REPORT ON THE RUSSIANS.....

by W. L. White

INSTALLMENT ONE

The Soviet vice-consul spoke creamy, schoolbook English. He was an agreeable young man, helping me fill out my visa application. His office was pleasant and airy, but I was uneasy. Maybe because the office of the consul, upstairs, had double doors. The kind when you open one door, you are left staring at still another closed door, about six

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inches in front of your nose. If the knob of the first door is on your right, the knob of the second is on the left. So no one could possibly look through both keyholes at once. I was uneasy because I had been with the Finnish army in the winter war of 1939-1940, which you had been in connection with a friendly visa. Of course, they knew I had been in Finland, but I wanted them to know I knew they knew it.

The consul was an urbane, stocky little diplomat. It soon became clear that he was on a fishing trip for information. Maybe in writing anyone about this, for it is the avowed business of all diplomats, including our own, to report to their home governments on the state of the nation to which they are accredited.

There was no need to withhold anything from this consul, as his questions did not concern military matters but were all in the sphere of politics.

Just before I left the consul switched the conversation from politics to literature. I wished to go to the Soviet Union as assistant to Mr. Eric Johnston, but I was also connected with the Reader's Digest? Yes, I said, I was one of its editors. I bowed myself out the octagon, good double doors and back to where Mr. Yardley was waiting with the questionnaire. It began with a large blank space for a brief autobiography, into which I inserted the fact that I had been with the Finnish army in 1939, a fact that Mr. Yardley, reading at my shoulder, seemed again not to notice.

It continued with other questions, obviously designed for White Russians, about political affiliations. I scanned some dummy of all this, and Mr. Yardley, sending reassuringly, said there was no need, in my case, for detailed answers.

But at the end was a most outlandish question: I had hastily written "no" in its blank, but then I hesitated. Had I, they wanted to know, ever been associated with the armed forces of any government in opposition to the Soviet State? I explained—this time clearly—that in 1940 I had been associated as a reporter with the armies of the Finnish Republic during its earlier war with Russia. So perhaps my answer should be yes?

Smiling broadly now, Mr. Yardley shook his head.

"The proper answer there, Mr. White, as you have already written it, is 'no.' Because in Finland in 1939, we understand that your opposition to the Soviet Union was purely verbal."

My visa came a week later.

All this had come about as the result of an impulsive letter I had written a few weeks before. Reading that Joseph Stalin had issued a special invitation to visit Russia to Eric Johnston, president of the United States Chamber of Commerce, I had sat down at my typewriter to tell Johnston I would like to go along.

Eric Johnston was to me a complete stranger, except that I had read a good deal of what he had written—and liked most of it very much. He "believed in" the country; he had been an eloquent voice preaching optimism and courage for the postwar period; saying clearly that never again must we allow American business and industry to stagnate into a depression, but must continue to produce for enormous needs and lucrative at almost maximum volume. There would be free markets for everything if there were free jobs for all, and vice versa.

He had opened his career as president of the National Chamber by calling at the White House—a presidential courtesy, as American business had not hitherto accorded the New Deal official recognition. He had even sat down across a conference table from John L. Lewis.

He has a theory, that before you denounce an opponent, you should first go over with him the points on which you agree; you will both be surprised, Johnston points out, at how many of those there are and often the fight can be fairly compromised.

In somewhat this frame of mind as we were approaching the Soviet Union; I wanted to go there for the very obvious reason that Russia is clearly the biggest and most unpredictable factor with which America must deal in the next few decades.

A week after my impulsive letter I met Eric Johnston across lunch in Washington. Eric Johnston is handsome. At forty-seven he has all of his white even teeth, all of his wavy brown hair, and a clear, ruddy skin, and blue eyes. He has a longish, sensitive face and a fine, broad profile. Together these make him unusually and conspicuously handsome. He might have made a successful career as an actor, were it not for his brain, which, considered as an organ, is unusually good. It stalls with a phenomenal memory. He never forgets anything he thinks he will ever need. He is healthily competitive; he wants something like all/one anything you have, or if possible, one just a little better. But he takes disappointments well. When I first met him he was being mentioned for the presidency; he had a small

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