

SHOULD WE ABOLISH THE DEATH SENTENCE?

UNTIL the 1930's or thereabouts the case against capital punishment was making great progress. In many European countries the death penalty had been abolished; the Soviet Union had followed its revolution in 1917 by ending executions not only in civil life, but in the army; and in Britain a commission had recommended a limitation of the death penalty which was generally recognized as a first step towards abolition.

But to-day we must recognize that the cause for the abolition of capital punishment has suffered a setback. In the Soviet Union the death penalty has been reintroduced; in many other countries it is being imposed on an extended scale. Why is this?

I think the answer is to be found in the increased use of the death penalty in political cases. Twenty years ago it was rare for a political offender to be executed. Far more were condemned for civil crimes than for political crimes. But now the proportions have been reversed. *During the last five years a hundred prisoners have been executed for "treason" for*

every prisoner executed for murder.

The new tendency was begun in Germany, where after the Fascist victory, a large number of Socialists and Communists were done to death; but now capital punishment for political offences is probably employed in the Soviet Union more extensively than in any other country.

During recent months the wide use of the death penalty for political offences has extended to Palestine. Technically the offences have been crimes of violence or the possession of firearms; but the motive and cause were political. During the civil war in Spain the death penalty has been employed not only for military offences, but for political purposes in the sectional struggles behind the lines. These are only a few instances of many which could be given.

Yet, despite these circumstances, the case for the abolition of the death penalty remains, and mankind will again turn to it as a civilization progresses.

Capital punishment can only be justified on two grounds.

The first is the principle of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. This principle, applied to cases of murder, is nakedly the principle of revenge, above which all that is best in humanity has long ago risen. The second is the ground of war—the destruction of an enemy who is dangerous. This is the principle on which political executions are justified; but every one who is seeking a solution of our political problems on the basis of freedom and true democracy (that is, the political expression of social and economic equality) must regard the recent extension of capital punishment in the political field with abhorrence.

Let us look at these two cases—hanging for murder and execution for political offences—separately. Within the space of this article we must do so briefly, so I put the points concisely.

1. The death penalty is defended as a matter of justice. The offender has taken a life; he must forfeit his life. But before the justice of any punishment can be determined, all the considerations which made for the committal of the crime must be weighed, and when we begin that examination we shall find that the causes of homicide are as much social as individual. The majority of murderers, to quote the Editor of the official

Judicial Statistics for Britain, “belong to the poorer classes.” Overcrowding, the squalor of poverty and the bitterness which it causes, the lack of education, the denial of a healthy worthwhile life—these are the factors which go to the making of crimes of violence. *When crime increases, a community should not turn revengefully against the criminals, but should ask itself what is wrong with its own social basis.*

2. The death penalty is defended as a deterrent. There is no evidence to justify this argument. I have examined carefully the statistics of States which have abolished the death penalty and compared the figures of murder in the years immediately preceding and succeeding. In actual fact the number of murders has on the whole *decreased* after the abolition of the death penalty; but this may be due to other considerations. One can say emphatically, however, that a survey of all the evidence available provides no support for the argument that the death penalty is a deterrent.

3. The advocates of the death penalty never pay any regard to its effect upon those who have to carry it out. If the supporters of capital punishment had themselves to manipulate the gallows or turn on the switch of the electric chair

or fire the shot—or look after the victims prior to the sentence being carried out—there would be few executions! I shall never forget a personal experience in Liverpool prison, where a Chief Warder who was in charge of a murderer came to me the day before the execution and unburdened his agony of mind. The prisoner had treated the warder as a confidant and friend, baring his soul naked. Yet it was the duty of the warder to officiate at his hanging! None of us has the right to impose these inhuman duties upon others.

When we turn to the case of political executions we shall find that they are always the reflection of war or dictatorships. Spies who are giving away military information to an enemy country are shot. Opponents of the Hitler or Stalin regimes are shot. The British authorities in Palestine execute Arabs and Jews, whose enmity is due to conditions imposed by Imperialist dictatorship.

It is doubtful whether these

methods will succeed, even taking a temporary view. By his methods Hitler has lost the sympathy of all that is best in all peoples in the world. Stalin has destroyed the early enthusiasm among the workers of all countries for the Russian Revolution and is creating an Opposition in his own country which threatens to overwhelm him. Every execution carried out by the British authorities in Palestine only serves to intensify the antagonism between the Arabs and Jews, and at the same time creates a hatred of British Imperialism which will await its opportunity of expression.

We may have to pass through wars and dictatorships before the existing order of society is destroyed. But the ideal must be kept alive of a New World in which domination of nation over nation, class over class, and individual over individual, is ended. In that world there will be no place for capital punishment.—*Fenner Brockway, condensed from The Aryan Path, Bombay.*

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Husband's Sacrifice

WIFE: "Really, John, you are the shabbiest man in the whole town. Cannot you dress better?"

HUSBAND: "No, I can't afford it."

WIFE: "Why not?"

HUSBAND: "Because you are the best-dressed woman in the whole town."—*Parade.*