

THE DECLARATION OF THE 121

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EARLY in September, the large Paris dailies received in their post a four-page statement, printed on fine paper, and headed 'Declaration on the Right to Disobedience in the Algerian War.*' The statement was signed by 121 personalities from the academic world, literature and the arts, among them writers like Jean-Paul Sartre, André Breton, Simone de Beauvoir, Vercors, Arthur Adamou, Marguerite Duras and Jean-Louis Bory; film-makers and actors like Alain Resnais, Alain Cuny, Roger Blin, Simone Signoret; university professors Theodore Monod, André Mandouze, P. Vidal-Naquet, Michel Leiris; painters like Pignon, Masson, Marc Saint-Saens, Lapoujade; and musicians like Pierre Boulez. My own name was there, and those of other, more significant figures. The Left intelligentsia was publishing its attitude to the Algerian War. And this attitude was candidly subversive.

The Algerian War, the manifesto argued, is senseless. It is not a national war, as the Algerian army in no way threatens the conquest of France. It is neither a civil war nor a war of conquest, since it has been recognized that the Algerian people have the right of self-determination. At first presented to the public as a police action, it has tended more and more to become an operation of the army, which seeks to secure caste interests, which has made an institution of torture in Algeria and has taken up a position of open or latent revolt against democratic institutions. In these circumstances it is reasonable that many Frenchmen should come to question the validity of their traditional duties; either by refusing to take up arms against the Algerian people, or by bringing help and protection to the Algerians who are being oppressed in the name of the French people.

Without actually constituting a direct appeal for mutiny or for assistance to the F.L.N., the statement was a declaration of principle; the signatories were setting themselves up against the law and knew that they were doing so.

They chose to precipitate a clash for several reasons. First, the appearance of the statement coincided with the opening in Paris of the trial of those involved in a network of sustenance to

*'Déclaration sur le Droit à l'Insoumission dans la Guerre d'Algérie'.

the F.L.N., known as the Jeanson trial. For several years now there have been monthly arrests by the police of teachers and trade union militants for having sheltered Algerians, transported them by car, or duplicated their leaflets for them. Month after month, young soldiers have refused to leave for Algeria. Many of them have been condemned and imprisoned, but the principal newspapers have preserved an absolute silence about it.

The Manifesto of the 121 succeeded in breaking through this silence, and in focussing public opinion in France and abroad upon this resistance by Frenchmen to the war. The 121 signatories, many of them ex-resistance fighters, came in effect to the witness box to explain why they approved the attitude of those who had organized aid to the F.L.N. The most powerful grenade was thrown from Brazil by Jean-Paul Sartre, who announced unequivocally that he was ready, if it were asked of him, to carry the luggage of the F.L.N.—so clearly did the cause of French democracy seem to him to be one with that of the Algerian people in their struggle against French colonialism.

Secondly, the manifesto was intended, by highlighting the courageous activities of isolated individuals or small independent movements, to reawaken the political groups and official parties, who must bear responsibility for the lethargy and apathy of the masses.

Finally, it was intended to force the Government to a trial of strength, from which the signatories knew in advance that it would retreat. This demonstration of impotence would contribute to injecting vigour and militancy into a Left long paralysed by inaction and fear of the army.

Two months after the publication of the Declaration, it can be confirmed that the stand of the 121 has powerfully contributed towards freeing Left opinion from its paralysis and setting it back in motion.

The Declaration has in the first place caught the imagination of the young people, who are the most directly involved in the war through their period of military service lasting 28 months. Without concerning themselves with tactics or strategy, the student leaders have thrown themselves into the front-line, launching a campaign of agitation that the trade union centres and the party machines of the Left have been forced to follow.

The trial of strength with the Debré Government has been won. The army possesses no longer the privilege of holding political power in check. Those round the knees of the President

at first wanted to have all the signatories of the Manifesto arrested. He has contented himself with imprisoning only one of them, the writer of this article, for 15 days, and with provisionally suspending several university teachers. The solidarity evinced in the University was such that the Minister of National Education was forced to withdraw the suspension orders. One of the professors, Laurent Schwartz, found his appointment to the Polytechnic withdrawn because his presence at the college would not be compatible with "good sense and honour." He immediately replied publicly that he had no lesson on honour to learn from a personage who had listed for the Legion of Honour two officers convicted of being torturers.

The Government will probably hesitate in the end to bring the 121 to trial, for it has discovered that repressive measures have only resulted in publicity for the theme of disobedience, and in uniting the Left in total opposition.

It would however be reckless to conclude from this revival of democratic opinion in France, that the principal military plotters and their civilian associates have suddenly taken fright, and that all danger of Right-wing subversion has been entirely averted. In the final analysis, the pivot of resistance to fascism remains for the time being General de Gaulle, in whom a large part of the middle classes and the bourgeoisie continue to have confidence. If General de Gaulle were to disappear, the trial of strength would doubtless be very speedily won by the Right.

The democratic forces find themselves therefore paradoxically placed in their attitude to him. They cannot approve of de Gaulle to the degree that he resolutely refuses to set himself on the path of peace. They cannot attack him head-on, as this would be playing with the cards of the Right, who are trying to dispose of him by sapping his authority.

In fact, of course, the real problem is not de Gaulle. It is the building of a true united front of the Left for peace in Algeria. If that force is successfully constructed in the coming months, democracy has still a chance of being saved in France. But if the parties and unions persist in making the same mortal errors over again that destroyed the Weimar Republic, France has little chance of escaping a clash, the immediate outcome of which can scarcely be in doubt.

Translated from the French