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Bertrand Russell: The Committed Sceptic in Public Life

ABSTRACT

Bertrand Russell came from a political family but was devoted to an academic life before 1914. It was the Great War which transformed him. He broke from the Liberal Party, began to regard himself as a socialist and became a prominent public intellectual, noted for his independence of mind. Throughout the rest of his long life he earned a living as a writer and public speaker, devoting at least as much time to politics and social questions as he did to philosophy and science. Though Russell's intellectual gifts were exceptional his political odyssey was not. It illustrates the strength of liberalism and its permeability with socialism in twentieth century Britain, as well as the relatively strong tradition of dissent on matters of defence and foreign policy found within these overlapping political cultures.

Keywords: *Bertrand Russell, liberalism, socialism, anti-nuclear campaigning, United Kingdom, United States*

Liberalism

Bertrand Russell was born into one of the leading families of the Whig aristocracy on 18 May 1872. In middle age he described himself as “a British Whig, with a British love of compromise and moderation”.¹ His parents were free-thinkers and radical reformers, disciples and friends of John Stuart Mill. Both were dead before Russell was four years old. In February 1876 he was taken to live at Pembroke Lodge in Richmond Park, with his grandparents, the former Prime Minister Lord John Russell and his second wife. Lord John Russell died when Bertrand was only six years old and it was his grandmother who became the most important person in his childhood. Russell described the Dowager Countess as a “Victorian Puritan”, fluent in French, German and Italian, familiar with the classics of literature and possessed of “a minute knowledge of English history according to the Whig tradition” and of British politics since 1830, which she experienced first-

1 Bertrand Russell. Introduction: On the Value of Scepticism, in: Bertrand Russell: Sceptical Essays, London 1928/1991), p. II.

hand.² Though he studied mathematics at Cambridge, becoming a Fellow of Trinity in 1895, and developed an early interest in philosophy, Russell's first published book, arising from two extended trips to Berlin in 1895, was concerned with the avant-garde politics of German Social Democracy. It was a little later, in consequence of contact with American academics in the United States, before he realised "the superiority of Germany to England in almost all academic matters".³

Russell was not, however, favourably impressed by German politics. He saw that the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) possessed "a complete, self-contained philosophy of the world and of human development" that, in a word, its doctrine amounted to "a religion and an ethic".⁴ There was, he thought "an almost oriental tinge in the belief, shared by all orthodox Marxians, that capitalistic society is doomed, the advent of the communist state a foreordained necessity". This gave the SPD emotional strength as a fighting force but it was based, in Russell's view, on theories which could not withstand critical scrutiny – a stricture which he applied to all of Marx's economic doctrines. The political success of the SPD he attributed to the mistakes and cowardice of the other political parties in Germany. And yet he saw the possibility of reform and peaceful development:

If the Social Democrats can abandon their uncompromising attitude, without losing their strength; if other parties, perceiving this change, adopt a more conciliatory tone; and if an emperor or a chancellor should arise, less uncompromisingly hostile to every advance in civilization or freedom than Bismarck or Wilhelm II.

Otherwise, Russell forecast, the SPD would eventually acquire its majority and, if intransigence continued on both sides, Germany would face either civil war or external "war and extinction of the national life" leading to the "almost inevitable doom of the German Empire".⁵

Until the First World War these thoughts were about the full extent of Russell's publicly expressed interest in socialism. He was already, however, an advanced Liberal. Russell thought democracy necessary to any civilised politics but he was opposed to the extreme individualism of classical liberalism. He described himself as a Liberal Imperialist⁶ when the Boer War began in the autumn of 1899, but had become a pro-Boer and a

2 Bertrand Russell: *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell: 1872–1914*, London 1967, pp. 20–21.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

4 Bertrand Russell: *German Social Democracy: Six Lectures*, London 1896, p. 1, at <http://archive.org/stream/germansocialdemoorussgoog#page/n8/mode/2up> (accessed on 3 May 2012).

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 162–163

6 Led ineffectually by Lord Rosebery, the Liberal Imperialists wanted the Liberal Party to build up its working class support and secure its middle class base by combining measures of social

pacifist by early 1901. In 1902 he joined The Coefficients dining club established by the Fabian leaders, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, which brought together political thinkers dissatisfied with conventional party politics and keen on social reforms capable of addressing the many inefficiencies in British life. Russell was shocked by the attitudes of most of those gathered at these meetings. All of them, except Russell himself and H. G. Wells, were imperialists.⁷ They included W.A.S. Hewins (Director of the London School of Economics); Sir Edward Grey, the future Foreign Secretary, who was already arguing for the policy that would lead to the Entente with France in 1904; and H. J. Mackinder, the theorist of geopolitics. Russell remembered them looking “forward without too much apprehension to a war with Germany”. He “spoke vehemently” against Grey’s policy, at one of these meetings, claiming that it would lead straight to such a catastrophic outcome.⁸

Although Russell’s academic reputation was made in the field of mathematical philosophy with the publication of *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903) and the three volumes of *Principia Mathematica* (from 1910) which he wrote with A. N. Whitehead, it is clear that his interest in politics and public life was already well developed before he became a lecturer at the University of Cambridge in 1910. Party politics in Britain was convulsed in October 1903 when Joseph Chamberlain launched a campaign for Tariff Reform based on a system of imperial preference. His intention was to create a closed empire trading bloc which would protect and develop British manufacturing, integrate the imperial economies, develop self-sufficiency and augment Britain’s capacity for waging wars. The Liberal Party, supported by the nascent Labour Party, was galvanised to fight against this platform in defence of Free Trade and was duly swept to power in February 1906 with a landslide majority. The war fever that had sustained the Conservatives at the wartime election of 1900 had passed and the government had managed to unite its opponents behind the defence of the Free Trade orthodoxy which most of the voters associated with cheap food. Russell himself stood as a Liberal candidate at a by-election in Wimbledon in May 1907. His address to the electors mentioned four policies – his support for women’s suffrage, Free Trade, the taxation of land values and universal old age pensions. Unsuccessful in his bid to become an MP – and failed in an attempt to be adopted as a Liberal candidate in 1910 – Russell continued to regard himself as a Liberal, though one belonging to its Radical wing. He supported the new government’s reforming programme accordingly.

reform with defence of the Empire. They were utterly vague on policy but were clear that classical Liberalism of the sort associated with Gladstone could not answer the needs of national efficiency. National efficiency was briefly the rallying cry for all those disaffected with conventional party politics.

7 Bertrand Russell: *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell: 1872–1914*, p. 153

8 Bertrand Russell: *Portraits From Memory: And Other Essays*, London 1958, pp. 76–77.

The years 1906–14 witnessed important Liberal reforms designed to appeal to the trade unions and the working class voter. The Labour Party (formed in 1900) had only 29 Members of Parliament in 1906 (rising to 42 in 1910). It was still possible to contain it within the great Liberal coalition and this is no doubt what some of the reforms were intended to secure – on workmen’s compensation, school meals, a school medical service, old age pensions, a minimum wage, an eight-hours Act for the coalfields, payment for Members of Parliament, reform of the laws affecting collective bargaining, the introduction of Labour Exchanges and national insurance on health and unemployment. David Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, also took measures to finance this programme, at least in part, through progressive taxation. His People’s Budget was vetoed by the House of Lords and this led to two general elections in 1910 which eventually produced the Parliament Act (1911), and resolution of the constitutional crisis, by a measure that diminished the Lords’ powers to those of delay only. It was possible for contemporaries to view this Edwardian Liberal programme as the culmination of a process that began in the wake of the Second Reform Act (1867). This had created an electorate in which the artisan class was the largest proportion of urban voters. By the early 1870s leading Radicals were calling for the Liberals to introduce a connected scheme of reforms of social improvement that would appeal to these new voters.⁹ In 1885 – in the immediate wake of another extension of the franchise which added two million to the rolls – Joseph Chamberlain launched a Radical Programme designed to do just that. The election of independent Labour candidates to Parliament by now had become a dangerous possibility for the Liberals. The Radical Programme realised this danger and Chamberlain outraged many in his own party when, in a speech on 5 January 1885, he asked “what ransom will property pay for the security it enjoys?” In the same speech he asserted that “society owes a compensation to the poorer classes of this country [...] it ought to recognise that claim and pay it”.¹⁰ He thrilled future politicians like Lloyd George and Ramsay MacDonald with such rhetoric, denouncing reactionary landowners and purveyors of the cant of *laissez-faire* alike.¹¹

Between 1874 and 1885 about one-third of Liberal MPs could be counted as Radicals; between 1886 and 1895 the proportion had risen to 70 per cent.¹² By this later date liberalism itself had also undergone an important ideological development in England. The New Liberalism, as it was called, built a powerful case against *laissez-faire* and in favour of social amelioration through state action. Its theoretical roots need not concern us here but it is important to see that it carried political weight and drew on the critique of social

9 Dennis Judd: *Radical Joe: A Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, London 1977, p. 64.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 117–118.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

12 G. L. Bernstein: *Liberalism and Liberal Politics in Edwardian England*, Winchester 1986, p. 9.

injustice which some of the country's most important public intellectuals – men like Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold – had already helped to fix in the minds of activists on the political left. The Liberal Party in Parliament looked as if it had finally found the will and the opportunity to put such ideas into practice between 1900 and 1914. The infant Labour Party seemed content to follow where the Liberals led and on most important issues had nothing distinctive to offer.

All of this is important in establishing the strength of liberalism as an ideology and as a party in Britain. Russell belonged to this coalition of interests, now committed to social and economic reform. But the optimistic picture of liberalism has also to be qualified. The pace of reform did not satisfy activists for the women's vote, of whom Russell was one. The agitation for the vote became violent in 1912. It coincided with an explosion of industrial unrest in the years 1910–14, which saw the doubling of trade union membership and numerous conflicts in the major cities and towns. This also may have suggested that the pace of reform was too slow. On top of this the Conservative Party and its allies among the Unionists of Ulster prepared to defy any Act of Parliament introducing Home Rule for Ireland. Lloyd George himself, addressing representatives of the City in July 1914, warned that if the Irish and labour rebellions should coincide “the situation will be the gravest threat with which any government has had to deal for centuries”.¹³ It was only a matter of days before the beginning of the Great War, an event which prevented this triple crisis developing any further. Academic opinion is divided on the question of whether the war dealt the death blow to the Liberal Party as a party of government or if the seeds of its decline were already germinating before 1914.¹⁴ But Russell was in no doubt about the significance of August 1914 for himself; he described the years 1910–14 as a period of personal transition, his life before 1910 being as sharply divided from his life after 1914 as Faust's was before and after his meeting with Mephistopheles.¹⁵ The First World War was thus the major turning point in Russell's political life.

First World War

His powerful sense of isolation from others – something he periodically complained about – did not leave him completely immune to the enthusiasm for war which he saw all around him. He later testified to the effort required, the feelings of patriotism he felt, but also to his “desire for intellectual sobriety” which made him try to view matters of

13 Quoted in: E. Halevy: *The Rule of Democracy: 1905–14*, New York 1961, p. 486.

14 The debate is summarised in: D. Tanner: *Political Change and the Labour Party: 1900–1918*, London 1990, pp. 1–19.

15 Bertrand Russell: *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell 2: 1914–1944*, London 1968, p. 15.

passionate emotion as if they were elements in symbolic logic.¹⁶ But he was assisted in this effort by his inability to see any great matters of principle for which the war was worth fighting. He was thus able to abide by his grandmother's favourite Biblical text: "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil".¹⁷ His fidelity to the Liberal Party at once collapsed, however, and never returned. But his understanding of the war rapidly changed in the course of its duration. Initially he took a position similar to the one the Union of Democratic Control (UDC) developed in November 1914. He thought the war was the result of a disastrous secret diplomacy. Britain should have remained neutral, foreign affairs in future would have to be subject to democratic control and a League of Nations would be necessary to resolve international disputes. One of his university friends, G. Lowes Dickinson, did more than most to promote the idea of a League of Nations. Leading thinkers in the UDC – E. D. Morel, J. A. Hobson, Norman Angell, Arthur Ponsonby, Charles Trevelyan, and Charles Buxton – deserted the Liberal Party for the Labour Party after the war, where they joined earlier Liberal converts to Labour among the UDC leadership, like Henry Brailsford and Frederick Pethwick-Lawrence. It is hardly surprising that Russell was speculating about a new post-war order, built by a new party, perhaps created from the merger of Labour and Liberal radicals like those he was drawn to, and ready to implement a far-reaching programme of democratisation in administration, the armed forces, the conduct of foreign affairs and elsewhere.¹⁸

But he could also see that a righteous war was not simply one which had the correct diplomatic preliminaries. To avoid future wars more would have to be done than the UDC imagined. More important than the reforms it envisaged, according to Russell, was the realisation that basic human passions were involved in generating popular support for wars. These would not disappear simply as a result of institutional reforms of the sort favoured by the UDC. Something more fundamental also would be necessary, involving long-term education and a deeper understanding of human psychology. In 1916 he argued that war grew out of ordinary human nature.¹⁹ Impulses were at the root of the problem and they could only be countered effectively by other impulses – creative impulses that make for life such as love, constructiveness and the joy of life. Substantial

16 Bertrand Russell: *Some Psychological Difficulties of Pacifism in War-Time: 1935*, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *How to Keep the Peace: The Pacifist Dilemma 1935–38* (The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell 21), London 2008, pp. 64–67.

17 Bertrand Russell: *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell 1: 1872–1914*, p. 22.

18 Bertrand Russell: *Friends of Progress Betrayed*, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *Prophecy and Dissent: 1914–16* (The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell 13), London 2008, pp. 3–5.

19 Bertrand Russell: *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, London 1916, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *Prophecy and Dissent: 1914–16* (The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell 13), London 2008 p. 11.

institutional change would be needed to provide the conditions for their growth. But Russell encouraged his readers to believe that such profound change was possible and he invoked the growth of the socialist movement as an illustration of “a great and growing power” that had begun life with “isolated theorists”.²⁰ Education and the psychological springs of human behaviour would remain emphases of Russell’s writings for the rest of his life, so would his interest in socialism. Another recurring trope made its first appearance in the first weeks of the war crisis; Russell adopted the standpoint of a guardian of civilisation, as he did on future occasions of crisis.

When civilisation itself was threatened Russell could not be confused with those ethical opponents of killing whom we also call pacifist. Russell was a pacifist only in the original meaning of the term – that is, he was one who believed in the possibility of war avoidance. If wars furthered the ends of civilisation they could be justified in Russell’s view and he openly admitted what all nineteenth century liberals had felt – that when backward peoples stood in the way of progress their suppression was justified on utilitarian grounds.²¹ He certainly thought Britain could have, and should have, avoided involvement in the Great War, a war between civilised nations. But when he looked to the war in the East, in November 1914, his loathing of Tsarist Russia and his admiration for German culture got the better of him. In a UDC pamphlet he openly accepted the argument – popular in Berlin of course – that Germany in the East was defending civilisation against the backward Slavs.²² While the war in the East had what he called a certain “ethnic inevitability”, the war in the West was the result of alliances built in response to 1870 and the “folly” of Germany’s naval programme. This was an argument he soon dropped from his anti-war writings.

Russell actively campaigned against the war as a member of the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF), which became a significant movement when conscription was introduced into law in January 1916. In December 1915 he published his most detailed study of British foreign policy in reply to officially-sponsored propaganda written by Professor Gilbert Murray. He accepted that Germany bore the greatest responsibility for the outbreak of the war, and its subsequent conduct, but held fast to the conviction that the “maxims” of British foreign policy had led to Britain’s unnecessary involvement. He explained his stance:

If we seem to emphasise the faults on our side, that is because they are ignored by our compatriots; if we seem to say little about the faults on the other side, that is because every newspaper and professor throughout the country is making them known. More-

20 Ibid., p. 225.

21 Bertrand Russell: *The Ethics of War*, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *Prophecy and Dissent*, p. 67.

22 Bertrand Russell: *War, The Offspring of Fear*, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *Prophecy and Dissent*, pp. 37–47.

over, it is more profitable to be conscious of our own faults than of the faults of our enemies; we can amend our own faults if we become aware of them, whereas we only increase hatred on both sides by proclaiming the faults of the enemy.²³

He maintained that Britain's foreign policy since 1904 had strengthened the war party in Germany, weakened the friends of peace in Germany and supported France and Russia "in enterprises which were inherently indefensible".

As the war dragged on, he repeatedly warned of its dangers to civilisation and of the threat it represented of ending "the most wonderful upward movement" of European culture carried on since the Renaissance. Only pride, fear and hatred prolonged the conflict. In July 1916 he wrote leaflets for the NCF calling for peace negotiations in which he referred to Germany having "repeatedly offered terms of peace".²⁴ At the end of the year he argued again that peace negotiations were feasible and would meet with popular support. Bethmann-Hollweg's peace note delivered to the American embassy on 12 December signalled that Germany was receptive to such overtures, according to Russell. He warned against the sort of peace that the advocates of "total victory" would bring about – a peace based on fear and humiliation. Yet this, he saw, was what the new coalition government formed by Lloyd-George in Britain was aiming to achieve. He wrote an open letter to President Woodrow Wilson, as these steps were taken in December 1916, in the belief that the United States could use its power to put a stop to the unnecessary slaughter and ruination of civilisation.²⁵ But he publicly took issue with Lowes Dickinson in January 1917 about the utility of a future "League to Enforce Peace" on the grounds that such a body could easily become a new Holy Alliance dedicated to maintenance of the international status quo.²⁶ It is clear that Russell saw no easy solutions to the problem posed by total war in an age of nationalism and industrial capitalism.

Revolution in Russia in March 1917 offered fresh hope and Russell was present when the event was celebrated by a mass meeting at the Royal Albert Hall. An "ancient, corrupt and cruel tyranny" had been overthrown and there was at least the possibility that the anti-war "Labour faction" could gain the upper-hand in Petrograd/Saint Petersburg. A major incentive to militarism in Germany – the Tsarist regime – might be removed from the scene. These initial thoughts were reinforced by the Charter of Freedom which committed Russia to civic freedoms, abolition of social, religious and national discrimi-

23 Bertrand Russell: *The Policy of the Entente: 1904–1914: A Reply to Professor Gilbert Murray*, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *Prophecy and Dissent*, pp. 214–280.

24 Bertrand Russell: *What Are We Fighting For?*, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *Prophecy and Dissent*, p. 419.

25 Bertrand Russell: *Letter to President Wilson*, in: Richard A. Rempel et al. (eds.): *Pacifism and Revolution: 1916–18 (Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell 14)*, London 1995), pp. 21–24.

26 Bertrand Russell: *Two Ideals of Pacifism: January 1917*, in: Richard A. Rempel et al. (eds.): *Pacifism and Revolution*, pp. 28–31.

nations, and universal suffrage. The Provisional Government also renounced any annexationist ambitions. But Russell was not convinced that America's entry into the war would hasten its end and he soon began to attach more hope to the "Council of Soldiers and Workmen" in Russia which, he argued in April 1917, was at least as powerful as the Provisional Government and had stopped it from reaffirming Russia's imperial ambitions.²⁷ Though Russell saw no possibility of a revolution in Britain he thought the fear of it might lead the authorities towards peace faster than the pacifist agitations of people like himself. He felt the need to resign his chairmanship of the NCF and to make clear that he did not – unlike many of its members – object in principle to the use of force, which he acknowledged as an active factor in revolutions.²⁸ After the Leeds Convention on 3 June, when enthusiasts for the Russian Revolution called for the creation of soviets in Britain, Russell argued that "it is only the fear of revolt by organised Labour that will force our rulers to allow peace to come about".²⁹ He also saw good prospects for revolution in Germany if its rulers rejected peace initiatives from the Entente and argued that "all parties in Germany" recognised the need for democratic change.³⁰ Russell began to link capitalism to war as well as to economic injustice.³¹ He saw evidence that local Labour Parties in Britain were making common cause with conscientious objectors, while the party was becoming more broadly based and even ready to make itself into "a great People's Party". He thought that Labour could force the British government to open peace negotiations by December 1917.

The government refused him a passport to prevent him making a journey to the United States in July 1916 and a few days later he was informed that he had been removed from his lectureship at Trinity, following his successful prosecution for "impeding recruitment and discipline". His anti-war speeches also led to a ban from all coastal regions. Then, in February 1918, he was prosecuted under the Defence of the Realm Act and sentenced to six months imprisonment in response to an article calling upon the Labour Party to accept the most recent German peace offer, while asserting that the British and Americans were more worried by the threat of Bolshevism and the fillip to revolutionaries which the Russian revolution and its call for a peace without annexations

27 Bertrand Russell: *The Russian Revolution*, in: Richard A. Rempel et al. (eds.): *Pacifism and Revolution*, pp. 153–54.

28 Bertrand Russell: *Letter of Resignation*, in: Richard A. Rempel et al. (eds.): *Pacifism and Revolution*, pp. 162–164.

29 Bertrand Russell: *Lord Derby and Leeds*, in: Richard A. Rempel et al. (eds.): *Pacifism and Revolution*, pp. 183–184.

30 Bertrand Russell: *The Chances of Peace: 14 June 1917*, in: Richard A. Rempel et al. (eds.): *Pacifism and Revolution*, pp. 187–88.

31 Bertrand Russell: *Pacifism and Economic Revolution and A Pacifist Revolution?*, in: Richard A. Rempel et al. (eds.): *Pacifism and Revolution*, pp. 196–197 and 201–202.

and indemnities had supplied. This was the time when Russell first began to doubt the value of an academic career. He was losing much of his interest in philosophy around the same time when he began to realise, partly under Wittgenstein's influence, that the philosophy of mathematics would not be able to disclose a realm of certain knowledge of the sort that had inspired his academic work. By 1918 he was also convinced that he could do more good as a public intellectual than as an academic. He already had an international reputation for both his academic work and his opposition to the war which could give him the necessary platform. He would use it in the fields of social and political commentary and analysis.

The Bolshevik Revolution

Russell's interest in socialism clearly increased as he became convinced that "the greatest evil of the existing system is [...] the concentration of economic power". He wrote on syndicalism and direct action and became an advocate briefly of Guild Socialism – an English variant of syndicalism which envisaged the gradual encroachment on managerial prerogatives by organised workers culminating in devolved, socialised, internally self-governing units of industrial power, which would operate alongside a co-equal state authority representing consumers. Typically Russell showed no interest in thinking through the detail of the Guild Socialist vision. He was more concerned to stress that to replace concentrated economic power in private hands with the concentrated power of the state – as he detected in Marxism – would represent a supreme folly. That was to remain his principle objection to mainstream conceptions of socialism, even though he could see a valid and enlarged role for the state in economic management. Socialists imagined that the socialist state would be run by people like themselves, he perceived, when in fact "they will bear as little resemblance to the present Socialists as the dignitaries of the Church after the time of Constantine, bore to the Apostles."³² The ambitious executive type would replace those with zeal for the public good. Marxian socialism would give far too much power to the state, which would become the main oppressor, while syndicalism by abolishing the state would be forced to reinvent it in order to deal with the rivalries of multiple groups of producers. Russell endorsed Eduard Bernstein's revisions to Marx's account of contemporary capitalism but he was far from enamoured of the representative democracy which social democrats depended on.³³ The defects inherent in the system, he thought, included hypocrisy and cynicism among the elected representatives as they competed by flattery for the attention of ignorant voters, before retiring to the seat of government, cocooned from that same public. Guild Socialism attracted him as a way of addressing these evils, but even this alternative required a diffused respect for liberty

32 Bertrand Russell: *Roads to Freedom*, London 1989, pp. 91–92.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 39–43.

and an absence of submissiveness to government among the populace – and these things could not be conjured overnight.

In May 1920 he entered Soviet Russia, attached as an observer to a group of Labour and trade union delegates from Britain. He met Trotsky and conversed for an hour with Lenin, seeing the vanity, “lightning intelligence” and charisma of the former and the “religious faith” in Marxism and personal asceticism of the latter. Lenin, he thought, had “as little love for liberty” as the men who suffered under Diocletian and who retaliated in kind when they themselves acquired power. He reported his impressions to *The Nation* drawing attention to the gulf that separated Western sympathisers of Bolshevik Russia from the reality:

Friends of Russia ... think of the dictatorship of the proletariat as merely a new form of representative government [...]. They think *proletariat* means *proletariat* but *dictatorship* does not quite mean *dictatorship*. This is the opposite of the truth. When a Russian Communist speaks of dictatorship, he means the word literally, but when he speaks of proletariat, he means the word in the Pickwickian sense. He means [...] the Communist Party.³⁴

He thought the Oriental traits in the Russian character had produced a mentality not unlike that of Mohammed’s followers. Opposition was crushed without mercy using the methods of the Tsarist police. Repression was justified in terms of ultimate goals. The nearest analogy was Plato’s ideal state, with the Bolsheviks in the role of the Guardians, sole possessors of power and beneficiaries of “innumerable advantages” in consequence of this fact. Were the Bolsheviks to succeed in persuading other socialists to emulate their methods the result would be a disaster for civilisation because the road indicated would be the road of civil war. Were the Bolsheviks to cling on to power indefinitely, Russell predicted that their Communism would fade and their government would come to resemble “any other Asiatic Government”. He had already noticed that Trotsky was “not by any means” regarded as Lenin’s equal by the other Bolsheviks; that the Soviet system – far from representing a superior form of democracy – was already “moribund”; that the Communists were virtually absent in the villages; and that all real power was concentrated in the Communist Party – 600,000 people in a population of 120 million. He also saw that the Bolsheviks “love everything in modern industry”, except private profit, and were subjecting the workforce to “harsh discipline” in an effort to modernise the country. Lenin’s regime was stable and Russia needed a strong government, in Russell’s opinion, because the country was not ready “for any form of democracy”. These conclusions were

34 Bertrand Russell: Impressions of Bolshevik Russia, in: Richard A. Rempel et. al. (eds.): *Uncertain Paths to Freedom: Russia and China, 1919–22* (Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell 15), London 2000, pp. 176–98.

repeated in subsequent journalistic essays and in book-length treatment in *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* during the course of 1920.³⁵

Russell's private correspondence was scathing about the Bolshevik regime. No vestige of liberty survived, he told Ottoline Morell, and the regime was "unspeakably horrible".³⁶ Publicly he called the Russian Revolution "one of the great heroic events of the world's history", recognising its power to change men's beliefs. Bolshevism was "something radically new" combining "characteristics of the French Revolution with those of the rise of Islam". Russell recognised its power to inspire and argued that socialism itself was desirable. He repeated his claim that the new regime was better able to prevent a slide into chaos than anything else available in Russia. But the Bolshevik project was building something worse than capitalism.³⁷ He took issue with its mentality of "militant certainty" about objectively doubtful matters and contrasted it with the "temper of constructive and fruitful scepticism" associated with the scientific outlook. Behind Bolshevik fanaticism Russell perceived cruelty, some of it "Russian rather than Communist" but much of it deriving from ideology, especially its "dogmatism of hatred" and conviction that human nature could be transformed by force.³⁸ The dictatorship had already "shot thousands without proper trial" and labour desertion from the factories could lead to "internment in concentration camps" in the context of the general "militarization of labour" that the Bolsheviks had instituted.³⁹ Russell's judgements carried force on the British left because they were those of one who supported the professed goals of Communism while condemning attempts to bring down the Bolsheviks by force.

When thinking about China, following a visit there in 1920, Russell also advocated socialism, even "a large amount" of state socialism, as long as the Chinese developed a

public spirit in place of the family ethic, a transference to the public service of that honesty which already exists in private business, and a degree of energy which is at present rare. I believe that Young China is capable of fulfilling these requisites, spurred on by patriotism; but it is important to realise that they are requisites, and that, without them, any system of State Socialism must fail.

He argued that: "All the Great Powers, without exception, have interests which are incompatible, in the long run, with China's welfare and with the best development of

35 For example in Bertrand Russell: *Why Russia Endures Bolshevism*, in: Richard A. Rempel et al. (eds.): *Uncertain Paths to Freedom*, pp. 200–201.

36 Ray Monk: *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude*, London 1997, p. 583.

37 Bertrand Russell: *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, first published in 1920, London 1969, p. 18.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 18, 89–90.

39 *Ibid.*, pp. 35.

Chinese civilisation. Therefore the Chinese must seek salvation in their own energy, not in the benevolence of any outside Power". Patriotism was absolutely necessary to the regeneration of China while independence should be sought, not as an end in itself, but as a means "towards a new blend of Western skill with the traditional Chinese virtues. If this end is not achieved, political independence will have little value." The three chief requisites, he thought, were the establishment of an orderly Government; industrial development under Chinese control; and the spread of education. But the priority had to be ending the political anarchy, followed by industrialisation, so that foreigners could not establish a permanent control over the country.⁴⁰ Public interest in Russell among the Chinese intelligentsia derived from his reputation there as a great social and political thinker, at a time of nationalist revival and the turn to Western thought among political activists following the 4 May anti-imperialist demonstrations in Beijing in 1919. A twenty-six year old student called Mao Zedong attended one of Russell's public lectures on Bolshevik Russia, recording his doubts about the practicality of Russell's argument that communism was better achieved by the gradual enlightenment of the propertied classes, rather than by war and violent revolution.⁴¹ But there was clearly much in Russell's views that Mao could agree with.⁴²

The Scientific Method

Political ideologies with teleological dimensions and claims of self-sufficiency always fell foul of Russell's scepticism. He believed that the only way to obtain knowledge was by the scientific way, which he thought of as the experimental and observational method employed by Galileo, a method that established facts as a basis for quantitative laws.⁴³ He argued that "marriage with the world is not achieved by an ideal which shrinks from fact, or demands in advance that the world shall conform to its desires". In his view "Ethical considerations can only legitimately appear when the truth has been ascertained: they can and should appear as determining our feeling towards the truth, and our manner of ordering our lives in view of the truth, but not as themselves dictating what the truth is to be."⁴⁴ He believed in the "intrinsic value of a scientific habit of mind in forming our outlook on the world". If education cultivated this habit more broadly it would "give us a true view of our place in society, of the relation of the whole human

40 Bertrand Russell: *The Problem of China*, London 1922.

41 Ray Monk: Bertrand Russell, p. 592.

42 Jonathan Spence: *Mao*, London 1999, p. 38. In 1919 Mao himself had argued that in fighting oppression it was self-defeating to use the tools of oppression.

43 Bertrand Russell: *The Scientific Outlook*, London 1931, pp. 22–24.

44 Bertrand Russell: *Mysticism and Logic*, in: Bertrand Russell: *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays*, London 1918, 1970, p. 13.

society to its non-human environment, and of the nature of the non-human world as it is in itself apart from our desires and interests".⁴⁵ For Russell "the kernel of the scientific outlook is the refusal to regard our own desires, tastes and interests as affording a key to the understanding of the world." It involved the "sweeping away of all other desires in the interests of the desire to know", the "suppression of hopes and fears, loves and hates, and the whole subjective emotional life".⁴⁶

He preached scepticism more consistently than he practised it. Opinions held with passion, Russell asserted, "are always those for which no good ground exists" and political opinions "are hardly ever based on evidence". Instead men more often mobilise reason to justify opinions that support their selfish interests. He thought the solution to this problem was a long-term growth in self-awareness informed by advances in psychology and disseminated through the education system leading to a growth in enlightened self-interest.⁴⁷ The scepticism Russell advocated – and which he himself often suspended in his popular writings (for example asserting the scientific value of behaviourist and Freudian psychology)⁴⁸ – amounted to three propositions. When experts agree the opposite opinion cannot be held to be certain; when they are not agreed no opinion can be held to be certain by a non-expert; and when they all agree that no sufficient evidence exists to support a positive opinion, the public should suspend judgement.⁴⁹ While there was a need for scepticism in politics – and certain countries like England had produced enough of it for parliamentary democracy to work tolerably well⁵⁰ – Russell was extremely pessimistic in the 1920s about the bigger reform of mentality required to take this process further. Modern democracy, based on political parties, fed on and promoted division and the tendency of politicians to play to majority prejudices and needs of the moment. The result was that they "cannot pay attention to anything difficult to explain, or to anything not involving division [...] or to anything that would diminish the power of politicians

45 Bertrand Russell: *The Place of Science in a Liberal Education*, in: *Bertrand Russell: Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays*, London 1918, 1970, p. 35.

46 *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.

47 Bertrand Russell: *Can Men Be Rational?*, in: *Bertrand Russell: Sceptical Essays*, London 1928, pp. 40–41

48 He was prone to do this in the 1920s especially, though he did not subject the new psychology to any rigorous examination in his writings. Daniel Russell: *Behaviourism and Values*, in: *Bertrand Russell: Sceptical Essays*, London 1928, pp. 69–75, is not an exception to this pattern.

49 Bertrand Russell: *Introduction: On the Value of Scepticism*, in: *Bertrand Russell: Sceptical Essays*, London 1928, p. 12.

50 Bertrand Russell: *The Danger of Creed Wars*, in: *Bertrand Russell: Sceptical Essays*, London 1928, p. 163.

as a class".⁵¹ Handing over power to experts would simply augment their own impulses towards tyranny and add to their existing defects in matters of political judgement. In the medium term Russell had nothing to offer to correct these maladies other than suggesting a greater role for civil servants and encouraging as many people as possible to become political sceptics like himself, even if this meant "concentrating our enmity upon politicians, instead of nations or social classes".⁵²

He believed that liberalism had flourished in commercial capitalism, like that of England, Holland, the United States and France between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. But industrial capitalism, by contrast, tended to oligarchy and the neutralisation of representative democracy. The US as an advanced form of industrial capitalism often captured Russell's interest and he was a frequent visitor until 1951. In 1922 he could already see that the "world-supremacy" of America was, along with the Bolshevik Revolution, the most important outcome of the war.⁵³ He argued that undeveloped countries that chose socialism – like Russia and, possibly, China – would be no match for American capitalism. They would fall under the economic hegemony of western capitalism unless socialism was victorious in the advanced capitalist countries. But he did not expect the lead in this matter to come from Britain because it was so firmly subordinated – like much of Western Europe – to the US. Thus in practice the future of socialism, Russell argued, depended on developments in the US itself. This was a recurring theme of Russell's writings in the 1920s and amounted to a paradox; the future of socialism depended on America, yet America was firmly committed to capitalism. Indeed, according to Russell, America was on the path of "capitalist imperialism" and therefore destined to play a reactionary role in an international class-war between itself and the oppressed countries of the world.⁵⁴

Writing in 1928 he saw only two great Powers, the US and the Soviet Union. He repeated what he had told the Fabian Society in 1926 – socialism would take more than a hundred years to catch on in the US. The US dominated Western Europe and the Americas, while Bolshevism was already dominating "most of China". It was a division that reminded him of the mediaeval division between the Christian and Islamic worlds; "there is the same kind of difference of creed, the same implacable hostility, and a similar

51 Bertrand Russell: *The Need for Political Scepticism*, in: Bertrand Russell: *Sceptical Essays*, London 1928, p. 101.

52 *Ibid.*, pp. 109–110.

53 Bertrand Russell: *Hopes and Fears as Regards America*, in: *New Republic*, 15 and 22 March 1922, in Barry Feinberg/Ronald Kasrils (eds.): *Bertrand Russell's America: 1896–1945*, Boston 1973, pp. 220–227.

54 Ray Monk: *Bertrand Russell: The Ghost of Madness: 1921–1970*, London 2001, p. 17.

though more extended division of territory”.⁵⁵ He forecast wars between elements in the rival blocs, whereas the blocs themselves would remain antagonistic, capable only of truces, though neither bloc could be victorious in the struggle or gain advantage from the conflict. The stifling of minority opinion in the West – which he thought pronounced – would only lead the more vigorous men to choose communism, a process already underway in the East, especially in China among the patriotic intelligentsia. It was “by no means improbable”, Russell asserted, that in twenty years the Bolshevik ideology would be in power in that country. Meanwhile the US would remain in the grip of an individualist philosophy hostile to collectivism and offering no effective opposition to the holders of power in America itself. Socialism would not be allowed in any of the countries within the American economic orbit.⁵⁶

Russell stood as a Labour candidate in the general election of 1922 arguing that Labour was the only party with a “sane and reasonable” foreign policy. His election address to the voters of Chelsea announced that he supported nationalisation of mines and railways, the introduction of a capital levy, and measures of workers’ control in public industries. But as the previous paragraph suggests he was increasingly pessimistic about what could be achieved in politics in the 1920s. Though he thought the future of civilisation depended upon the triumph of socialism he also believed that the US would delay that outcome by at least a century. Socialism thus represented a distant, global solution for mankind in Russell’s thinking, rather in the way that world government figured in the imagination of British advocates of the League of Nations, of which there were many in the 1920s. For the foreseeable future the nearest mankind could attain to world government would be dependent on the US remaining committed to democracy and prepared to use its military power to dominate the world for the greater good, as seen through a liberal democratic lens.

Russell may have taken comfort in the thought that humanity was but a speck in the universe. He was always acutely conscious of the contingent and brief place of man in the universe, and of the scientific progress that was making “the conquest of Nature” possible (together, admittedly, with the possibility of man’s speedy annihilation). He acknowledged on more than one occasion that he found consolation in contemplating long periods of history, in which perspective man’s time on planet Earth was so small that his achievements did not look so paltry as they otherwise appeared to be. Science as an activity was “the chief agent of rapid change in the world” but where it was recognised and encouraged by the state, scientists themselves were becoming politically conserva-

55 Bertrand Russell: *The Danger of Creed Wars*, in: Bertrand Russell: *Sceptical Essays*, London 1928, p. 163.

56 *Ibid.*, pp. 162–175.

tive.⁵⁷ His biographer refers to the “tone of disillusionment and despair” that pervaded Russell’s *The Scientific Outlook* (1931).⁵⁸ In this work he argued that science itself had undergone an internal development which could be characterised as the passage from contemplation to manipulation. The impulse of love that had given birth to science – love of knowing the world – had been superseded by an impulse of power. Politicians and scientists could be joined successfully together in pursuance of getting things done – like increasing the production of material commodities – and, without a care for moral considerations or the development of what is best in mankind – could strengthen science as a technique for the transformation of our environment and ourselves.⁵⁹ And it is clear that this is what he expected in the foreseeable future.

Appeasement

After Hitler’s accession to power Russell continued to argue that the association of the League of Nations’ Covenant with the Treaty of Versailles had been a “fatal mistake” committing the League to the status quo established at Paris in 1919 and thus incurring the just resentment of Germany. In 1935 he thought the argument of the British isolationists would be right if it could be known that another world war was inevitable. But since that could not be shown he advocated living up to the principles which inspired the formation of the League. Britain could do that by announcing clearly that in the event of war it would side against the aggressor.⁶⁰ When Hitler told the *Reichstag* of his peaceful intentions on 21 May 1935, in the context of the increasing diplomatic isolation of Germany, Russell took Hitler seriously.⁶¹ Russell’s determination to avoid war was no longer a lonely endeavour but reflected a popular mood in Britain, informed by the catastrophe of August 1914. Broad swathes of the public, together with many of those who led the National Government and the Labour Opposition in the House of Commons were united in fear that war would destroy much more than could be gained from it. Russell himself believed that what remained of democracy would perish. He distinguished his own position from that of the political parties by saying that if war came Britain should choose neutrality; whereas the British government was actually preparing for participa-

57 Bertrand Russell: *Is Science Superstitious?*, in: Bertrand Russell: *Sceptical Essays*, London 1928, p. 30.

58 Ray Monk, Bertrand Russell: *The Ghost of Madness: 1921–1970*, p. 124.

59 Bertrand Russell: *The Scientific Outlook*, pp. 269–79.

60 Bertrand Russell: *On Isolationism*, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *How to Keep the Peace: The Pacifist Dilemma, 1935–38* (*The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* 21), London 2008, pp. 5–6.

61 Bertrand Russell: *Hitler’s Thirteen Points*, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *How to Keep the Peace*, pp. 13–14.

tion, however reluctantly. Russell acknowledged the nastiness of the Nazi regime but thought that the threat of war to stop the dictators would only spread the conditions that produced fascism in the first place. Neutrality would strengthen Britain and allow the belligerents to weaken themselves to such an extent that the neutral powers could dictate the terms of peace.⁶² A three-week tour of the Scandinavian countries in the autumn of 1935 no doubt reinforced these convictions; Russell lauded Sweden as “the happiest [country] I know” and attributed its success to the absence of poverty, war, and empire as well as the success of its social policies.⁶³

He expanded on some of these reflections in a lecture given to the Fabian Society on 28 November 1935. Peace, he said, was necessary for the continued existence of Britain as a civilised society; its empire was no longer militarily defensible; and while its vulnerability would act as a constant temptation to aggressors, its existence had no justification. He dismissed the idea of appeasing Hitler with colonial concessions on the grounds that it would simply vindicate his methods and whet his appetite. The Crown Colonies should be handed over to the League and be administered from Geneva.⁶⁴ His public interventions continued to oppose a more belligerent stance towards Germany but in 1936, after Hitler’s remilitarisation of the Rhineland and talk of further British concessions, he worried that when the next war came Britain would fight on the side of the Nazis, such was the desire of “our own reactionaries” to see the “great experiment” of the Soviet Union fall to ruin.⁶⁵ This was a rare instance of Russell sharing two of the more powerful convictions of the contemporary British left; he more often begged to differ. While his own party, Labour, stressed the need for collective security through the League, Russell only saw this as the high road to war – world war.⁶⁶ His maiden speech in the House of Lords in February 1937 (the death of his brother had automatically given him the seat) stressed the scale of the atrocities war would bring with it and he opposed rearmament accordingly. The bombing of Guernica in April confirmed his pessimism. He even objected to the idea of economic boycott and argued that the outlook of the Nazis would only prosper in such circumstances. Anti-Semitism had risen in Germany because of the “terror

62 Bertrand Russell: *How Not to Fight Fascism: August 1935*, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *How to Keep the Peace*, pp. 37–39.

63 Bertrand Russell: *In Lands Where Slums And Wars Are Unknown, 1935*, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *How to Keep the Peace*, pp. 58–62.

64 Bertrand Russell: *Socialism and the Planned States*, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.), pp. 71–79.

65 Bertrand Russell: *Letter to the New Statesman and Nation: 18 July 1936*, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *How to Keep the Peace*, pp. 446–447; see also: Bertrand Russell: *A Turning-Point in Foreign Policy*, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *How to Keep the Peace*, pp. 453–455.

66 Bertrand Russell: *Collective Security: 13 February 1937*, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *How to Keep the Peace*, pp. 494–496.

and misery” inflicted upon the Germans after the armistice.⁶⁷ Russell favoured measures to get Jews out of Germany but opposed anything which increased the chances of war. Anthony Eden’s resignation in February 1938 was thus welcomed because the outgoing Foreign Secretary’s favoured policy of collective security was worse than Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler, in Russell’s view; it would simply bring war with more certainty. Russell left England to take up an academic position in the United States when the Czechoslovak crisis was at its height in September 1938. It was only in May–June 1940 that he finally realised that Hitler could only be stopped by superior force.

Nuclear War and Anti-Imperialism

By the end of the Second World War Russell’s fame had spread more widely. His *History of Western Philosophy* (1943) became an international best-seller after 1945. He delivered the inaugural series of Reith Lectures for the British Broadcasting Corporation in the same year, a form of recognition by the British Establishment. But it was his warnings about the nuclear bomb which raised his profile with the British public and beyond. As his biographer remarks, “the apocalyptic vision of civilisation destroying itself through the power of its science and technology, which Russell had expressed in countless articles and books since the 1920s, now looked prophetic”.⁶⁸ In August 1945 he said “the prospect for the human race is sombre beyond all precedent. Mankind are faced with a clear-cut alternative: either we shall all perish, or we shall have to acquire some slight degree of common sense.”⁶⁹ A few months before 22 June 1941, when the Soviet Union became an ally of Great Britain, Russell expressed the fear that Stalin’s regime would survive the war, though he had no doubt that it was even worse than Hitler’s. By 1945 the Soviet Union was in control of the whole of Eastern Europe. He thought it fortunate that the United States possessed an atomic monopoly, but knew that the situation would not last long. Fearing that an independent international authority in sole control of uranium was a utopian fancy, Russell argued that:

If America were more imperialistic there would be another possibility, less Utopian and less desirable, but still preferable to the total obliteration of civilized life. It would be possible for Americans to use their position of temporary superiority to insist upon disarmament, not only in Germany and Japan, but everywhere except in the United States, or at any rate in every country not prepared to enter into a close military alli-

67 Bertrand Russell: Maiden speech, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *How to Keep the Peace*, pp. 501–502; Bertrand Russell: *The Persecution of the Jews: 1938*, in: Andrew G. Bone/Michael D. Stevenson (eds.): *How to Keep the Peace*, pp. 251–3.

68 Ray Monk: *Bertrand Russell: Ghost of Madness: 1921–1970*, pp. 297–298.

69 Bertrand Russell: *The Bomb and Civilisation*, in: *Forward*, 18 August 1945.

ance with the United States, involving compulsory sharing of military secrets. During the next few years, this policy could be enforced; if one or two wars were necessary, they would be brief, and would soon end in decisive American victory. In this way a new League of Nations could be formed under American leadership, and the peace of the world could be securely established. But I fear that respect for international justice will prevent Washington from adopting this policy.⁷⁰

The next month he was warning of the need for the US to impose its will on the international situation and to avoid appeasing Moscow. Privately he envisaged war between the former allies and when the Soviet Union rejected the Baruch Plan in June 1946 he openly advocated using the threat of war to secure its future adherence to this scheme for international control of nuclear weapons. Throughout the period 1945–8 his arguments were informed by fear of Soviet expansion in Western Europe as well as fear of a nuclear war following Russia's development of the bomb.⁷¹ It was during this period that he received the Order of Merit, the highest honour a British Government can bestow on one of its citizens. But Russell's analysis of the main danger shifted abruptly soon after he received this accolade. The Soviet Union acquired its own atomic bomb in 1949 and China acquired a Communist government only weeks later. By the summer of 1950 the US was involved in war in Korea and gripped by a wave of intense anti-Communism at home. The danger of a "creed war" of the sort Russell predicted in the 1920s increased alarmingly and as it did so the US led the way in an arms race which saw the number and power of nuclear weapons grow. At first Russell encouraged the US to stand up to Moscow. His public lectures in America drew enormous crowds shortly after the announcement in November 1950 that he was to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. But by the beginning of 1951 his emphasis had changed. What worried him now was American belligerence towards China and the "atmosphere of a police state" in America itself.⁷²

In the 1950s Russell was best known for his attempts to mobilise scientists, neutral states and public opinion against the threat of nuclear war posed by the conflict between the US and the Soviet Union. Frédéric Joliot-Curie and Einstein were among those he worked with. From its inauguration in July 1957 the Pugwash Movement became the focal point of such activities designed to publicise the dangers of nuclear energy and advance schemes for control of nuclear weapons, with Russell as its President. Russell also wrote to world leaders warning against the proliferation of nuclear weapons and in February 1958 he became a founder member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and an advocate of Britain's unilateral renunciation of nuclear weapons. CND in Britain was to become a focal point of activity for the New Left that had emerged since 1956, in

70 Ibid.

71 Ray Monk: *Bertrand Russell: Ghost of Madness: 1921–1970*, pp. 298–305

72 Ibid, pp. 332–4.

the wake of Khrushchev's "secret speech", the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt. Russell was soon associated with some of its leading activists. In 1960 CND turned to mass civil disobedience under the guidance of Russell and Ralph Schoenman, a postgraduate student at the London School of Economics. Schoenman and others associated with the New Left – Robin Blackburn, Perry Anderson, Pat Jordan and Ken Coates – now worked as members of Russell's personal secretariat. Advocacy of the civil disobedience tactic within CND led to the formation of the Committee of 100, with Russell as its President. In February 1961 it organised a mass sit-down outside the Ministry of Defence involving several thousand people. Russell became a hero for young left-wing activists when he was imprisoned for his participation in these events. By now he was calling for Britain to leave the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and to declare itself neutral of the superpowers. His association with the New Left was only strengthened when he responded to a personal plea from the Cuban Ambassador in September 1962 over fears of an impending US invasion of the island. Russell called for the US to publicly deny any such intention and for the Soviet Government to stop supplying Cuba with arms. Days later Kennedy announced the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba. Khrushchev replied publicly to Russell to the effect that Russia would do everything to prevent the crisis escalating to nuclear war. This letter made the front pages of newspapers all over the world.⁷³ Russell publicly praised Khrushchev's responsible response and called on Kennedy to give up missiles in Turkey in return for Soviet withdrawal from Cuba. The next day the Russians took up this same demand.⁷⁴

After the Cuban missile crisis Russell became increasingly hostile to US foreign policy and increasingly polemical. Between 1963 and 1968 he publicly sided with national liberation movements in the Americas and South East Asia against US imperialism. Monk says that "Russell launched [...] an attack on the United States that was the literary equivalent of carpet bombing".⁷⁵ Most active opponents of the American intervention in Vietnam only materialised after years of warfare against the Communist "bandits" in that country; but not so Russell. As early as 22 March 1963 – well before the anti-war movement became a presence in either America or Western Europe – he claimed that the US was waging a "war of annihilation in Vietnam" in a letter to the *Washington Post*. In January 1964 he drew the attention of readers of the *New York Herald Tribune* to America's chemical warfare in Vietnam, "the wholesale destruction of villages", the herding of peasants into concentration camps, and the rottenness of the regime in Saigon.⁷⁶ He blamed the US for preventing free elections as stipulated at the Geneva Conference in 1955 and

73 Ray Monk: Bertrand Russell: The Ghost of Madness, 1921–1970, p. 443.

74 Ibid., p. 444.

75 Ibid., p. 458.

76 Barry Feinberg/Ronald Kasrils (eds.): Bertrand Russell's America: His Transatlantic Writings and Travels: A Documented Account: Volume Two, 1945–1970, Boston 1983, p. 242.

for systematic sabotage of neutrality in South East Asia. He showed the vast scale of the American involvement in the destruction of Vietnam in the years before its involvement was made official.⁷⁷ Fear of Communism was now a bigger menace than Communism itself in Russell's opinion and successive American governments had nurtured it. The American military authorities seemed to Russell a bigger threat to world peace than their Soviet counterparts, who openly stressed the need for disarmament proposals.⁷⁸

He also emphasised the problems of American society that had generated the increasingly reactionary role of the US in world politics and the extent to which liberals and even socialists in Europe accepted the desirability US overseas interventions wherever it saw fit to do so.⁷⁹ American freedom had become a "myth". The reality of America was crude persecution of dissidents, intolerance of critics of capitalism, an excessive role for the political police and the paid informer, a supine press, and the political dominance of the corporate business community.⁸⁰ He denounced US society for its everyday conformity and its acceptance of high levels of violence. He analysed the military-industrial complex in America showing the vast scale of its activities.⁸¹ He wrote of the experience of the blacks in the US – their "torture, lonely murder and systematic maltreatment" – as comparable to the victims of the Nazis.⁸²

The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation was launched in September 1963 for the furtherance of international work against nuclear war. The emphasis remained on the danger represented by the US. Russell was pro-Cuba in these years as well as anti-Vietnam War. In every country where the US was guarantor of reactionary regimes Russell supported resistance to US imperialism.⁸³ In 1965, at the London School of Economics, he denounced the Labour Government in Britain for supporting the US in its campaign against the movements for independence in the former colonial world. Similar messages were given to the World Congress for Peace in Helsinki in July 1965 and the Tricontinental Conference in Havana in January 1966. World peace depended on the defeat of US imperialism, Russell insisted. To that end the Peace Foundation set up the Vietnamese

77 Bertrand Russell: War and Atrocity in Vietnam, in: Barry Feinberg/Ronald Kasrils (eds.): *Bertrand Russell's America*, pp. 361–370.

78 Bertrand Russell: Thermonuclear War: Battle of Experts, in: *New Republic*: 3 April 1961, in: Barry Feinberg/Ronald Kasrils (eds.): *Bertrand Russell's America*, pp. 346–49.

79 Bertrand Russell: Free World Barbarism, in: Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils (eds.): *Bertrand Russell's America*, pp. 371–381.

80 Bertrand Russell: The Myth of American Freedom: The Minority of One: May 1963, in: Barry Feinberg/Ronald Kasrils (eds.): *Bertrand Russell's America*, pp. 356–60.

81 Bertrand Russell: The Imminent Danger of Nuclear War, in: Barry Feinberg/Ronald Kasrils (eds.): *Bertrand Russell's America*, pp. 350–355.

82 Ray Monk: *Bertrand Russell*, p. 461

83 Bertrand Russell: Peace Through Resistance to US Imperialism, Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils (eds.): *Bertrand Russell's America*, pp. 394–98.

Solidarity Campaign under the leadership of Tariq Ali to campaign in Britain against the war. In November 1966 it announced the creation of an International War Crimes Tribunal, with sessions in Sweden and Denmark in 1967, to mobilise world opinion against the US. Russell's last published word on the subject – he died on 2 February 1970 – argued that “the entire American people” were on trial; it was not enough to merely lack the will to continue the slaughter in Vietnam, it was necessary to bring the leading political and military war criminals to trial.⁸⁴

Russell was a public intellectual with an international reach who depended on the printed word. He took this path after the First World War, a conflict that changed him in important and enduring ways. He wrote with the wit, lucidity and vigour required to hold an audience of educated readers in the areas of social, political, and philosophical thought. He wrote too much – too many “potboilers” in his own estimation – for his work to be uniformly of a high standard, much less internally consistent. But he needed a large public, once he decided to make a living as an independent writer, and to find such an audience Russell had to write in the vernacular with pungency and purpose. He did so as an informed citizen, who assumed that fellow citizens and leading politicians would and should be interested in the matters that concerned him. He adopted the stance of an outsider, without institutional affiliation or dependence on the holders of power. If he had any special qualifications for doing this it was not those of a professional philosopher, university academic, member of a political party or policy analyst. He did so as a dissenter, beholden to no-one, concerned with broad social and political issues, intent on opening and guiding discussions and raising awareness on the big challenges of the day – the sort (such as the current environmental crisis) that mainstream politics tends to neglect, marginalise or suppress. His utilitarian and consequentialist calculations took the standpoint of what was best for civilisation, often with a global dimension. The circumstances of his political life encouraged this as world wars and global economic crisis succeeded one another and the threat of nuclear war hung over his last twenty-five years. Though he was clear-eyed about the shortcomings of parliamentary democracy and the many forces working against individual and collective liberty in the twentieth century he ultimately placed his faith in the ordinary citizen, to whom he addressed the vast majority of his publications and actions.

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84 Bertrand Russell: The Entire American People Are on Trial: Ramparts: March 1970, in: Barry Feinberg/Ronald Kasrils (eds.): Bertrand Russell's America, pp. 408–409.