

Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom

Published by the Committee on Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association and Prepared by Paul Bixler, Secretary

One of the documentary films to be questioned for its accuracy this past year was "Peoples of the Soviet Union." Photographed in the late 1930's and early years of World War II in Russia, its first version has called forth some criticism. Recently the film was re-edited with a new sound track. And we can report that the new version seems accurate, objective, and is altogether a first-rate film. As one of the few films (if not the only one) photographed in Soviet Russia by a foreigner (Julien Bryan), it takes on added significance today, although it is now historical rather than current. Credit for the new version goes to the text-film division of McGraw-Hill.

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Last summer the Educational Film Association endorsed the ALA's Library Bill of Rights, and it now has a committee on freedom for films and film showings. A vigorous one-page editorial, "Censorship by Coercion" appeared in the October, 1952 Educational Screen, and in the December issue of the same magazine appeared a page of letters about it, all but one favorable to the editorial.

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NBC presented "The Librarian," a half hour television drama by John Latham over its network, Sunday afternoon, January 9. We regret that advance notice of the drama could not have been given. The drama was one of the "American Inventory" series offered under a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. We quote part of Jack Gould's review in the January 10 New York Times:

In spots the plot was pretty sticky and the production was not always fluid. But in the climactic scenes that really counted "Librarian" had a courageous eloquence and fearlessness that lifted it head and shoulders above the average run of television drama.

The story was a simple one: Amy McCain is a trained librarian who obtains a job in a small town called Newton. It is not long before she discovers, for instance, that the library has books giving only one version of American foreign policy. How, she asks, can a reader satisfy himself that the American way is best if there is no basis of comparison?

Miss McCain soon finds herself at odds with one of the town leaders who thinks of herself as the final arbiter of what the library should contain. Later, a vigorous young man who belongs to "a pretty important organization in this town" decides that it is time "we checked up on the books in our library."

The young man explains that he is merely looking for "subversive books"; he can tell whether books are "good" or "bad," but other people can't and need "protection."

Against the background of an impending visit from a committee of the organization that wants to dismiss her, Miss McCain rehearses what she will say. In essence her words are taken from the bill of rights adopted in 1948 by the American Library Association.

A kinescope of the drama (this is the TV equivalent of "movie") was shown twice at the Chicago Midwinter meeting, and it is possible that the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee may be able to obtain copies for distribution. It is not certain that showing the film "cold" to public audiences would be sound tactics. But it should have value for library staff and personnel and for showing to library trustees if discussion follows the showing. There may be some criticism that the small-town woman leader who would censor the library is not exactly typical. The librarian stands her ground on the issue of intellectual freedom but never carries her fight to the town. Library trustees are never even mentioned. And the dispute over censorship is never resolved but left up in the air. These are all points which do not seem quite the sort of thing to leave as final impressions, but which would be excellent for stimulating discussion and understanding of intellectual freedom. If copies of the kinescope can be obtained, they will probably be distributed with discussion sheets.

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Do you remember the anti-Stevenson speech by Senator Joseph McCarthy delivered October 27 over television from Chicago? The accuracy and the methods of this talk have been vigorously and minutely taken apart by the Rev. Robert C. Harnett in the November 22 and December 13 issues of America, a Jesuit weekly review published in New York. Senator McCarthy replies in typical fashion in the latter issue, but there is the promise of more comment to come from America.

McCarthy's methods are also examined and found wanting in the February Catholic World in "Senator McCarthy and a Moral Principle" by Norbert R. Ciesel and Anthony J. Wilhelm. The Catholic World published an article by Helen Williams favorable to the Wisconsin Senator in its last November issue.

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In his popular column "All of Us" in a recent issue of the Farm Journal (circulation just under 3 million), Wheeler McMillen offers a short list of "top-notch books that really explain what liberty means and does" and suggests how they may be obtained. "It's a fair bet," he says, "that your town or school library has a number of socialist, leftish, pinkish or outright Communist books, and maybe more of that kind than of books that set forth the honest American doctrines." He suggests that after his readers have bought and read the books, they be given to their local library. We've seen the list, and the conception of liberty in these books is somewhat limited.

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Have you been listening to Elmer Davis recently? (His comment comes over our east-midwest radio at 7:15 p.m.) In recent weeks no one else has been so consistent in discussing current developments in academic freedom, censorship and congressional hearings on subversion. If you like Mr. Davis's broadcasts, give him a hand; send a favorable note to the local radio station which carries his comment; the program has local sponsorship everywhere, and there are always some antagonistic critics who would like to see him off the air.

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The best article we've seen recently on public education is "Pressures on the Public Schools" by Richard B. Kennan, Secretary of the Defense Commission of the National Education Association in the Civil Liberties Bulletin for January. This is published by the National Civil Liberties Clearing House, 1637 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington 6, D. C. The article deserves far more circulation than it apparently is going to receive.

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This note comes a bit late. But if you didn't see Melvin Arnold's review of Whittaker Chambers' Witness in the September Christian Register (p.5-7) we suggest you turn to it now as the most succinct summary available of the Hiss-Chambers-liberal-communist confusion of our time. In this connection, see also Nathaniel Weyl's copyrighted statement in the January 9 issue of U. S. News and World Report. Of the dozens, perhaps hundreds, of people who have known intimately some of the major facts concerning the conspiracy in which Alger Hiss was implicated, Weyl is (aside from Chambers) almost alone in speaking up.

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In "A Book Burning That Backfired," the December Progressive (p.24-25), Max Awner tells the story of the banning of some 50 Public Affairs pamphlets by the Denver public school administration in spring, 1951, and how the "Citizens Committee for the Denver Public Schools" successfully organized a backfire.

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The latest library board to adopt the Library Bill of Rights is the Dearborn (Mich.) Library Commission.

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In Adams, Massachusetts, the American Legion Auxiliary sent a communication to the trustees of the Adams Free Public Library concerning "reports that books with Communist leanings are available at the library while those exposing the dangers of Communism are not available despite requests for them." After due consideration the following reply signed by five trustees was sent to the auxiliary and to the Adams News Sentinel where it was published on January 6:

Your letter of Dec. 10 to the trustees of the Adams Free library was presented at the board's regular meeting, Dec. 29. Five of the six trustees were present. The members of the board were agreed that your action, while motivated by sincere concern, was nonetheless ill-advised, in that it was based solely upon rumor and before any adequate investigation of facts had been made. Publicity given this letter has unfortunately left the public with the impression that the library is under Communist influence.

The board assures you and the public that such is definitely not the case.

You express concern over "reports that while plenty of pro-Communist literature is available at the Adams Free library, books exposing the spread of this ism have not been secured despite requests for them." The board feels it imperative that such a serious charge be substantiated with specific titles, authors' names, and other definite information. Vague rumor and alleged reports should not and cannot be considered sufficient basis for a charge such as that made by the Legion auxiliary. Further, it has always been a library policy to have available to the public information concerning books purchased, and to consider for purchase such titles as may be suggested by its readers. The trustees have complete confidence in the discretion and capability of the librarian whose selection of books fully conforms with national library standards and is directed toward serving local needs.

As elected public officials responsible for library policies, the members of the board wish to affirm the democratic principles which guide them in determining such policies. It is the board's earnest desire to provide the public, through its library, access to all types of information in keeping with valid standards of literary quality and objective truth. Numerous aspects of all important social and political problems must be represented if the principal objective of library book selection is to hold--namely, to help make possible well-informed citizens. The board believes this policy in book selection the only one consistent with the democratic way of life. The board does not believe, however, that the best interests of democracy are served when any group of citizens makes a serious charge such as that in question, based on mere rumor and report, and without careful and responsible examination of the facts. To do so, would be to weaken the very cause which we believe it is the earnest purpose of the Legion auxiliary to further.

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Early in January, the city of Stamford, Connecticut celebrated Freedom Week, under the slogan "Speak Up--Freedom Needs Exercise." The idea for what the New York Times called "a community-wide rededication to the Bill of Rights and responsible government" was originated by the Stamford chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women, was financed by the Stamford-Greenwich Manufacturing Council and local merchants, and was celebrated in schools, churches, civic groups, in radio and writing contests.

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On December 15 the United States Supreme Court by an 8 to 0 vote struck down the Oklahoma loyalty oath law as unconstitutional. The Court noted that the law offended "due process" and took note of the fact that membership in a subversive organization may be innocent (which the Oklahoma law did not recognize)--a fact which may help to clarify the doctrine of guilt by association. Excerpts from the Supreme Court opinions on the case appeared in the December 16 New York Times.

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We welcome the establishment of The Fund for the Republic, a new organization founded by the Ford Foundation to work for "elimination of restrictions on freedom of thought, inquiry and expression in the United States."

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The Firing Line, published by the American Legion's Americanization Commission, has criticized the ALA's list of "Notable Books, 1951." "The strange and curious factor," says this publication, "is not which books made the 'notable' list, but those which got left off." Their objection is that the list included no book about the Korean War or "Red" China, about Soviet Russia, anti-communism, or the methods Communists use to subvert American society. We have received clippings from two towns, one in Louisiana and one in the state of Washington, indicating local repercussions from The Firing Line criticism. If there are others we should welcome notes or news stories about them.

The Firing Line criticism came ten months after the List was published, six weeks before the new list was due. We've just seen the list of 53 "Notable Books of 1952." It looks pretty good.

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David J. Dallin in The New Leader disclosed last October that the Post Office Department has been refusing to deliver certain Soviet publication to certain subscribers, including anti-Communist journals, scholars and libraries. (Strangely enough, the Soviet newspapers Pravda and Isvestia were at the same time, still being delivered everywhere.)

Elmer Rice of the American Civil Liberties Union protested this government action of censorship to the Post Office. Its practical result, he noted, is to deprive American scholars of knowledge about the U. S. S. R.

In reply, according to the ACLU's Civil Liberties, the Post Office's acting solicitor Louis Doyle said that political propaganda distributed in violation of the Foreign Agents Registration Act "may be considered non-mailable." He added that the Soviet publications had not been withheld from universities of "known standing" or from "certain researchers who offer evidence as to the nature of their work."

The ACLU contends that withholding such publications from anyone, "constitutes an inherent threat to freedom of opinion."

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The note about The New Leader in the above item is not without interest. How many librarians are acquainted with this weekly magazine? For more than twenty years it has published more material on the antics of communism than any other American periodical. In that time many liberals ignored it on the grounds that it was "destructive," "too shrill," or "red-baiting." (Did somebody sell somebody a bill of goods on The New Leader?)

Furthermore, it is an unpleasant comment on the character of most of the anti-communist agitation of our time that The New Leader is rarely if ever referred to in Congressional hearings, that reactionaries and even most conservatives don't even know that the magazine exists.

Not to be misunderstood, we are not suggesting that The New Leader be swallowed whole but merely that it be read with the critical attention one would give any other magazine--say The New Republic or Life. To note only one of its several contributions--on a number of occasions The New Leader has scooped the American press (including the New York Times) on Communist events abroad.

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In her testimony before the Gathings Committee on Pornographic Materials Mrs. Margaret Culkin Banning mentioned a system of censorship in St. Cloud, Minnesota, by which many books and periodicals are barred from sale on the city's newsstands. Late in December Leo Sonderegger reported on this situation more fully in a series of news stories in the Minneapolis Star. A summary of his findings appear in the February 7 Publishers' Weekly, p. 757-58.

According to the report, a five-man board of review, made up of Protestant and Catholic clergymen and laymen, using lists put out by the National Organization for Decent Literature and operating under a local ordinance, enforce the censorship. News dealers have fully "co-operated" and the ordinance has never been defended or tested in court.

Among the books banned are some by William Faulkner, Somerset Maugham, Richard Wright, James Farrell, and Willard Motley. The pattern of censorship seems likely to be imitated in some other Minnesota communities.

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As we go to the mimeographers, the word on the possibility of state legislation on censorship is bad. In Tennessee a state legislative committee is having hearings on textbooks allegedly subversive; a focus of criticism is a book by Mary Rothrock. Censorship legislation is pending in Massachusetts, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Dakota. A censorship bill has been introduced in the Georgia legislature. In Michigan a Federal Grand Jury is currently said to be taking testimony on obscene literature.

May we have news clippings or other information on developments in these states and in any others where censorship bills are being considered?

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