We could recommend *Prague Spring* for reading mainly as an informative book with plenty of what in Australia are unknown facts, details, data and figures. The readers certainly will appreciate the short chronology of Czechoslovak events given at the end of this useful book.

**Ales Benda**

(Mr. Benda, a journalist on the Czech paper "Youth Front" visited Australia as a guest of the Young Socialist League in May this year.—Ed.)

**ON ESCALATION: METAPHORS AND SCENARIOS,** by Herman Kahn. Penguin, 300 pp., $1.65.

HERMAN KAHN, a mathematician rumoured to have an IQ of over 200, once referred to himself as an "amateur strategist". But since the conditional acceptance of his style of strategy by the US administration he has moved into the lucrative and powerfield of prediction and pontificating — his Hudson Institute team is now "investigating" the twenty-first century. However, in greater measure even than similar general theories of the Buckminster Fuller/ Marshall McLuhan type, Kahn trades in errors of fact and in generalisation so loose it can be shown to be untrue (see. the discussion of his first two books in *Dissent, X, i, 1963*).

*On Escalation* is a work so crowded with characteristic Kahn shortsightedness and general lack of political awareness it becomes difficult to know where to begin discussing them. As in his earlier works these faults stem primarily from the type of anti-sentimental stand he adopts, for by facing the fact that we must think of what would be involved in nuclear war he forgets individuals or societies completely and assumes, in their stead, a potential public tolerance of widespread disaster. Thus

"Today our strategic forces are so hardened and dispersed that many analysts believe the US could give the Soviets days to try to destroy these forces and they would not be able to do so. Therefore, there need be no rush for the President to retaliate. He could wait until the attack was finished and then decide on the nature of the retaliation. For example, he could communicate with the Soviets to find out if the attack was accidental or deliberate before striking back. (p. 65)."

As though to underline the naivete of expecting the necessary tolerance of such a situation, Kahn, at other points in the same book, lists both Pearl Harbor and the sinking of the *Lusitania* as "intense" (i.e. likely to start a war) "crises".

But it seems Kahn's style to be so rash. For instance four pages previously he is similarly naive before the US Government "Line" on the Tonkin Gulf Incident. After quoting a single article from *The Washington Post* of 10/7/64, headed "US Reprisal Raids on North Vietnam Kept as Last Resort," Kahn writes:

"Since the above was obviously 'leaked', it was likely to be understood by Hanoi and Peking as semiofficial, if not official. It would be difficult to give a more detailed, specific and expository threat and account of the theory. However, the extent to which such stories may have influenced the behaviour of Hanoi and Peking is an open issue. It clearly did not prevent the later attack on US destroyers in Tonkin Bay."

To have leaped from any one report to this conclusion would have been absurd, even had the report been dated as late as July 31. In fact the 23 days between the report and the Tonkin Gulf Incident included separate appeals for a reconvened Geneva Conference from the Soviet Union, U
Thant and De Gaulle as well as NLF interest. But on 26/7/64 Saigon denounced such proposals (only a day after Johnson had stated “We do not believe in conferences called to ratify terror, so our policy is unchanged”); on 29/7/65 General Khanh of South Vietnam called for a “march to the North” and the same period included at least two North Vietnamese reports of US interference in the Tonkin Gulf area. On the strength of completely ignored contemporary actions and statements Kahn’s belief in The Washington Post as some form of lay hotline must be discounted even should the reader accept the attack as unprovoked or the alliance between Hanoi and Peking both obvious and strong. (In his discussion of the “Phony War” of September ’39 — May ’40 Kahn again uses only one source: an article by Quester that ignores many important economic considerations.)

But this is the characteristic style of Herman Kahn. He has prepared a “ladder of escalation,” labelled the “rungs,” and then speculated with respect to either largely unsubstantiated claims about the past or to “metaphors and scenarios” which, since they are of his own making, he can hardly be congratulated on studying in depth. To make a book from his theories he must then push the world and its leaders into the frames of his making, discounting at every “rung” the possibility that his scenario may not be plausible in its entirety. (Accidental war leading to the formation of a world government is “not . . . wildly implausible” to Kahn though he doesn’t say why not; nor does he say why Pearl Harbor and the act of violating Belgian neutrality in 1914 were similar in their “savage” break of “the conventions of war.”)

In fact so much of Kahn’s book is unacceptable one cannot really get to terms with his general conclusion — that any nuclear war will be intentional rather than accidental and that he has the key to the forms any ordered escalation may take. His previous work was called Thinking about the Unthinkable (and included the confession he would not like to defend America’s justifiable loss in World War III being 60,000,000, his figure, “in the give and take of public debate”) but Kahn is not even a skilful thinker. His theory is all from the top of his head, because we haven’t had a holocaust yet, yet lack of such experience surely doesn’t necessitate ignoring precedent to such a degree that previous wars and crises are instructive only to the extent that they show us how different, and how much more orderly nuclear war will be: use of nuclear weapons, for instance, is seen as a quantitative not qualitative alteration to the nature of a conventional war or “agreed battle” — one can only assume, in this case, that a pushbutton war will simply not move the public as other wars might and that they shall accept all that their leaders do and say. In fact the simultaneous publication in Penguin of a savagely abridged Clausewitz On War demonstrates, and clearly, how strategy has not been forced away from precedent by the development of nuclear weapons. And one has only to look at the article Talenski, the Russian theorist, has written on “The Character of Modern War” (International Affairs, Moscow, 1960) to see just how unnecessary and callous Kahn’s hard truths really are.

As to the edition: the implications that the revisions to the 1965 text, the consequence of a trip to Vietnam, make the revised edition more up to date are quite misleading and the indexing is, if not arbitrary, irritatingly selective.

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