

Jacobo Timerman's ordeal began in April 1977. Argentina's military authorities arrested the prominent journalist and publisher, subjecting him to cruel interrogations and hideous torture. Acting against the wishes of the country's supreme court and even its president, the generals did not let Timerman go until the end of 1977, when they annulled his citizenship and expelled him.

Fortunately, Jacobo Timerman had a place to go, a country that had worked all along for his release, that not only welcomed him but granted him citizenship at once: Israel. A life-long Zionist, Timerman considered Israel his home rather than a mere refuge; he thought of his arrival as the completion of a voyage, a kind of return. From there, he exacted his revenge on his torturers by telling his story, which he understood as a survivor's testimony.

Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number—all the above information is taken from it—brought much acclaim to Jacobo Timerman, some of it deserved. He writes well, and at his best he used the heat of hatred to forge his style into a weapon against injustice. The book amounted to more than a personal tale of suffering and endurance, though it was certainly that; it illuminated the lot of the political prisoner in many times and places; it even cast some light on the perplexities of Argentinean politics.

However, the book also entangled Timerman in acrimonious controversy. *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* raised a number of troubling questions. Why had Timerman been arrested? He suggests that his being a Jew as well as a champion of human rights proved too much for the authorities, but was that the whole or the real story? Timerman's business partner had been involved in the financing of subversive activities, and Timerman's arrest might well have been triggered by his connection with David Graiver. That would not in the least justify those who jailed Timerman, but why had Timerman failed to mention Graiver in his account?

Timerman's vituperative responses to his critics, many of whom knew the situation in Argentina as well as he, only served to broaden the questions raised. If Timerman had not been

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THE LONGEST WAR: ISRAEL IN LEBANON

Jacobo Timerman / Alfred A. Knopf / \$11.95

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arrested because he was a Jew—though being Jewish surely harmed him once he was in prison—perhaps he had exaggerated the intensity of Argentinean anti-Semitism? Anti-Semitism is always to be deplored, but was the Argentinean regime so perfidious that it exposed as knaves or fools all those who tried to distinguish its authoritarianism from totalitarianism?

Finally, what was one to make of Timerman's venomous comments about the Argentinean Jewish community? He had likened Jewish leaders to those Jews who had collaborated with the Nazis. The situation of Argentine Jewry was surely quite difficult and might not be enviable, but were most of the Jews there either blind or cowardly, as Timerman suggested, when they kept building synagogues and community centers instead of fleeing or fighting?

All these questions concern Jacobo

Timerman's credibility. They are fair questions, though they may sound harsh, for Timerman always writes as a witness and in a witness credibility is all. The basic question of credibility could not be resolved simply on the basis of *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*. It was not enough to refute Timerman on the basis of facts: a mistaken witness differs from a deceitful one. Nothing could be done about assessing his reliability until the appearance of another volume in the same mode. The new book provides new evidence, and with that evidence Jacobo Timerman has gone a long way toward indicting himself.

The Longest War concerns Israel's invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 as well as Timerman's reactions to subsequent events of what he calls "Sharon's War," a war he views as completely unnecessary and hence

completely unjust. Israel was not even provoked for there "were no difficulties along the northern border" and the general situation in the Middle East these days is such that the Israeli "doesn't fear for his security."

As the war goes on Timerman frets about Israel's expenditure of the blood of its young people, but above all about the moral costs of a war in which Israel commits so many crimes and thus incurs so much guilt. The war shakes "the foundations of the moral structure on which Israel was built." Israel has forfeited all claim to be a light unto the nations; instead it has become "the South Africa of the Middle East," or its Prussia, or its Chile, or its Argentina under Peron. Timerman makes all these comparisons but criticizes those who would compare the Israelis with the Nazis.

Timerman writes in the present tense, in a form reminiscent of a journal, so that he is able to illustrate his growing despair and rage as week of war follows week of war. The war commands the support of the majority of Israelis. That becomes for Timerman either a sure sign of the majority's manipulation by its leaders or else a sure sign of the perils of democracy itself. Israel begins to lose a genuine sense of continuity and identity by ceasing to be true to itself. The Jews are no better, though perhaps no worse, than the Palestinians. Begin, who is inept and "unbalanced," is no better than Arafat. What the Israelis, whom the war has turned into "efficient criminals," are doing cannot be called genocide, yet the author fears that the collective subconscious "may not be wholly repelled by the possibility of a Palestinian genocide." Israel quite literally nauseates Jacobo Timerman: "I can only relieve myself by vomiting for this Israel . . ." The Begin government is "establishing the basis" for "a totalitarian country."

Yet hope mingles with Timerman's gloom, a hope derived from all those Israelis who protest against the war. Perhaps they, who now constitute no more than a substantial minority, will be able to recall the whole country to its senses. Perhaps Israel will come to see that no military solution to its problems exists but that a political solution is quite simple: the establishment of a Palestinian state. Perhaps Israel will atone



for its sins by rebuilding Lebanon. Perhaps Israel will engage the Arabs in a fruitful dialogue.

Perhaps, perhaps not. The book concludes with Timerman's reaction to the news of the "Beirut Massacre" of September 1982. Timerman has no doubt whatsoever that the massacre was organized by the Israeli army. He knows that any investigation will in effect protect the criminals—Begin, Sharon, and Israel's entire general staff—"from the punishment they deserve."

The story Timerman tells cannot be dismissed because of its left-wing bias, though he is a biased man of the Left. After all, an honorable man of the Left like Conor Cruise O'Brien has managed to be fair to Israel; in fact, on the basis of personal experience, O'Brien has been able flatly to contradict Timerman's assertion that the Lebanese did not really welcome Israeli soldiers. They really did, and eyewitnesses of many political persuasions have given the lie to the author of *The Longest War* on this point.

What disturbs one, then, is not Timerman's point of view but his disingenuousness about his point of view. He does, to be sure, admit and assert that he is of the Left, but he is forever trying to position himself as a moderate. He denounces the Soviet Union now and then until it appears as depraved as, say, Argentina; he has nothing but blame for Stalin as well as for the U.S. role in Vietnam; he even talks about fascism of the Left (though not about Communism of the Right). What exposes him are little things, like his frequent resort to left-wing terminology (it's been a long time since I have seen the word "progressive" used that way outside of overtly Marxist literature) and his way of identifying right-wingers as such while remaining silent about the political sympathies of those on the Left.

The same lack of candor informs Timerman's political argumentation in general. One may contend that Israel's march into Lebanon constituted an excessive reaction to provocation, but to deny there was provocation is to court dishonesty. Timerman has next to nothing to say about the presence of Soviet-built Syrian missiles in Lebanon prior to the war, a presence conceded to be "intolerable" to Israel, and tolerated by it for over a year while Ambassador Habib negotiated in vain for their removal. Moreover, Timerman constantly downgrades the strength of the PLO, as if to divert attention from the fact that it was an armed terrorist force dedicated to the destruction of Israel,

a force no nation, let alone a nation which possesses the virtue of self-respect, could be expected to countenance on its borders. He goes so far as to refer to "the fact" that "the Palestinians were preparing to recognize Israel before we invaded Lebanon." That alleged fact receives no documentation; there is none.

Underestimating Israel's problems—to put the matter as mildly as possible—Timerman goes on to underestimate the difficulties of a solution to those problems. He repeatedly suggests that all will be well once the Palestinians have a state of their own. He acts as though all right-thinking Israelis see the need for such a state. But the Socialist Shimon Peres, for whom Timerman has some kind words, opposes the Palestinian state as much as does the Revisionist Menachem Begin, for whom he has only words of loathing. So oblivious does he appear to the weighty arguments against the establishment of yet another sovereign nation in the region that one may be tempted to give Timerman the benefit of the doubt on the question of honesty and dismiss him as an honest simpleton.

That temptation must be resisted. The very style of *The Longest War* precludes innocence. Jacobo Timerman is a very sophisticated writer—and a dishonest one. The most frequent device he employs in the service of dishonesty is hyperbole that passes over gradually into untruth. Consider, for example, his account of what he sees during a brief trip to Lebanon. All wars entail horrible sights; this one was no exception. The fighting resulted in extensive damage to cities like Tyre and Sidon. But those cities were not razed by Israel, or systematically destroyed by the Israelis, as Timerman insists more than once. He lies.

In the example I have just cited the lie might conceivably be a second-degree lie, if there is such a thing, an untruth that results from excessive passion. But Timerman also lies when his passions function with less intensity, as when he blandly states that "all those born in Israel understand the tongue of their parents," a patent falsehood. Here the lie is simply self-serving. The truth is that Jacobo Timerman must downgrade the importance of his ignorance of Hebrew. He is a man who does not know the national language of the nation he describes and condemns, but he never hesitates to pose as an expert on its psyche.

As one reads along in *The Longest War*, one realizes that Timerman

hardly ever hesitates to pose about anything. Thus he poses as someone to whom the war comes as a shocking revelation of Begin's fascist tendencies, when the truth is that he had been grumbling about Begin's fascism years before the war. Thus, too, he poses as a steadfast champion of democracy when the truth is that he is a former supporter of Peron who believes in democracy only when democratic procedures happen to result in policies of which he approves.

There are many kinds of posing. Timerman can be said to exemplify the poseur as existentialist. He parades his feelings, above all those connected with anguish and nausea. He muses about alienation, takes pride in authenticity, likes to pontificate about Albert Camus, and forthrightly pronounces himself in favor of "dialogue" between Jews and Arabs. It does not seem to occur to him that understanding one's adversary can bring about war as well as peace, and he has probably never considered the wisdom of the Bible in making the first human dialogue—between Cain and Abel—the prelude to the first murder.

Poseurs are usually ridiculous, and it is easy enough to ridicule the author of *The Longest War* for his hollow rhetoric—but only until one realizes that what is at stake is the good name and security of Israel, a beleaguered democracy. Realizing as much, one must put aside all mockery and denounce Jacobo Timerman for what he is—a witness who bears false witness. □

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THE YOUNG REBECCA

Rebecca West, edited by Jane Marcus / The Viking Press / \$25.00

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Herb Greer

Consider poor Thomas Chatterton, who blossomed young, was starved of applause, and killed himself in despair. In our time there is the more ghastly case of Norman Mailer, who for the sake of literature ought, perhaps, to have done the same. Instead he was glutted with praise, as he simultaneously ripened and rotted, like a medlar. There have been so many of these bright starts which faded away, like Arthur Rimbaud, or warped at last into a stunted crankiness, like Bernard Shaw in his dotage. It is as though some envious god had laid a random curse upon literary talent of a certain excellence.

Nevertheless a few escape. In December of last year Dame Rebecca West was ninety years old. As a writer she has never been ignored, but neither has she been stuffed like a French goose with the sort of hyped

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demotic adulation which is now a commercial commonplace. Her writing is still as fresh, clear, lambent, and graceful as it was when she began her career before the First World War, at the age of eighteen. The work of those early days, which delighted and sometimes outraged her contemporaries, was until last year almost entirely buried in the archives of universities, libraries, and defunct publications. Thanks to a British feminist publisher, Virago, and Viking, some of this is now available to the present generation of American readers. Much of it is enjoyable and historically interesting, but the book could have been a good deal better than it is. The fault lies with the editor, an apparently feminist and vaguely left-wing academic called Jane Marcus, who has made the selection and contributed the gloss.

The Young Rebecca contains essays, book reviews, biographical sketches, one piece of rather bad fiction, and some other miscellaneous journalism, ranging from a magazine debut in 1911 to work for British dailies six years later. The saving grace of this anthology is its heartening proof that a brilliant intelligence, honesty, and superb literary flair can triumph over the facile underdoggerly and superficial prejudice which come naturally to a passionate teenager.

At this time—Miss Marcus asserts confidently—Rebecca West was writing “as a convinced socialist . . . and a dedicated feminist” and “was clear that the ideas of feminism were inseparable from those of socialism.” Now these are tricky terms to throw at a reader in the 1980s, when the political context is changed altogether and (as Miss Marcus forgets to mention) both “isms” have quite different connotations from those they carried in the Britain of 1911-17. The occasionally breathtaking coverage in this book shows that feminism in those days was a serious and often very dangerous affair—for women. Female Britons in the early years of this century were a species of foreigners in male-dominated public

life, really banal and second-class citizens; they were subject to types of misprision and actual assault that a jury today would probably regard as just cause for homicide.

The feminist movement did not arise among the “oppressed” working-class, but with middle-class women who had time on their hands and so were able to think for themselves about the worn-out social patterns which condoned—among other abuses—a denial of their access to public life and the deprivation of their property rights in marriage. As they had not before, these women demanded a recognition of their capability and independence as full-fledged human beings rather than household chattels. Like other protesters they tended to see conspiracy where there was habit, and to use exaggerated polemic to attract attention and shame their opponents. But they did have a legitimate cause. Women who demonstrated even for the banal democratic perquisite of suffrage were furiously denounced by reactionary members of their own sex; they were beaten up, sometimes viciously, by police or male bystanders, always with impunity. The same women were imprisoned and subjected to force-feeding of a barbaric cruelty and crudity, now and then with fatal results. It was a very far cry from the hen-party sociological caviling and post-adolescent identity problems of most so-called “feminists” today.

The young Rebecca wrote in support of her feminist contemporaries with stunning eloquence and a withering contempt for the smugness of the male establishment of the day. But as she herself says, her dedication did not extend to activism. She was not the marching type, but a consistently sane advocate who could (and did) censure her own side for their wilder flights of biological fancy, and for a certain tendency to promote the sex-hatred which is still around today. She was deadly with adversaries in print, easily able to strangle an antifeminist author with the rope of his own prejudice, chapter and verse:

“Bodily unfaithfulness rather than spiritual unfaithfulness” comes natural to them [i.e. men]. “If a wife is unfaithful to her husband, a bigger revolution takes place in her moral nature than takes place in the moral nature of her husband.” In other words, a man is always more of a hog than a woman.

Ugh! Men aren't like this. . . . Yet . . . this book will stir up many doubts. . . .

Unfortunately Miss Marcus is determined to make *The Young*

Rebecca harp on the feminist string at all costs. To this end she includes material which belongs back in the archives—reviews of obscure works by forgotten authors like Louis Billington Grieg, Mary H.J. Skrine, W.L. George, et al. In order to make room for this stuff she has omitted an account of the first British performance of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, a piece on Sir Edward Carson and the Irish question, and commentary on pacifism, anti-Semitism, and Bertrand Russell, any of which would surely retain its heat in today's political climate.

Like any writer young or old, Rebecca West committed her share of howlers to paper, and there are splendid examples in this book:

The men of the commercial and financial world are the merest accident of a complicated social system; their work has nothing to do with the satisfaction of the natural hungers of mankind . . .

But even within the seven-year scope of this collection, she grows visibly in her social and political grasp of the events she is writing about. Framed by her peculiar brand of sanity, this tends to diminish her mistakes, so that they matter less than the excellence or sheer power of what is there besides.

Miss Marcus, on the other hand, places errors and banality at the very center of her concerns, so that they dominate her writing. Socialism, she says, “is a way of thinking which could make all men behave like brothers in the ordinary pursuits of life.” It would be gormless enough for anyone who knew the story of Cain and Abel to write that at any time. To write it in the 1980s is a dereliction of common sense. But there is worse. As an academic in the field of English literature, Miss Marcus labels the years 1911-17 as “an age which saw the debasement of language.” These were the last years of Henry James. There were others about, including Ezra Pound, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and a few more who were giving new life and power to our wretched tongue—including, of course, Rebecca West. Worst of all, Miss Marcus's editing and commentary are intensely annoying because they try to cram the young Rebecca into a mold clearly too narrow to hold her. The gloss should be read skeptically and with great care—if at all.

Obviously Miss Marcus has read the contents of this book but manages to overlook one glaringly patent fact: the “socialism” stitched into some of the coverage and essays is pro-forma rhetoric, a left-wing jargon which sticks out of Rebecca West's