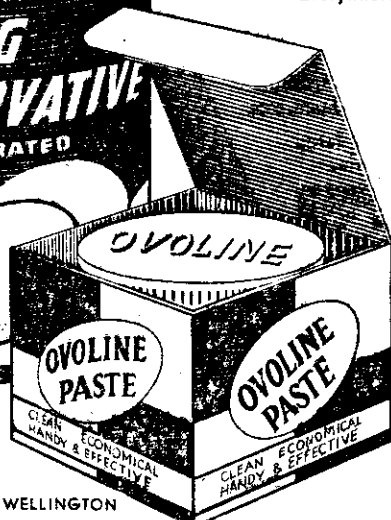
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