

- A great thinker's ideas on military and war service through compulsion.

OBJECTION TO MILITARY SERVICE

A few days ago, the teenage son of actor Sterling Hayden burned his draft card and focussed attention on the fact that in the United States more and more people are refusing the draft to fight in Viet Nam. On this score we would like to publish a letter written by Leo Tolstoy to a young Russian who was up for conscription. The letter was written way back in 1899 but we believe that it has even more meaning in the United States today.

"What should a man do who has been called upon for military service — that is, called upon to kill or to prepare himself to kill?

"For a person who understands the true meaning of military service and who wants to be moral, there is only one clear and incontrovertible answer: such a person must refuse to take part in military service no matter what consequences this refusal may have. It may seem to

us that this refusal could be futile or even harmful, and that it would be a far more useful thing, after serving one's time, to become a good village teacher. But in the same way, Christ could have judged it more useful for himself to be a good carpenter and submit to all the principles of the Pharisees than to die in obscurity as he did, repudiated and forgotten by everyone.

"Moral acts are distinguished from all other acts by the fact that they operate independently of any predictable advantage to ourselves or to others. No matter how dangerous the situation may be of a man who finds himself in the power of robbers who demand that he take part in plundering, murder, rape, a moral person cannot take part. Is not military service the same thing? Is one not required to agree to the deaths of all those one is commanded to kill?

"But how can one refuse to do what everyone does, what everyone finds unavoidable and necessary? Or, must one do what no one does and what everyone considers unnecessary or even stupid and bad? No matter how strange it sounds, this strange argument is the main one offered against those moral acts which in our times face you and every other person called up for military service. But this argument is even more incorrect than the one which would make a moral action dependent upon considerations of advantage.

"If I, finding myself in a crowd of running people, run with the crowd without knowing where, it is obvious that I have given myself up to mass hysteria; but if by chance I should push my way to the front, or be gifted with sharper sight than the others, or receive information that this crowd was racing to attack human beings and toward its own corruption, would I really not stop and tell the people what might rescue them? Would I go on running and do these things which I knew to be bad and

corrupt? This is the situation of every individual called up for military service, if he knows what military service means.

"I can well understand that you, a young man full of life, loving and loved by your mother, friends, perhaps a young woman, think with a natural terror about what awaits you if you will refuse conscription; and perhaps you will not feel strong enough to bear the consequences of refusal, and knowing your weakness, will submit and become a soldier. I understand completely, and I do not for a moment allow myself to blame you, knowing very well that in your place I might perhaps do the same thing. Only do not say that you did it because it was useful or because everyone does it. If you did it, know that you did wrong. . . . For under no circumstances can we inflict violence on people, torture or kill them because we think such acts could be of use to us or to others.

"In every person's life there are moments in which he can know himself, tell himself

who he is, whether he is a man who values his human dignity above his life or a weak creature who does not know his dignity and is concerned merely with being useful (chiefly to himself) . . . And in our times, it is the

situation of a man called to military service.”

The Viet Nam war is causing a lot of soul-searching in the United States. — *Alejandro R. Roces, The Manila Chronicle, March 12, 1968.*

SECT

When we come to believe that we are in possession of our God because we belong to some particular sect it gives us such a complete sense of comfort, that God is needed no longer except for quarreling with others whose idea of God differs from ours in theoretical details. — *Rabindranath Tagore, Thought Relics, 1909*