

BEN HECHT

enough. They need luster excitement, bolder showmanship . . . they egg on the mad children of the Irgun; the distant whiff of bombs is headier than a cocktail. . . .

On May 15th, 1947, Hecht published a full-page piece in fifteen major American dailies which soon smeared him across newspapers all over the world.

LETTER TO THE TERRORISTS OF PALESTINE

My brave friends,
You may not believe what I write you, for there is a lot of fertilizer in the air at the moment.

But, on my word as an old reporter, what I write is true.
The Jews of America are for you. You are the feathers in their hats.

In the past fifteen hundred years every nation of Europe has taken a crack at the Jews. This time the British are at bat.

You are the first answer that makes sense to the New World.

Every time you blow up a British arsenal, or wreck a British jail, or send a British railroad train sky high, or rob a British bank, or let go with your bombs and guns at the British betrayers and invaders of your homeland, the Jews of America make a little holiday in their hearts. . . .

For weeks Hecht was attacked by the British press. Lord Beaverbrook's *Evening Standard* called him a "penthouse warrior" and accused him of "gross chauvinism, distortion of history, indoctrination of children, preference of solutions through violence, race pride, the stoking up of hatred between nations, indifference to the sanctity of human life." Lord Rothmere's *Daily Mail* labeled him a "vitriolic Zionist volcano with a touch of the carnival huckster" and reprinted an article from the *Palestine Post* that accused Hecht of "creating a criminal insanity that is killing Jews as well as Britons." The *Standard* devoted its entire "Letters to the Editor" section one day to Hecht, one correspondent calling Hecht a "Nazi at heart" and nine others suggesting his films be banned.

Hecht was not only reviled in imperialist British newspapers and by his Haganah foes, but by many of the very people he considered himself a spokesman for: American Jews. Meyer Levin, in his autobiography *In Search*, wrote:

The Forties: Propaganda Wars

The Haganah and Palmach were resistance groups Irgun and Stern were terrorist groups, yet terrorist resistance actions were sometimes difficult to distinguish from each other. . . . And more complicating powerful propaganda carried on by the terrorist groups particularly in the United States—propaganda so powerful as to give their activities an importance altogether relationship to reality. . . . In America, the noise of Irgun Tsvai Leumi was permitted to give the impression that it alone opposed the British in Palestine. . . . Bergson showed me a copy of a first manifesto, published as a full-page advertisement. This was the creation of an attention-getting device which was in the course of years to prove costly, wasteful, sometimes harmful effective chiefly for Bergson, Ben Hecht, and the torii-loving friends. . . . Their [American Jews] were mobilized, vast funds were collected from them ensuing years, ostensibly for paying for "medical Hebrew fighters," and they thought they were very valiantly assuming that their funds were really paying for explosives apparently their funds were paying for more full-page advertisements in which Ben Hecht could exercise his for bellicose phrase-making. . . . And in the end Bergson-Hecht propaganda provided the greatest phrase toward anti-Semitism since Hitler. . . . for it one of those full-page ads. . . . that Ben Hecht wrote with every bombing and shooting of British soldiers Jews of America make a little holiday in their hearts.

I don't believe that any single phrase was ever harmful to the Jewish people. Hecht published statements with the flourish of the prophet speaking to people; he must have realized that the British would use this phrase as the slogan of the Jewish people; he was so. And in this sense the phrase amounted to race-speech with murderous results.

How could he permit himself to speak for our people had read a book of his called *A Guide for the Bedouin* supposedly dealing with the Jews' problems. There needed to discuss this pretentious hodge-podge of mud and incomplete thoughts: one remark in it was sufficient illustrative. Through all of his early life, and through years in Chicago as a newspaperman, Hecht stated, he never personally encountered anti-Semitism.