

Pacifism and the War, George Orwell

About a year ago I and a number of others were engaged in broadcasting literary programmes to India, and among other things we broadcast a good deal of verse by contemporary and near-contemporary English writers – for example, Eliot, Herbert Read, Auden, Spender, Dylan Thomas, Henry Treece, Alex Comfort, Robert Bridges, Edmund Blunden, D. H. Lawrence. Whenever it was possible we had poems broadcast by the people who wrote them. Just why these particular programmes (a small and remote out-flanking movement in the radio war) were instituted there is no need to explain here, but I should add that the fact that we were broadcasting to an Indian audience dictated our technique to some extent. The essential point was that our literary broadcasts were aimed at the Indian university students, a small and hostile audience, unapproachable by anything that could be described as British propaganda. It was known in advance that we could not hope for more than a few thousand listeners at the most, and this gave us an excuse to be more 'highbrow' than is generally possible on the air.

Since I don't suppose you want to fill an entire number of P.R. (Partisan Review) with squalid controversies imported from across the Atlantic, I will lump together the various letters you have sent on to me (from Messrs Savage, Woodcock and Comfort), as the central issue in all of them is the same. But I must afterwards deal separately with some points of fact raised in various of the letters.

Pacifism. Pacifism is objectively pro-Fascist. This is elementary common sense. If you hamper the war effort of one side you automatically help that of the other. Nor is there any real way of remaining outside such a war as the present one. In practice, 'he that is not with me is against me'. The idea that you can somehow remain aloof from and superior to the struggle, while living on food which British sailors have to risk their lives to bring you, is a bourgeois illusion bred of money and security. Mr Savage remarks that 'according to this type of reasoning, a German or Japanese pacifist would be "objectively pro-British".'

But of course he would be! That is why pacifist activities are not permitted in those countries (in both of them the penalty is, or can be, beheading) while both the Germans and the Japanese do all they can to encourage the spread of pacifism in British and American territories. The Germans even run a spurious 'freedom' station which serves out pacifist propaganda indistinguishable from that of the P.P.U. They would stimulate pacifism in Russia as well if they could, but in that case they have tougher babies to deal with. In so far as it takes effect at all, pacifist propaganda can only be effective against those countries where a certain amount of freedom of speech is still permitted; in other words it is helpful to totalitarianism.

I am not interested in pacifism as a 'moral phenomenon'. If Mr Savage and others imagine that one can somehow 'overcome' the German army by lying on one's back, let them go on imagining it, but let them also wonder occasionally whether this is not an illusion due to security, too much money and a simple ignorance of the way in which things actually happen. As an ex-Indian civil servant, it always makes me shout with laughter to hear, for instance, Gandhi named as an example of the success of non-violence. As long as twenty years ago it was cynically admitted in Anglo-Indian circles that Gandhi was very useful to the British government. So he will be to the Japanese if they get there. Despotism can stand 'moral force' till the cows come home; what they fear is physical force.

But though not much interested in the 'theory' of pacifism, I am interested in the psychological processes by which pacifists who have started out with an alleged horror of violence end up with a marked tendency to be fascinated by the success and power of Nazism. Even pacifists who wouldn't own to any such fascination are beginning to claim that a Nazi victory is desirable in itself. In the letter you sent on to me, Mr Comfort considers that an artist in occupied territory ought to 'protest against such evils as he sees', but considers that this is best done by 'temporarily accepting the status quo' (like Déat or Bergery, for instance?). a few weeks back he was hoping for a Nazi victory because of the stimulating effect it would have upon the arts:

As far as I can see, no therapy short of complete military defeat has any chance of re-establishing the common stability of literature and of the man in the street. One can imagine the greater the adversity the greater the sudden realization of a stream of imaginative work, and the greater the sudden katharsis of poetry, from the isolated interpretation of war as calamity to the realization of the imaginative and actual tragedy of Man. When we have access again to the literature of the war years in France, Poland and Czechoslovakia, I am confident that that is what we shall find. (From a letter to Horizon.)

I pass over the money-sheltered ignorance capable of believing that literary life is still going on in, for instance, Poland, and remark merely that statements like this justify me in saying that our English pacifists are tending towards active pro-Fascism. But I don't particularly object to that. What I object to is the intellectual cowardice of people who are objectively and to some extent emotionally pro-Fascist, but who don't care to say so and take refuge behind the formula 'I am just as anti-fascist as anyone, but-'. The result of this is that so-called peace propaganda is just as dishonest and intellectually disgusting as war propaganda. Like war propaganda, it concentrates on putting forward a 'case', obscuring the opponent's point of view and avoiding awkward questions. The line normally followed is 'Those who fight against Fascism go Fascist themselves.' In order to evade the quite obvious objections that can be raised to this, the following propaganda-tricks are used:

The Fascizing processes occurring in Britain as a result of war are systematically exaggerated.

The actual record of Fascism, especially its pre-war history, is ignored or pooh-poohed as 'propaganda'. Discussion of what the world would actually be like if the Axis dominated it is evaded.

Those who want to struggle against Fascism are accused of being wholehearted defenders of capitalist 'democracy'. The fact that the rich everywhere tend to be pro-Fascist and the working class are nearly always anti-Fascist is hushed up.

It is tacitly pretended that the war is only between Britain and Germany. Mention of Russia and China, and their fate if Fascism is permitted to win, is avoided. (You won't find one word about Russia or China in the three letters you sent to me.)

Now as to one or two points of fact which I must deal with if your correspondents' letters are to be printed in full.

My past and present. Mr Woodcock tries to discredit me by saying that (a) I once served in the Indian Imperial Police, (b) I have written article for the Adelphi and was mixed up with the Trotskyists in Spain, and (c) that I am at the B.B.C. 'conducting British propaganda to fox the Indian

masses'. With regard to (a), it is quite true that I served five years in the Indian Police. It is also true that I gave up that job, partly because it didn't suit me but mainly because I would not any longer be a servant of imperialism. I am against imperialism because I know something about it from the inside. The whole history of this is to be found in my writings, including a novel (Burmese Days) which I think I can claim was a kind of prophecy of what happened this year in Burma. (b) Of course I have written for the Adelphi. Why not? I once wrote an article for a vegetarian paper.

Does that make me a vegetarian? I was associated with the Trotskyists in Spain. It was chance that I was serving in the P.O.U.M. militia and not another, and I largely disagreed with the P.O.U. M. 'line' and told its leaders so freely, but when they were afterwards accused of pro-Fascist activities I defended them as best it could. How does this contradict my present anti-Hitler attitude? It is news to me that Trotskyists are either pacifists or pro-Fascists. (c) Does Mr Woodcock really know what kind of stuff I put out in the Indian broadcasts? He does not - though I would be quite glad to tell him about it. He is careful not to mention what other people are associated with these Indian broadcasts. One for instance is Herbert Read, whom he mentions with approval. Others are T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster, Reginald Reynolds, Stephen Spender, J. B. S. Haldane, Tom Wintringham. Most of our broadcasters are Indian left-wing intellectual, from Liberals to Trotskyists, some of them bitterly anti-British. They don't do it to 'fox the Indian masses' but because they know what a Fascist victory would mean to the chances of India's independence. Why not try to find out what I am doing before accusing my good faith?

'Mr Orwell is intellectual-hunting again' (Mr Comfort). I have never attacked 'the intellectuals' or 'the intelligentsia' en bloc. I have used a lot of ink and done myself a lot of harm by attacking the successive literary cliques which have infested this country, not because they were intellectuals but precisely because they were not what I mean by true intellectuals. The life of a clique is about five years and I have been writing long enough to see three of them come and two go - the Catholic gang, the Stalinist gang, and the present pacifist or, as they are sometimes nicknamed, Fascifist gang. My case against all of them is that they write mentally dishonest propoganda and degrade literary criticism to mutual arse-licking.

But even with these various schools I would differentiate between individuals. I would never think of coupling Christopher Dawson with Arnold Lunn, or Malraux with Palme Dutt, or Max Plowman with the Duke of Bedford. And even the work of one individual can exist at very different levels. For instance Mr Comfort himself wrote one poem I value greatly ('The Atoll in the Mind'), and I wish he would write more of them instead of lifeless propoganda tracts dressed up as novels. But his letter he has chosen to send you is a different matter. Instead of answering what I have said he tries to prejudice an audience to whom I am little known by a misrepresentation of my general line and sneers about my 'status' in England. (A writer isn't judged by his 'status', he is judged by his work.) That is on a par with 'peace' propoganda which has to avoid mention of Hitler's invasion of Russian, and it is not what I mean by intellectual honesty. It is just because I do take the function of the intelligentsia seriously that I don't like the sneers, libels, parrot phrased and financially profitable back-scratching which flourish in our English literary world, and perhaps in yours also.

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