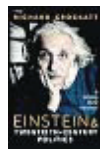


How Einstein brought politics into the equation

An account of the great physicist's campaigns for freedom and justice impresses *Andrew Robinson*

EINSTEIN AND 20TH CENTURY POLITICS

by Richard Crockatt



236PP, OUP, £25



When Albert Einstein paid his sole visit to Palestine in 1923, he was

bombarded with requests to move his home from increasingly anti-Semitic Berlin – then the world's leading centre for physics – to

Jerusalem. “My heart says yes but my head no,” he reflected in his travel diary, notwithstanding his considerable sympathy for Zionism and visceral dislike of German authoritarianism since childhood.

In 1933, as the Nazis came to power, Einstein had no choice but to move – to the United States. There he continued theoretical physics research, while in 1939-40 privately encouraging President Roosevelt to build an atomic bomb, lest German physicists managed to build one first, and in 1950 publicly discouraging President Truman from building a hydrogen bomb, lest it destroy humanity. In 1952, the new state of Israel offered Einstein its presidency. Though deeply honoured, he refused, knowing how ill-suited he was to office work and committee meetings. With Einstein, the

pursuit of science – generally alone – always took precedence.

And yet no scientist, with the possible exception of Charles Darwin, interests the non-scientific world as much as Einstein. There are some 1,700 individual books about him. The majority focus on science, but they include two scintillating anthologies of Einstein's statements about politics: *Einstein on Peace* (1960) and the more extensive *Einstein on Politics* (2007); many biographies that deal with his political views; and *The Einstein File* (2002), a study based on declassified FBI files detailing J Edgar Hoover's determined attempt in the early Fifties to prove that Einstein was a communist sympathiser who should be deported.

Einstein and Twentieth-Century Politics by Richard Crockatt, a retired professor of American history, is the first book to survey the range of Einstein's political activism historically, from his public opposition to Germany's role in the First World War until his death in 1955. In engaging, non-academic prose, it covers Einstein's not-always-consistent attitudes towards pacifism, Zionism/Israel and nuclear weapons/the arms race, his advocacy of world government from 1945 and his courageous support for individual freedom during the McCarthyite period of the Cold War.

While inevitably selective, the book offers stimulating analysis of the effects of Einstein's words and actions, and illuminating



comparisons with the political involvements of his non-scientific contemporaries such as Sigmund Freud, Mahatma Gandhi, Thomas Mann, Romain Rolland, Bertrand Russell, George Bernard Shaw and HG Wells, with whom Einstein interacted and sometimes collaborated. In 1955, for example, the last document he signed was the influential Russell-Einstein manifesto alerting the world to the dangers of nuclear war, with its still-powerful final plea: “Remember your humanity, and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new Paradise; if you cannot, there lies before you the risk of universal death.”

Of course, people were curious about Einstein’s political views chiefly because of his authoritative scientific achievements. Many hoped that science could be applied to politics. However, Einstein perceived little connection. In 1949, a psychologist enquired to what extent the equation $E = mc^2$ (notorious for its application in the Bomb) was motivated by “your unusual degree of humanitarianism”? Einstein responded “with characteristic bluntness”, notes Crockatt, as follows: “My scientific work is motivated by an irresistible longing to understand the secrets of nature and by no other feelings. My love for justice and the striving to contribute to the improvement of human conditions are quite independent from my scientific interests.”

Regrettably, the book has insufficient coverage of Einstein’s complex attitude towards the Soviet Union. Unlike some contemporaries, who were fellow travellers, Einstein never joined the Communist Party (or indeed any party) and chose not to visit

Russia: a fact neglected by Crockatt. Einstein bluntly attacked Soviet ruthlessness, but, having experienced the reality of big-power politics in Europe and the US, he nevertheless refused to

draw a clear distinction between the communist world and the so-called free world.

“I prefer to speak of a power conflict between East and West,” he wrote in his final, undelivered, message in April 1955, “although, the world being round, it is not even clear what precisely is meant by the terms East and West.” No doubt such politics was sufficient evidence for Hoover and Joseph McCarthy to condemn Einstein as a communist sympathiser. But it was consistent with his lifelong, salutary conviction, documented throughout *Einstein and Twentieth-Century Politics*, that the individual always matters more than the nation.

Andrew Robinson is the author of *Einstein: A Hundred Years of Relativity* (Princeton)



Powerful: Einstein's last document warned of the dangers of nuclear war