

## EDITORIAL

### The Terrorist Challenge

In our first issue, less than one year ago, we pointed to the growing danger of state-sponsored terrorism.<sup>1</sup> This issue includes an important new article, "After Tehran", which examines the peril and proposes possible counters. The author, Paul Wilkinson, is a leading academic authority on terrorism. His work<sup>2</sup> on the subject is required reading in the field and the philosophy he espouses has been adopted by most liberal democracies. It argues for a hard line response strictly within the legal framework. He had the courage to stick to his "no concessions" belief when interviewed on British television at the climax of the Mogadishu hijack, when 68 lives were in grave danger.<sup>3</sup> By the following morning, GSG9<sup>4</sup> had broken the siege and Wilkinson had been vindicated. If we needed to be reminded of the danger of defying this hard line policy, events in March this year ought to have served. The Pakistani government surrendered to terrorists who, with possible Soviet assistance,<sup>5</sup> held hostages in a hijacked airliner. Within fourteen days two more aircraft had been hijacked.<sup>6</sup> A tough government that acts within the law serves the interests of the international community: a weak response puts us all at the mercy of political criminals.

A major test of democracy's will to withstand the terrorist challenge is taking place today over the issue of "special status" for convicted terrorists. Revolutionaries have always seen the need to promote the legitimacy of their struggle as part of their claim to popular allegiance. Where rebels represent the majority, such claims are often valid: when the revolutionary group has no mass following, as described by J.K. Zawodny in his article "Infrastructures of Terrorist Organizations", the claims are false. Campaigns for special or "political" status form part of the propaganda which causes the media to "search for some kind of bogus intellectual objectivity and to regard the terrorist on the one hand and the policeman or soldier on the other as two sides of a morally symmetrical confrontation".<sup>7</sup> Terrorism is a conflict method that bestows upon its practitioners the key advantages of surprise, concealment (they neither wear uniform nor carry arms openly, and, like other criminals, they hide within society), and the full protection of the law. Terrorists may not be "shot on sight"; they have to be caught in the act of committing a crime and brought to due process. The Law, then, is the liberal society's sole defence.

Fortunately, it is a good defence. And the most potent weapon for keeping killers off the streets, demoralizing their fellows still at large, and deterring youngsters from joining terrorist ranks is the long prison sentence. "Special status" is intended to erode and eventually break this deterrent by conferring "prisoner of war" or "political prisoner" rank upon convicted terrorists. Physical conditions in prison are irrelevant, being used as a diversion to confuse the media: the aim is to be able to claim that the government, by accepting special status, has acknowledged that these prisoners are guilty of no crimes, and are cruelly imprisoned solely because of their dissenting political opinions.<sup>8</sup>

Civil Rights activists would have a field day. Pressures for the release of prisoners might mount, and their freedom traded for some small concession such as a temporary truce. By such a process, terrorists hope to place themselves virtually above the law, with consequent benefit to their morale, numbers and recruiting potential.

In the United States, both the left-sponsored Puerto Rican and the neo-fascist anti-Castro terrorists claim "prisoner of war" status; in Quebec, campaigners on behalf of FLQ "political prisoners" make similar demands. In December last the Italian Red Brigades kidnapped Mr. Giovanni D'Urso in a bid to force the closure of a top security prison,<sup>9</sup> and on 16 April 1981 Red Army Faction prisoner Sigurd Debus died after his ten week hunger strike failed to win "political status". Slow suicide makes powerful propaganda. The public is persuaded by those who have ordered one of their members to die that it is authority, and not the terrorists, that must bear responsibility. When the victim dies, his death is then promoted as justification for more murders. In the case of Bobby Sands, the British government must share with the media some of the responsibility for a bewildered public reaction. Countering terrorism is at least 50 percent a war of ideas, and unless authority explains in forthright and clear terms what is at stake, it may forfeit confidence and respect. Bobby Sands's death was a tragedy inflicted upon Northern Ireland by the Provisional IRA.<sup>10</sup> The British government's stand involved a tough decision, made necessary by the tough challenge of terrorism.

#### Footnotes

1. Maurice Tugwell, "The Present Danger", in *Conflict Quarterly*, vol I, no 1.
2. See Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorism and the Liberal State* (London, 1977) and "Terrorism: International Dimensions" in *Conflict Studies*, no. 113 (1979).
3. See "The New War on Terrorism" in *Newsweek*, 31 Oct. 1977, pp. 48-56.
4. Rolf Tophoven, *The GSG9 Anti-Terrorist Unit* (Coblenz/Bonn, 1977).
5. See "A Victory for Terrorism", in *Time*, 30 Mar. 1981, pp. 32-33.
6. On 25 Mar. 1981 Moslem extremists hijacked an Indonesian airliner and diverted it to Thailand. On 28 Mar. 1981 a Honduran airliner was hijacked to Managua, Nicaragua.
7. Lord Chalfont, "The Climate of Opinion", in *Report on the Jerusalem Conference on International Terrorism*, the Jonathan Institute, 2-5 July 1979.
8. A Vancouver terrorist supporters club gave the game away by adopting the title "Irish Prisoners of War Committee".
9. "The Happy Ending that may mean Sad Ones to Come", in *Economist*, 17 Jan. 1981.
10. On CBC radio's "Sunday Morning" on 26 Apr. 1981 an IRA organizer explained in detail how the movement was orchestrating the propaganda campaign to bring indignation to a pitch as Sands neared death.