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Skepticism.

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SKEPTICISM

by T/3 Klaus Mann

One winter day last year I got a hair cut, somewhere in New York City. The barber -- garrulous as barbers are -- made a remark about the chilly wheather, just * when I was absorbed in a newspaper story describing drastically the grim cold in Russia, where Russian and German soldiers were freezing to death by the hundreds. So I mumbled something to the effect that over there, in Russia, the cold was probably even more disturbing than here. The barber didn't like this, for one reason or another. He kept quiet for a while; then he observed -- shrugging his shoulders and smiling knowingly: "Why, what you read in the papers, that's all hooey... Just a lot of propaganda, you know..."

Now, there is nothing startling or incredible about the disclosure that winter weather in Moscow is not quite so mild as in Palm Beach or Hollywood. But the barber denied, or at least doubted, this natural, well-known fact -- simply because a New York afternoon paper happened to play it up. He meant to be smart, the barber.

He was very foolish. Unfortunately, he was very typical, too. I have found this kind of attitude -- this sluggish and complacent skepticism -- among many young men of my generation -- in this country and elsewhere. It's an attitude characteristic, not of the simple-minded nor of the really intelligent, but of the wise guys and would-be highbrows, those who pretend to be in the know, and have always the inside story, the news behind the news, the real dope. They think themselves mighty clever because they wouldn't take anything at its face value.

They don't believe in what the headlines say. They distrust "big words"; they debunk grandiose slogans.

Now, I don't want to be misunderstood. There is something sound and constructive about realism and sobriety. People lacking in those qualities are prone ^{to} dangerous illusions and hectic exaggerations. Evidently, the young men in Italy and Germany were not cautious and realistic -- not skeptical enough. They failed to debunk the blatant boasts and lies of their masters and demagogues. They allowed themselves to become intoxicated -- literally drunk with pompous, aggressive phrases. They fell for hollow rhetorics and theatrical gestures. Their immature, almost hysterical impressionability is one of the basic reasons for the present disaster.

But if indiscriminate credulity is bad, indiscriminate skepticism isn't good, either. To believe nothing, is almost as dangerous -- and, for that matter, almost as silly -- as to believe everything. The wave of skepticism and disillusionment which swept this country during the "Roaring Twenties", has left its traces in the minds of our generation. We are inclined to question even the obvious, out of a petty fear not to be impressed by the phony.

Young Americans beware of propaganda. That's fine -- why shouldn't they? The question is only whether they are always able to discriminate, justly and precisely, between "propaganda" and reality. Don't they ^{see} that there has been very little "propaganda", if any, in the announcements and proclamations of our Government and its various agencies? We don't ^{need} "propaganda", if this term means the distortion or exaggeration of the empiric truth; for the tangible, provable facts testify eloquently and clearly to the righteousness of our cause. It is not necessary -- indeed, it is impossible to exaggerate the fiendish

wickedness of the Nazis. Who would go out of his way to invent atrocity stories when the Nazis publicize themselves, with unblushing effrontery, their own crimes and outrages? Yet, I have seen many an American friend shrug his shoulders in view of films, posters or newspaper articles arraigning some of those enormities. "Why, of course," he would say, "the Nazis are pretty bad; but they can't be as bad as all that. All those ~~stories~~ ^{tales} we hear about the gruesome goings-on in the concentration camps and the occupied countries -- don't you think it's mostly propaganda?"

I happen to know it isn't. The Nazis are as bad as all that -- in fact, they are even worse. The most famous anti-Nazi documents -- books and plays like "The Moon Is Down", "The Watch On The Rhine", "Candle In The Wind", etc. -- have a tendency to present the Nazis as somewhat less beastly than ~~they~~ ^(most of them) actually are, simply because the awful truth would be too gross, too glaring, from an artistic point of view: nobody would believe it, it would look shockingly like propaganda.

The propaganda campaign against propaganda following the first World War has been unduly effective. I often feel it is time to launch a new crusade, not in favour of propaganda, but against skepticism. Too many ideals and facts have been "debunked", along with obsolete or hypocritical clichés. Now let's debunk this cheap and sterile skepticism.

The Russian winter is cold -- whether the skeptics believe it or not. The Nazis are evil -- no matter if our wise guys suspect most Nazi atrocities to be inventions of ~~Hitler-Gold~~ Warner Brothers and the Office of War Information. The fall of Mussolini is enormously, excitingly, inspiringly important,

although a smart fellow, right here in Camp Crowder, said to me when the great news came through, "What's the difference? He didn't have much power, anyhow. A front figure, that's all he was. It's just another piece of propaganda..."

Now, listen, brother! Mussolini had quite a bit of influence and power, in his days. Without the Duce, there would have been no Fuehrer. And with the Duce gone, the Fuehrer won't last much longer. And don't you dare to answer, "So what?" Or else, I'll debunk you.....