

Intellectuals & Just Causes

THE RECENT WAR in the Middle East between Arabs and Israelis has raised, as did the Viet Nam war, the recurrent issue of intellectuals "taking a stand." New appeals for support and solidarity were circulated among writers, scholars, and artists. Letters to editors were published which clarified one's own, or condemned someone else's, political (or "emotional") position. Where was justice (or is this a foolish and irrelevant question in world politics)? What humane or cultural values were at issue? How was world order, or the cause of peace or liberty, involved? What should an intellectual think, say, and do?

In a recent comment on an inquiry comparing the views of the Western intelligentsia between 1937 (Spain) and 1967 (Viet Nam), W. H. Auden remarked:

"Why writers should be canvassed for their opinion on controversial political issues I cannot imagine. Their views have no more authority than those of any reasonably well-educated citizen. Indeed, when read in bulk, the statements made by writers, including the greatest, would seem to indicate that literary talent and political common sense are rarely found together..."

Yet from Erasmus to Zola, and from Milton's "good old cause" to the "moral crusades" or "dirty little wars" of modern times, writers of all tendencies and temperaments have confronted (or, often, been forced to confront) the question of where they stood: and could they do otherwise?

We publish in the following pages—as we did earlier, in the "Going Into Europe" symposium [December 1962—March 1963]—a series of replies by a cross-section of intellectuals to the questions raised by these preliminary general remarks. (Biographical notes on the contributors will be found on p. 96.) How, if at all, has the Israeli-Arab conflict affected your attitude towards war, to great-power commitments, to supporting or opposing just or unjust causes? How have intellectuals—and how should they have—reacted?

A Symposium

John Osborne:

THE LAST TIME I involved myself in any political demonstration was in 1961, when, with a great many other writers or hang-around writers, I "sat down" in Trafalgar Square. I fully expected to go to gaol but mercifully didn't, although I was looking forward at the time to a legitimate reason for not being able to write. In fact, I was lovingly carried off into a van by eight—I think—kindly constables who called me "sir." (All those I saw manhandled asked for what they got. And they wanted it.) Apart from being reviled and libelled by the *Sunday Express*, I was fined forty shillings and went home for a good soak in the bath with a severe headache. I don't regret having done

this. At the time it had a kind of national poetic logic that certain of us should make this particular gesture. My sense of timing rarely lets me down and I know I was right at the time. However, I resolved then that I should never engage in this kind of concerted affair again unless some unforeseeable situation should arise. It revealed itself to my simple spirit that there is a certain kind of militant animal which seeks out and exploits political crises for reasons of personal aggrandisement and creative frustration. There is an odour of psychopathic self-righteousness about many of the hardy annual protesters which I find ludicrous and distasteful. I have long ago refused to sign those glib and predictable letters to the *Times*, including the one during the recent Israeli crisis when so many of

these cause-happy activists leapt to the telephone and their pens.

The same principle applies to the Viet Nam War, the very name of which has become a synonym for left-wing sanctimony. I have not been able to come to a clear resolution over this or many other political dilemmas. I do know that I see little to choose between Communist police terrorism and shoddy American power politics. Except that I find the latter minimally less repugnant. We really do live in a very wicked world. I believe that writers should express their position about this as well as they can and in the country in which they have elected to live. Writers are often more thoughtful than the rest of the community and occasionally more literate. However, they should speak modestly as gifted or admired individuals and not as part of a privileged pressure group with access to revealed truths. The presumption and sentimentality of many of my fellow craftsmen is frequently appalling. May God gag all actresses forever. Unless they are divine and the ones who are just shut up. Consequently I sign letters no longer, friends who were never friends call me blimp. To hell with them. It is harder than they will ever know. I certainly don't give money. Not to subsidise ungifted people who organise these junkets. Better even to spend it on a subscription to *ENCOUNTER*. No, not for all those school teachers and pedants and readers of the *Guardian* and the *Observer*. Perhaps to *Horse and Hound* and a girl to read it with.

Herbert Read:

FOR A PACIFIST who rejects all forms of violence, certain logical consequences follow in relation to a particular case of violence such as the Israeli-Arab conflict. The Israelis' surprise attack must be condemned. Equally the Arab threat to use violence against Israel that preceded this attack must be condemned. But the pacifist will reserve his strongest condemnation for those nations, including France, Russia and Great Britain, who have armed and abetted both hostile groups.

The pacifist is dismissed as an idealist, but he can always retort that his policy of non-violence has never been tried out (except by Gandhi in India, where it was successful, but admittedly in a situation that is not comparable). How often must it be shown that the alternative policy of aggression solves nothing? After fifty years of war the world is more divided than ever, feelings of aggression are stronger than ever, the future darker than ever.

The pacifist claims that his policy is sane and

realistic, but it is neither sane nor realistic to ask the pacifist to resolve a situation that would never have arisen if his policy had been followed in the past. In my opinion it was an act of political folly to create "a national home for the Jewish people" in the midst of the Arab world, but the Balfour declaration did at least contemplate that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine." At the time of the Balfour declaration there were about 535,000 Moslems and about 85,000 Jews in Palestine. There are now more than two million Jews and less than 500,000 Moslems. Such a reversal of population and all it implies of relative power and privilege is eloquent enough; the national "home" has become a national "state" and the Arab (in his own opinion) a dispossessed minority.

If we are to speak of "just causes," then the Arabs who have been in effective possession of Palestine for many centuries have justice on their side. A people that settles in a particular region is assimilated within a generation or two. If we are to go back for a thousand years or more to establish "rights," then the Gaelic people of Ireland and Wales have a right to reclaim those parts of the British Isles from which they were driven by the Romans and Anglo-Saxons. The creation of a modern Jewish state in Israel was an attempt to reverse not merely history, but also all those evolutionary processes that determine the social structure of human communities.

What alternative solution was there (or is there) for the Jewish problem? If a desert territory could have been found in some part of the world (or created by the voluntary transfer of populations) that might have been a viable solution, but it would not have satisfied Zionist idealism. The consuming desire of the Jews has always been to reverse the Dispersion, to return to the Promised Land, and I think anyone with imagination must sympathise with such a romantic ideal. But unfortunately romanticism in the sphere of politics becomes nationalism (not racialism, for the Jews do not claim to be a "race" in the sense that the Nazis claimed to be Aryans, or even in the sense of Negro "racialism"). Nationalism has been the curse of the modern world, as many political writers have demonstrated. Nationalism is now stronger than any other political sentiment—stronger than socialism or communism, stronger than any world religion, a form of mass hysteria which must have deep foundations in the collective unconscious (induced, as Marx was the first to point out, by the economic and psychological process which he called alienation).

To get rid of such a deep-seated paranoia is a