

Commentary

Collier's Magazine: *Preview Of The War We Do Not Want*

by John Morano

Before there was *The Day After*, *Red Dawn*, *Testament*, *Amerika*, *Dr. Strangelove*, or even *Failsafe*, there was *Preview Of The War We Do Not Want*.

Preview Of The War We Do Not Want occupied the entire issue of *Collier's* magazine on October 27, 1951. The collection of articles considered the question of what it would be like to fight a nuclear war with the Soviet Union—and win. The fictional events were set in the future, between 1952 and 1960. In anticipation of boosted sales, the magazine's press run was increased from 3.4 million issues to 3.9 million.

One of the reasons this particular issue of *Collier's* intrigues is the list of writers who contributed to it. Among them: Lowell Thomas, Edward R. Murrow, Robert E. Sherwood, Walter Winchell, Walter Reuther, Arthur Koestler, J.B. Priestley, Bill Maudlin, Red Smith.

These and other equally recognizable writers contributed "accounts" of battles and bombings, as well as accounts of the takeover and occupation of the Soviet Union, following a United Nations nuclear victory.

For instance, Edward R. Murrow wrote "A-Bomb Mission to Moscow," a report about what it was like to be seated in the bomber that struck Moscow. Lowell Thomas wrote "I Saw Them Chute into the Urals." Red Smith contributed an account of an Olympics held in Moscow subsequent to the war.

Adding to the impact of *Collier's* controversial publication was its timing: the General Assembly of the United Nations was scheduled to meet at Chaillot Palace in Paris two days after *Preview Of The War We Do Not Want* was to be released worldwide. Foremost among the topics listed for discussion at the U.N. Assembly was U.S.-Soviet relations. As the editors of *Collier's* hoped, *Preview Of The War We Do Not Want* played a role at these meetings, but not the role *Collier's* editors had intended.

On November 10, an article in London's *New Statesman and Nation* queried whether

. . . the present "climate" at the Palais de Chaillot is the most suitable for a meeting of this kind . . . There is a little too much talk about a "show-down in 1953"; and, on the U.N. bookstall, *Collier's* weekly with its story of the U.N.'s victory over the U.S.S.R. is now on sale to the delegates.

Collier's had taken the liberty of cloaking its imagined war behind the flag of the U.N. In fact, the symbol of the world organization appeared on the *Collier's* cover and on art work inside the issue. Arthur Koestler, in his piece, "Freedom—At Long Last," went so far as to create such U.N. agencies as "UNIHOPPE," "UNITOC," and "UNIPROD"—all part of *Collier's* plan for rehabilitating a free Russia.

On December 6, shortly after the U.N. sent a letter of protest to *Collier's* publisher Edward Anthony, Edward R. Murrow received a letter from the United States representative to the 1951 General Assembly of the U.N., Chester S. Williams. Williams wondered what possessed Murrow to contribute to the issue and commented on how foolishly he thought the journalist had behaved.

Williams also included a long letter from someone he identified only as "the head of an international organization of great reputation." This letter blasted Murrow and *Collier's*, and described the antagonistic climate at the U.N. following the publication of *Preview Of The War We Do Not Want*.

Williams' own letter to Murrow remarked:

To the Communists it was a gift from the Gods . . . *Collier's* has done our country, the United Nations and world peace in general a great disservice. Its effect in Europe has been to weaken confidence in American leadership, to frighten our friends rather than our enemies, thus weakening our capacity for collective action, and to obscure the real issue of preventing war by practical cooperation . . . It's stirred up a hornet's nest just when the U.S. has taken the initiative in a proposal for disarmament.

The letter further remarked that a majority of people believed the issue was "officially inspired." Murrow and associates were castigated for "writing history before it happened on the eve of a major U.N. meeting" and for "blatant warmongering."

Murrow replied to Williams in a letter on December 19. He wrote the U.N. delegate, "I offer no excuses but expect that it was a case where a number of reasonably responsible people were 'sold' individually on what turned out to be an irresponsible project."

On December 23, *The New York Times* featured a story about the U.N.'s protest over *Collier's* unauthorized use of their emblem. A letter sent several weeks earlier to the magazine's publisher on behalf of the U.N., cited violations of its 1946 resolution against the use of the U.N. emblem without authorization. The U.N. received no response to its charge from anyone at *Collier's*, but *The New York Times* did.

Collier's publisher told the *Times*:

Use of the United Nations emblem in the October 27 issue of *Collier's* was no innovation. *Collier's* has always been a stout supporter of the United Nations. It has run the United Nations emblem many times in the past . . . No permission was sought nor was any protest received.

The Soviets complained loudly about the *Collier's* special issue at home and to their satellites, as well as to the U.N. General Assembly—and to anyone else within hearing. The European and

American press, however, gave little space to communist complaints.

A Soviet delegate to the U.N. General Assembly, Andrei Vyshinsky, made a point to carry the *Collier's* special issue with him into the U.N. Assembly meetings. *The New York Times* reported further that during debates at the Paris talks, Soviet bloc delegates regularly cited *Collier's* as evidence that the United States was planning to attack their country. The delegates also claimed that Washington itself was behind the publication of *Collier's* stories.

The New York Times reported that the Yugoslavian delegation to the General Assembly in Paris had charged the Soviet Union and its satellites with committing hostile activities against their country. The *Times* remarked that Manfred Lachs, the Polish representative, defended the Soviet actions by citing *Collier's* special issue. Lachs claimed that because *Collier's* began their imagined war with a reported attempted assassination of Premier Marshal Tito, that the editors of the magazine—hence the U.S. government—and the Yugoslavians were connected in plotting against the Soviet Union.

The December 1951 issue of *The New World Review*, a communist-influenced American publication, stated that, “. . . the atomic war against the Soviet Union [was] dreamed up in the diseased brains of the editors of *Collier's* with the help, they boast, of ‘high-level Washington officials.’ ”

The Soviets continued to cite *Collier's*. On March 6, 1952, *The New York Times* reported that Vasily Zonov, a Soviet member of a United Nations group of news experts, urged the U.N. to set standards for the press that would, “direct journalists to combat war propaganda, expose fascism and promote friendly relations among nations.” Zonov attacked the *Collier's* special issue and used the October 27 publication as an example of what the proposed standards would contest.

As late as August 1952, the *Collier's* special issue was still being presented by the Soviets as a source of Soviet persecution, and, for the first time, as justification for belligerent Soviet attitudes.

A short time later, *Pravda* criticized United States Ambassador George F. Kennan for not attending Soviet Aviation Day. Kennan

had declined the invitation because the official Soviet poster commemorating the holiday depicted Soviet fighter planes driving off U.S. aircraft over Soviet frontiers. For its part, *Pravda* reported that the poster portrayed events that actually occurred, and thus, depicted fact. And, of course, *Pravda* compared the Soviet poster to *Collier's* October 27 issue.

The two most common charges leveled against *Collier's* were collusion and deception. Europeans and Americans alike claimed that *Collier's* produced *Preview Of The War We Do Not Want* with the approval and guidance of the United States government. *Collier's* was also charged with masking its intentions by not allowing contributors to view one another's work.

Collier's itself may have fueled the collusion controversy by printing in its special issue that

Our over-all conception of this issue was confirmed in study and consultation with top political, military and economic thinkers—including high-level Washington officials and foreign-affairs experts, both here and abroad.

Four-time Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Robert E. Sherwood did not help matters when he revealed that his contribution had been approved personally by the Defense Department's public information chief. Sherwood further confused matters by later writing in *The Nation*:

I must point out that I wrote my article, which was a fictional description of a hypothetical Third World War, without consultation either directly or indirectly with any "high-level Washington officials"—or, I may add, with any low-level Washington officials.

Sherwood also stressed that editors never urged him to take any particular line in his article. *Collier's* answered charges of collusion with an editorial on February 9, 1952. The magazine asked, "Can it be that some U.N. officials have fallen for the

Communist propaganda line that *Collier's* October 27th issue was a semiofficial example of Washington's 'warmongering' policy?"

The editorial continued:

Perhaps it is necessary to say once again that the United States, officially, had nothing to do with the issue in question. Our government did not endorse it in advance, although since its publication the State Department has asked and received permission to translate the issue's editorial for reprinting in publications throughout the world. And the government did not, as a left-wing domestic magazine incorrectly stated, ask that the issue be suppressed. It was the product of private journalistic enterprise.

The primary characteristic that doomed *Preview Of The War We Do Not Want* was probably its lack of consistency of intentions. The contributors, editors, artists, and the publisher had dissimilar aspirations for the project and dissimilar visions of their role in the process. Within its covers, *Collier's* listed its three reasons for the special issue:

(1) to warn the evil masters of the Russian people that their vast conspiracy to enslave humanity is the dark, downhill road to World War III; (2) to sound a powerful call for reason and understanding between the peoples of the West and the East—before it's too late; (3) to demonstrate that if *The War We Do Not Want* is forced upon us, we will win.

These three intentions, however, did not always mirror the varied aims of the issue's contributors.

In the December 8 issue of *The Nation*, Walter Reuther said he'd felt that the *Collier's* special issue was dedicated to world peace. Reuther believed that the project would communicate an "emphasis on the point that war is not inevitable" and present a "firm opposition to a preventative war." Reuther blamed the public's misunderstanding of *Collier's* intentions on "the

terrifying and horrible scenes depicted in the art work accompanying the articles.”

Robert E. Sherwood stated that he had wanted readers to realize that an atomic catastrophe was possible and hoped his article might impel them to take measures against it. In *The Nation*, Sherwood wrote, “When there is a widespread drift toward war, it seems to me advisable to call attention to it and its dreadful implications.”

Senator Margaret Chase Smith wrote her piece, she said, to discourage Russia from starting a Third World War. Novelist J.B. Priestly hoped to promote international understanding. Lowell Thomas believed the function of the *Collier's* project to be a warning against a Third World War.

Collier's publisher, Edward Anthony, wrote in his autobiography, “The issue would be a preview of The War We Do Not Want and would tell why Russia would be defeated if she precipitated World War III.”

Some of the *Collier's* writers meant to help to prevent nuclear war. Others meant to help to prepare for such war. Still others meant to promote understanding, or to change the Russian way of life, or to free the Russian people, or merely to imagine what a Third World War might be like.

The finished product, alas, was diffuse and confused. *Collier's* featured everything from imagined atomic destruction to an imagined post-war fashion show by Hattie Carnegie. The publication was long on spectacle and short on unity. With a theme as sensitive as World War III, in an era as eruptive as the Cold War, it was dangerously careless for a magazine such as *Collier's* to be unclear in its motives. What resulted was the *Collier's* calamity of October 27, 1951. □