



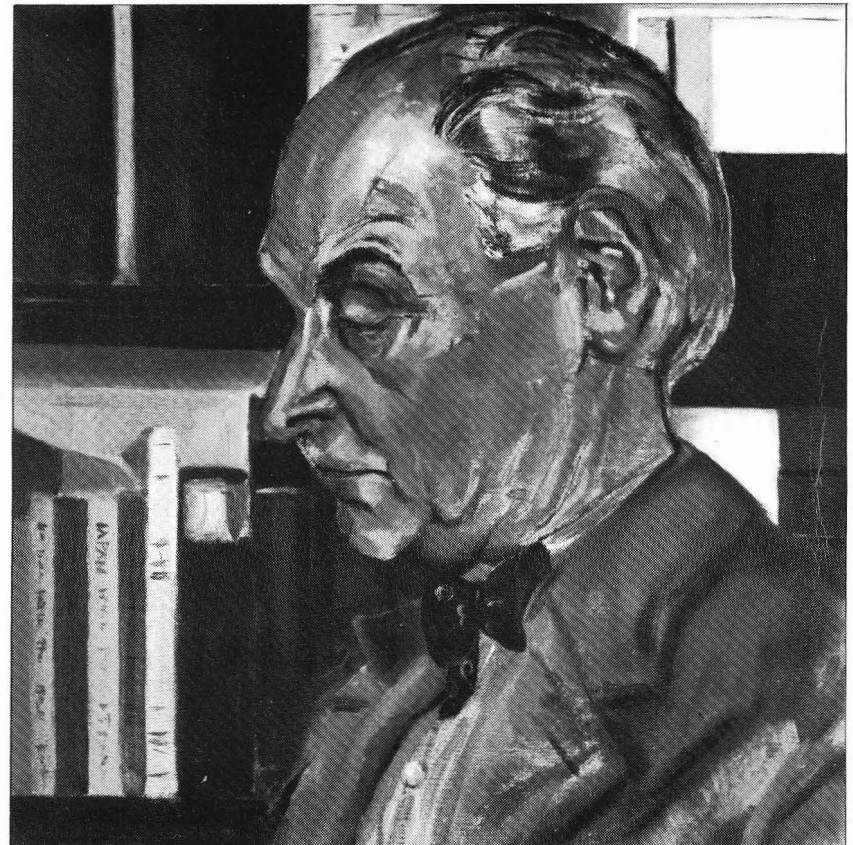
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BART DE LIGT

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# THE CONQUEST OF VIOLENCE

AN ESSAY ON WAR AND REVOLUTION



INTRODUCTION BY ALDOUS HUXLEY

NEW INTRODUCTION BY PETER VAN DEN DUNGEN

Libertarian  Critique

The logo features a stylized 'A' inside a circle, which is superimposed on a flagpole with a flag.

## CHAPTER V

### VIOLENCE AND THE MASSES

Men are small : up to a certain point they are able to disturb the course of things : by doing so, they can only hurt themselves. Humanity alone is great, is infallible. Now, I believe I may say in its name : Humanity wants no more war.

PROUDHON.

BOTH the individual and the mass must, then, always be ready to die for an idea, "to sacrifice themselves for the community". It is not to be wondered at if a number of these exploited men and women at last resolved to use violence no longer in an alien cause but in their own, which was also the cause of humanity. Again, it is not to be wondered at if they drew inspiration for their own revolution from the example that the revolutionary bourgeoisie once gave, which is incessantly glorified by schools, churches, the Press, literature, art and science. Nothing to wonder at, once more, if idealists of noble or middle-class birth, exasperated by the iniquitous behaviour of their own class, came to reject it and to devote themselves whole-heartedly to imparting their own faith in the liberating virtues of violence to the rising proletariat. If countless numbers of the disinherited and the disillusioned have been brought to take up those very arms which were legally imposed on them against their own private

"enemy at home"—the ruling class—the responsibility lies less with them than with their pitiless masters, who have educated them in this direction for centuries past.

It is the bourgeoisie, too, who, upheld everywhere by the last vestiges of the feudal system, has spread the romantic ideology of violence right down to the lowest strata of the lower middle classes and proletariat. They are the ones who, ever since the French Revolution, have forced the sons of the poor to undergo military training by the million and who poured them out into the trenches in 1914. They have divided the entire world into national camps, ready to tear each other to pieces at any moment. They have developed scientific warfare, beginning with the powder and shot which was used against the armour and the castle-walls of the nobility, until they have now come to the point of throwing gas and incendiary bombs on defenceless crowds, women, children, sick people, animals. They have corrupted the people's spirit by a disciplinary system unworthy of human beings, in factories, barracks, prisons, etc. They have introduced, with the Church's consent, warships, cruisers, submarines, bombers and military airships, and have carried the art of murder into the very stratosphere. And so it is the bourgeoisie, helped always by those representing the ancient spirit of the nobility and clergy, who have given the proletariat a taste for using these tools of destruction, encouraging them to employ them more and more in civil and revolutionary wars against their real social enemy, the ruling class. If the white working-class and the coloured peoples believe in the efficacy of violence to further their own noble cause, the blame must be put on the international bourgeoisie, who, what

is more, are still attacking all who fight for justice and liberty with the most fiendish weapons. Look at what has happened in Spain since 1934!

To the essentially parasitic bourgeoisie, the use of this violence comes naturally, as we have said. On the other hand, the Bolsheviks, Socialists, Syndicalists and Anarchists, who wish to do away with every kind of parasitism, exploitation, and oppression, are battling for a world from which every form of brutal violence will be banished. That is why, when once the old means of violence are used by them there appears a flagrant contradiction between such means and the goal in sight.

For it is a fixed law that all means have their own abiding end, proceeding from the function for which they came into being, which can only be subordinated to other, loftier ends as far as the latter are attuned to the essential and, as it were, innate end. Besides, every end suggests its own means. To transgress this law inevitably brings about a tyranny of the means. For if these lead away from their intended goal, then the more people use them, the farther they get from the objective and the more their actions are determined by them. For example, it is impossible to educate people in liberty by force, just as it is impossible to breathe by coal gas. Life must have fresh air. And freedom must be awakened and stimulated by freedom and in freedom. It can never be born of violence. At the most, we may seek liberty as an antidote to our bondage, just as we cry out for fresh air when we are threatened with asphyxiation.

And so, when those who struggle for the abolition of class and race exploitation automatically employ in their revolution—the greatest and noblest in history—

those very means of horizontal and vertical warfare that the capitalist class once employed against the feudal powers, aggravating them further by mediaeval cruelties such as inquisitions and tortures, abhorred by the bourgeoisie itself for a long time past, the result is a tragic contradiction. To take an example, the free organization of labour which the Workers' Soviets had in mind in the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 can never be realized as long as the following are in force:

Absolute government and secret police, borrowed from Tsarism; Inquisitions and Jesuitism, borrowed from mediaeval Catholicism; Nationalism and militarism, created by the bourgeoisie; *Étatism*, bureaucracy and Parliamentarianism, so characteristic of political systems under capitalism; and all other methods proceeding from these.

Bolshevism, whenever it used these methods to attain its revolutionary goal, strayed from its first principle: the Soviets of Workers and Peasants. It blundered into a State Socialism, or rather, a State Capitalism, tainted by the feudal spirit, and became more and more involved in the Machiavellian politics of the imperialist world. This is shown by Litvinoff's opportunist policy of coalitions, based on that fairy-tale of security in armaments, which is now driving mankind towards a gigantic war, the consequence of which can only be the end of justice and liberty.

Modern capitalism, no longer able to justify itself from either a practical or a moral point of view, inevitably finished up by adopting the methods of Fascism. Even in the most democratic countries, the middle-classes, in order to impose their will, found themselves

often unwillingly obliged to resort to all kinds of feudal expedients which once were repugnant to them. In our time, freedom of thought, of speech, of the Press, of organization and association, is being more and more curtailed, even in the classic lands of liberty like England, France and the Netherlands. There is not a single act to-day at which the capitalists will stop short in order to safeguard their "authority" and maintain the "right", that is to say, the privileges of the bourgeoisie. Those beautiful devices with which the bourgeoisie had so proudly adorned itself in its rise, have fallen away; and, stripped of those deceitful garments, it is seen for what it is and always has been.

Fascism, that is, a politico-economic state where the ruling class of each country behaves towards its own people as for several centuries it has behaved to the colonial peoples under its heel; Fascism, which takes from its victims one after the other, the few political and social rights which they enjoyed; Fascism which is always lowering wages and reducing human beings, men and women, to a state of slavery; Fascism is the last despairing stand which imperialist capitalism must inevitably make, unless the working-class opposes it with all its might. It is, we have reason to hope, the last effort of the upper middle-classes to check that social evolution which threatens to sweep away the selfish regime they have instituted. From the point of view of social psychology, we are up against the policy of despair and a system which takes advantage of the people's increasing misery to seduce them by a new Messianism: belief in the Strong Man, the Duce, the Führer. This condition of hopeless misery explains the brutality and cruelty of Fascism: on both sides, the

upper classes and the down-trodden masses alike, people are no longer themselves, *i.e.* no longer human.

It may therefore be said that Fascism in a country is nothing but imperialism the wrong way up, turned against its own people, and that imperialism is only Fascism the wrong way up, turned against foreign peoples. In both cases, the essence of the thing is violence.

While capitalism has come by its very nature to Fascist methods, Socialism on the other hand must never fall back on them; to do so would attack its very roots. The violence and warfare which are characteristic conditions of the imperialist world do not go with the liberation of the individual and of society, which is the historic mission of the exploited classes. The greater the violence, the weaker the revolution, even where violence has deliberately been put at the service of revolution. The greater the revolution, that is to say, the social construction, the less there will be to deplore of violence and destruction. To create a really new order, violence can never be anything more than a *pis aller* and a counsel of despair, it "is never, from the revolutionary point of view, essential to the change".<sup>1</sup>

The modern revolutionary therefore must: either accept the conclusion which, at the Anti-Gas Warfare Conference at Frankfort, in 1929, was vociferously proclaimed by Bolsheviks, both men and women: "Against the armies of women reactionaries, we must have armies of women Reds! Against the poison gas of the Whites, the poison gas of the Reds! Against the White bacteria, the Red bacteria!" and so direct his whole system of production and the whole community

<sup>1</sup> Aron et Dandieu, *La Révolution nécessaire*, pp. ix-x.

life steadily towards general destruction, as before . . . or else he must break with all that, in principle and practice, and hold to those fighting methods which are essentially in harmony with his goal of general reconstruction.

Some revolutionaries of the last century were naive enough to think that war, political or national, might easily be turned into war, civil and revolutionary, though Proudhon, in his immortal book *La Guerre et la Paix* (1861) had already concluded, from the Napoleonic wars and events of his own time, that the collective violence of the modern world would lose more and more of its civilizing bent, and would conflict with the character of modern Socialism: by reason of the technical and scientific warfare being evolved, every constructive work found itself threatened with destruction: it was therefore necessary, according to the Saint-Simon ideal, to change the military society into an industrial society as swiftly as possible. Nowadays, war, thanks to the scientific means of slaying available, presents a character so negative, not to say, nihilist, that to use it is impossible for a real revolutionary<sup>1</sup> unless he is willing to load his conscience with the mechanical mass-murder of men, women, children and animals; the complete destruction of towns and plains and their inhabitants, and plants; the diffusion, impossible to regulate, of gas and microbes, which would blindly annihilate friends and foes, comrades and adversaries—a way of action even more barbarous than that of the Old Testament God against Sodom and Gomorrah—and the odious crime that this would mean against Socialism and mankind in general.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Léo Campion, *Le Noyautage de l'Armée*.

Let us imagine a community of Socialists or Communists more highly developed than that of the U.S.S.R. which for convenience we will call "Russia" and which, like the Russia of the present day, was surrounded by imperialist States. At a certain moment, this community was attacked by a State, let us say, "Germany". Let us suppose that our imaginary Russia had not taken part in any coalitions comparable to those which bind the U.S.S.R. to non-Communist states such as Turkey and France, that is, in accordance with the principles of Lenin, she had been careful not to group herself with rival capitalist States. This Russia would have accepted the risk of having to defend herself single-handed, against all modern weapons. Let us admit that she would be in a better position to do so than modern Russia, even though the latter—to refer to the declarations of Pierre Cot, French Minister for Air, who was given an official reception in Moscow—possesses a perfect modern military machine, and notably a model Air Force, so that powerful military planes can leave Moscow at any moment to go and blot out some far-away enemy town. According to modern strategy, such a war requires that the nerve centres of the State machine, that is, the town where the Government is in residence and the industrial and traffic centres of the enemy country, should be attacked first (and let us remember that we are not speaking of some country in the abstract, such as is shown on the map, but quite simply of the life of millions of living creatures).

Imagine, then, that the German Air Force has come to attack Moscow. According to modern strategy, the only possible way in which Russia can defend herself is by reprisal, that is, by going and dropping bombs on Berlin.

But in our hypothesis, the airman hovering in his plane over Berlin with his bombs and his gas, on the verge of executing the orders received from Moscow, is a real revolutionary. If he faces squarely up to the reality of his act, will he be able to carry it out? Down

below, under him, live hundreds of thousands of proletarians, among whom are tens of thousands of comrades, secret members or sympathizers with his own Communist Party, besides women, children, babies, invalids—his own sort, in a word, of whom the great majority do not desire war with Russia, or not really, at least, but only because they have been deceived by their Government, their church, their press or their political party.

“But aren't the real culprits down there as well?”

It is more likely that they have already taken refuge. One thing we may be sure of, and that is that they will be the best protected. As to the Government, everyone knows that as soon as it feels in danger it hastens to take shelter as far away as possible. Remember the Exodus from Paris in 1914! Besides, where are the real culprits, those who shelter behind the Government? It is a fact that the ones who are most to blame are always the hardest to get at, while the innocent—millions of men, women, children—are in the greatest danger. If the airman in question is fully alive to the criminal act he is on the verge of committing, it will not be possible for him to carry it out.

Let us imagine another Communist airman, flying above the Ruhr district, that proletarian ant-heap, and above countless machines, the marvels of modern technique. Can he ruthlessly destroy all this?

And again, we have assumed the hypothesis of a purely defensive war, brought about by insurmountable political difficulties which have obliged the Government in question to act against its will. Actually, things are not so simple. The policy of present-day Russia, for example, is the same as the old imperialist diplomacy and traditional Machiavellianism, and is collaborating in the preparation of military coalitions of one set of imperialist powers against another. Having formerly favoured the secret armament of Germany and rendered countless services to Turkey and Italy, she is now working in with France along the lines of Barthou.

Now, many revolutionaries are beginning to grasp all this. Yet they hesitate to break with the traditional methods of violence. Why?

In the first place, by a false shame with regard to their own moral feelings. For morality has gone out of fashion with us. As we have said, there are few things so hard as to remain outside the “nationalization of consciences” and not to be carried away on the powerful current of belief in violence, which has permeated the working-class movement. Bourgeois-feudal-barbarous violence can congratulate itself on having obtained amazing results, thanks to its powers of seduction. Great strength and great courage is required to resist its appeal, for, besides the insidious language which it speaks, to do so brings down on one Fascists and Bolsheviks, Socialists and bourgeois Nationalists, practically everyone. Fist-shaking, shrieking, vociferating, marching through streets with flying flags and beating of drums—such is the behaviour of the thing to-day. What do the reasons for the agitation matter, provided one has a strong, heroic step and can howl loudly enough to persuade oneself? Such things have already stunned a great number of revolutionaries, who no longer venture into the breach for their own humane and humanitarian ideas, especially when these are trampled underfoot by their own revolutionary officials. There are even some—not so few of them, either—who blindly drift from the Bolshevik camp into the Fascist, and from the Fascist camp into the Bolshevik.

Secondly, people will not reject violence, because they believe by so doing they will also be rejecting the results expected from it.

“What shall we do, if we do not reply to the violence

of the reactionaries with our own? Are the methods of defence not decided by the methods of attack? Must we not convince the ruling classes with their own arguments?"

At a most contradictory conference, a Dutch worker flung the following remark at me: "We cannot send the bourgeoisie packing with a wave of the fan. We do not make war on Hitler with toothpicks. Against reactionary violence we must use methods that will work."

Certainly, we need methods that will work. But there is no greater fallacy than the generally accepted dogma, always propagated by the nobility and the bourgeoisie, that a righteous cause must be defended by force, and that war will decide between the two sides like a trial by ordeal. Ever since mankind took to war, in every one there have in reality been two waged by one side against the other. A great number of these armed enterprises have been indecisive; and indeed, victory, as that truth-lover M. de la Palice would have pointed out, can belong only to one of the belligerents. So it follows that of all the wars the world has seen, there have been more undecided or lost than won. And among the latter, very few of those undertaken for some holy cause can be reckoned. Most of the wars which ended up in victory have been waged in the service of an unjust rather than a just cause. However that may be, in modern wars at least the righteousness of the cause weighs less and less in the balance. Napoleon declared long ago that God was always on the side of the heaviest cannon. One thing can be definitely asserted, and that is that the Boers, fighting at the beginning of the century in so heroic a manner for a holy cause,

Bible in one hand and rifle in the other, were the losers in the fight against "perfidious Albion" in spite of their God and their weapons. The bourgeoisie of to-day has even built up a whole world of injustice and oppression by means of its violence, both horizontal and vertical. Right up to the present minute no righteous cause in the world has ever had the tenth chance of conquering by violence. And nowadays would it have even a hundredth chance? It would have none at all, for, as we have shown, the methods of modern warfare make even the justest cause unjust, since those who allowed themselves to be dragged into it cannot do other than descend to the same level of brutality as those they fight. Even were they to triumph, they would be doomed to safeguard the fruits of victory by a system of force which would always be developing and therefore growing less human, and to sink ever more deeply and inescapably into the mire of destruction. Catholic moralists<sup>1</sup> are beginning to see at last that consequent upon the developments of modern technique, and having regard to the nature of modern politics, a "just war" cannot even arise.

In any case, it is wrong to suppose that violence is the only weapon suited to a just cause. For the exploited white masses and the oppressed coloured peoples, armed warfare is no longer practicable, since the scientific means of destruction are in the hands of well-paid experts,—who for the most part are profoundly reactionary in temperament,—and since the working-classes have at their disposal neither aeroplanes nor poison gas nor death rays nor bacteria. All this is the monopoly

<sup>1</sup> See *The Catholics and War*, published by the War Resisters' International.

of a group of professionals, devoid of all scruples and all sense of human responsibility. And even if the masses had such weapons at their disposal, they could not use them without committing a monstrous crime against themselves, since the results of chemical, bacteriological, electrotechnical, stratospherical warfare cannot be regulated. Like the wizard's apprentice, the masses would let loose a storm of uncontrollable forces on themselves, and they would be the chief victims.

Meanwhile, from the revolutionary side, vehement reproaches are uttered against their opponents for using those same methods which they reserve the right to use themselves. The Swiss paper *Le Travail*, which is much in sympathy with Moscow, reveals indignantly that Mussolini and Hitler are fighting anti-Fascism with methods so barbarous as to recall those of the mediaeval Popes. But this revolutionary paper glosses over the fact that the very same repressive methods are used against the anti-Bolshevik opposition. According to the Dutch paper *Fakkel*, we must fight Fascism by all available means: "Tread this vermin underfoot the instant you have the necessary strength, and do not waste a moment. A war of aggression against Fascism is not only permissible: it is a duty, an unavoidable and sacred duty!" French, Swiss, Belgian, Danish, Dutch, English and Czech Socialists are preparing, just as Albert Einstein, and Emil Ludwig did, to oppose the Nazi violence by a "democratic" violence. As if modern warfare did not bring with it an era of Fascism and dictatorship, even in the so-called democratic and possibly victorious countries.

"Those who desire the end must also desire the means", we hear on all sides.

Yes, but only the means which are suited to the end. And for genuine revolutionaries, these means can never be "any means", because most of the latter are bourgeois, feudal and barbarous, and conflict with Socialism and with humanity.

It is of the first importance to note that, in neo-Marxist circles, they are coming at last to understand the mistake made by Marx and Engels in automatically accepting the horizontal and vertical use of violence as a means of bringing about the social revolution.

In the *Critique Sociale* of November 1933, Simone Weil recognized that the Marxists have as a rule blindly followed the traditions of revolutionary violence begun in the great French Revolution. In this respect, they have quite forgotten that "the materialist way is to examine a given fact of human life much less in the light of the end pursued than of the consequences necessarily implied by such means as are brought into play". To judge of the efficacy of war in relation to the social revolution, one must first of all examine the mechanism of military conflict, that is to say, analyse the bearing it has on existing technical, economic and social conditions.

The author quoted above proves how the revolutionary wars since 1792 which play such a legendary rôle in revolutionary ideology were really the result of provocation on the part of the Court and the upper classes, plotting against the people's liberty.

First, it was not long before the French people were forced by conscription to take part in the wars of the bourgeoisie. These wars also made inevitable the introduction of a centralized political machine, the institution of a bloody terror and the annihilation of every liberty the people had, and thus prepared the way for the military and bureaucratic despotism of Napoleon.

The clearest minds saw this coming with great anxiety. Saint-Just wrote "Only those who fight the



battles win them, and only the powerful profit from it." Robespierre himself recognized that war, without freeing any foreign people, could only deliver the French over to the slavery of *Étatism*. According to him, war was only good for "officers, the ambitious, the grafters, for those in executive positions: one does not bring freedom at the bayonet's point". In spite of the apparent success of the Revolution, Robespierre understood that a military despotism must follow it as night follows day, to the great detriment of French peasants and workers.

Simone Weil also states that as a result of the development of lethal technique in modern war, this differs from all previous wars. Just as Marx shows how the modern economic system is the subordination of the workers to the means of production, which belong solely to the owner class, so does modern war consist of the subordination of the soldier to the instruments of war, which belong to the ruling class. As the machine of national defence cannot function unless the masses are compulsorily sent out to their death, the war of one State against another is primarily a war of the political and military machine against its own Army: "War appears finally to be waged by the State machine and General Staff together against all the able-bodied men of military age together."

It seems to us that since modern warfare is total warfare, we must go farther and say that it now is waged by the assembly of State machine and General Staff against the whole people, women and children included, so that in every country the political and military directors are absolutely the enemies of the entire population.

Not to have drawn this conclusion was the fatal mistake made by Lenin and other leaders of the workers' revolution in Russia. The Soviet Constitution, proceeds Simone Weil, has undergone precisely the same fate as the Constitution of 1793. "Lenin had abandoned his democratic doctrines and established the despotism of a centralized political machine, just as Robespierre

did, and was in fact the forerunner of Stalin just as Robespierre was of Bonaparte." And this although Lenin knew that, according to Marx, the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot allow of an army, nor of police nor of a permanent bureaucracy.

"Revolutionary war is the grave of revolution," concludes Simone Weil. By the very workings of modern armed conflict it must either succumb to the blows of counter-revolution or transform itself into counter-revolution. It is the same for a war calling itself anti-Fascist. It must end either in the victory of the Fascism which is fought or in such an *État-ization* and militarization of the revolution defended that this would be undermined at the very roots.

We are glad that on this point, the neo-Marxists have come to conclusions which are as radically anti-*Étatist* as those of the anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists. Logically, anti-*Étatism* must also of its very nature reject all forms of war both horizontal and vertical.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See also, Simone Weil, "Ne recommençons pas la Guerre de Troie", *Nouveaux Cahiers*, of April 1st and 15th, 1937.

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BART DE LIGT

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## THE CONQUEST OF VIOLENCE

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When first published in English in 1937, *The Conquest of Violence* soon established itself as the textbook of non-violent revolution, and is still regarded as a classic text dealing with direct action against war and war preparation.

**Bart de Ligt** (1883-1938) was a leading Dutch anarcho-syndicalist and pacifist – as well as an early feminist – a fighter of all dogma, who was imprisoned in his own country for his anti-militaristic activities both during and after the First World War. He was a great scholar and an exceptional political organiser, deeply admired by **Aldous Huxley**, whose **Introduction** to the 1937 edition is reproduced here. Huxley described De Ligt's work as 'among the most important contributions to the literature of pacifism'.

*The Conquest of Violence* presents a strategy for the transformation of society, linking Mahatma Gandhi's principled non-violence with the total non-cooperation advocated by the syndicalists during the General Strike. De Ligt was an admirer of Gandhi, yet he was also highly critical of his inconsistencies and contradictions: his evaluation of Gandhi is contained in this volume.

The quest for non-violent methods of waging conflict is even more urgent today – in the era of nuclear weapons – than when De Ligt wrote, and the depth of his exposition in *The Conquest of Violence* is a guarantee that his voice will continue to be heard.

**Peter van den Dungen** (b. Holland 1948) studied Economics at the University of Antwerp, and International Relations in Bologna, Washington DC and London. Since 1976 he has been Lecturer in Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. He has contributed articles to major reference works in the field of Peace Studies. Recent publications include *Peace Movements and Political Cultures* (with Charles Chatfield, eds).

Cover illustration: Bart de Ligt by Ingrid van Peski-de Ligt  
Courtesy of J.E. de Ligt  
Cover design: Adrian Yeeles/Artworkers

**PLUTO  PRESS**

Pluto Press  
345 Archway Road  
London N6 5AA

ISBN 1-85305-057-1