


Détente or Destruction, 1955–57

Volume 29

Edited by
Andrew G. Bone

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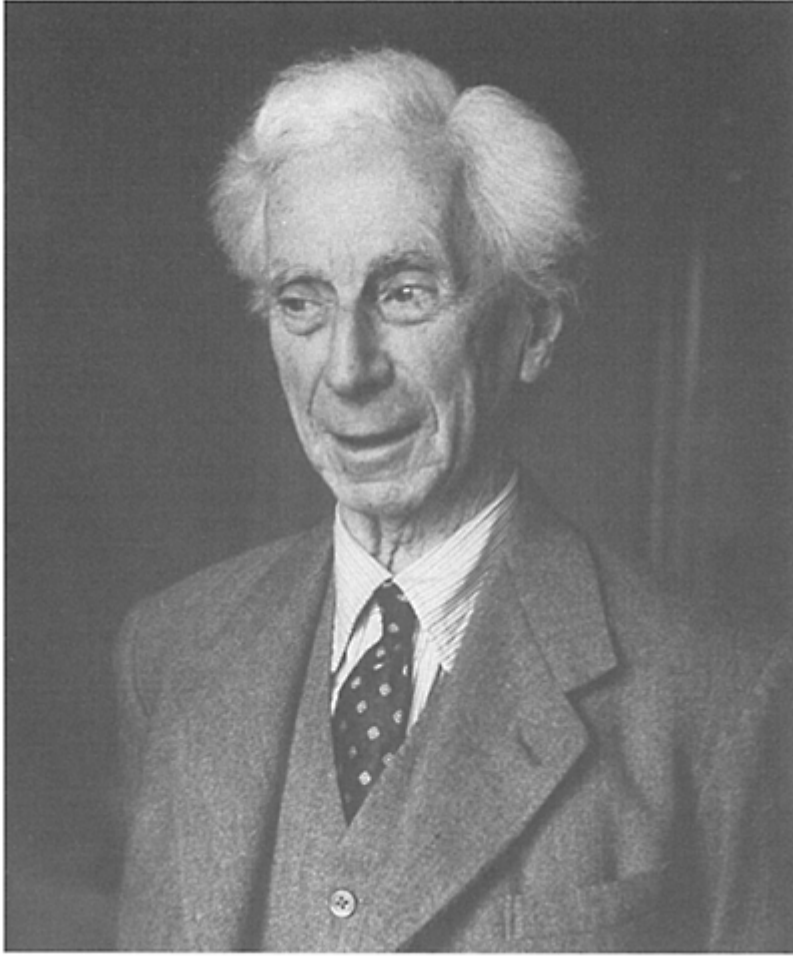
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An eighty-fifth birthday portrait, Plas Penrhyn, May 1957.

BERTRAND RUSSELL

Détente or Destruction, 1955–57

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Andrew G. Bone



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Abbreviations

To GIVE THE reader an uncluttered text, abbreviations and symbols have been kept to a minimum. The few necessary to the referencing system are as follows.

The papers printed in the volume are given a boldface number for easy reference. For example, “Anti-American Feeling in Britain” is Paper **38**.

Bibliographical references are usually in the form of author, date and page, e.g. “Russell 1969, 80”. Consultation of the Bibliographical Index shows that this reference is to *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*. Vol. 3:1944–1967 (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 80.

The abbreviation “*Papers*”, followed by a number, refers to a volume in this edition. The cited volumes are arranged in numerical sequence in the Bibliographical Index after the last entry by date under “Russell, Bertrand Arthur William, 3rd Earl”. The numbering of Russell’s publications, as in “B&R C57.22”, refers to the numbering scheme in the Russell bibliography, Blackwell and Ruja 1994.

Unless indicated otherwise, the location of archival documents cited in the edition is the Bertrand Russell Archives at McMaster University (“RA”). The following holdings in particular were indispensable to the editing of the present volume: Russell’s personal and publishing correspondence (respectively, RAI and RA2 710 and RAI 410); his dictation (RA2 750); the Pugwash (RAI 625), Congress for Cultural Freedom (RAI 580) and Morton Sobell case (RAI 841) correspondences; and the papers relating to Russell’s peace activities in 1955 (RAI 600) and his advocacy of world government (RAI 570). File numbers of documents in the Russell Archives are only provided, however, when manuscripts or typescripts of papers printed here are cited in Headnotes, or when files are difficult to identify. “RA REC. ACQ.” refers to the files of recent acquisitions in the Russell Archives. The abbreviation “EB” refers to the Eric Burhop Papers, MS ADD 385, University College London Manuscripts Room; “NAC” stands for the National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

Cross-references to Headnotes are preceded by “H” and followed by a boldface paper number, as in **H43**. Cross-references to annotations are preceded by “A” and followed by page and line numbers (as in “A318:9”). Cross-references to textual notes are preceded by “T”. Further abbreviations are used in the Textual Notes, but they are identified at the beginning of each set of notes.

Abbreviations of organizations can be found expanded in the General Index.

Introduction

IN MAY 1957 Bertrand Russell turned eighty-five. The occasion was noted, although with nothing like the pomp and ceremony of his birthday celebrations either five years before or hence. Typically perhaps, he was preoccupied at the time with arrangements for the upcoming conference of international scientists in Pugwash, although he had decided not to attend this meeting himself. One popular newsweekly did print Russell's birthday reflections on the gulf between the world of his ninth decade and that of his late-Victorian youth. In this article (17) he dwelt mainly on the dramatic changes that had occurred in domestic and international politics, rather than on his own eventful personal and intellectual odyssey—from Trinity College, Cambridge to Brixton Prison, from Bolshevik Russia to Cold War America, from idealism to logicism, from liberalism to socialism, and from a fairly closeted academic life to that of a renowned public sage. Perhaps he refrained from a mere summation of his life because, for all its variety and distinction, the octogenarian Russell—in accordance with his own prescription for a fruitful old age—still preferred to look ahead. Yet, when he did contemplate the future at the end of his essay, he saw it clouded by “the great shadow which darkens the lives of modern men. I mean the shadow of nuclear war”. He therefore remained “suspended between hope and fear” (17, p. 102).

For some time already Russell had been trying to combat this stark and terrible threat—to instil hope and to dispel fear. In donning the mantle of anti-nuclear prophet, he had effected a transformation in his public persona that was not fully grasped until after he assumed the presidency of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) early in 1958. Barely five months before then Russell had joked with an interviewer about how much he disliked being regarded as respectable. Brandishing a copy of his latest book, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (1957), he hoped that this compilation of freethinking essays would suffice to “undo my new respectability” (Appendix VII, p. 385). Religious sensibilities could certainly be offended still by such provocative unorthodoxy (see **H15**). In truth, though, the “respectability” enjoyed by Russell for much of the decade after the Second World War—and capped in 1949–50 by the prestigious laurels of Order of Merit and Nobel Prize—had been tarnished already by his increasingly vocal opposition to nuclear weapons. As he entered this political fray, Russell assumed a crusading guise which was unfamiliar (and perhaps a little unsettling) to a public that had grown accustomed to him over the past decade as “an intellectual ornament in something of the style of Voltaire” (Ryan 1988, 157).

The catalyst for Russell's new and urgent political quest had come from Bikini atoll in March 1954 with the first truly successful test of a hydrogen bomb. The United States had provided a frightening demonstration of this absolute weapon, whose technical feasibility Russell had grasped almost a decade before in a rare appearance in the House of Lords (see Willis 2002–03, 120). Ever since the Soviet Union's explosion of an atomic bomb in 1949, he had questioned whether victory as it was conventionally understood

could be achieved in a nuclear war. The development of the infinitely more destructive hydrogen bomb only magnified these doubts—which were entertained by political and military leaders as well as by ordinary citizens and peace campaigners. While strategists for the rival blocs looked for advantage in the Cold War arms race, or anticipated the stabilizing effects of a nuclear-armed stalemate, Russell sought a less precarious and more lasting basis for peace. In December 1954 he spoke eloquently on BBC radio about the looming threat to civilization posed by thermonuclear weapons. The extraordinary response to the sombre but hopeful message of “Man’s Peril” (16 in *Papers* 28) propelled Russell into a flurry of activism, which culminated in the release early in July 1955 of the scientists’ declaration known as “The Russell-Einstein Manifesto” (57d in *Papers* 28).

Russell remembered the “first two-thirds of the year 1955 (as) a period of hope” (1961a, 53). These eight months and the year which preceded them set the chronological parameters of *Collected Papers* 28. That volume concluded with Russell exhibiting a cautious optimism about the possibility of reducing the dangers to mankind from the nuclear arms race. At the same time, however, he was uncertain about his future political role. How could he help to sustain the momentum generated by the Russell-Einstein manifesto or by the portents of détente—admittedly fleeting—from the recent (July 1955) summit meeting of heads of state in Geneva? As for another initiative led by scientists, “I hope that the international conference envisaged in our joint statement will take place”, Russell told Joseph Rotblat, one of its signatories and his close political associate, but “it is for others to organize it” (24 July 1955).

It seems in retrospect that this hesitancy signified nothing more than a passing state of exhaustion after an extremely hectic few months. Russell’s political exertions did not continue at quite the frenetic pace he had set himself in the spring and summer, and the buoyancy of his mood was soon disturbed by the resurgence of familiar Cold War animosities (1, 2). Nevertheless, it was not long before he and others were plotting the next steps in precisely those directions mapped out by the famous declaration of scientists that Russell had written. After September 1955, the growing nuclear capabilities of the superpowers continued to feed the disquiet to which Russell had spoken in his manifesto. The scenario of global destruction sketched in this appeal and in other essays and articles from *Collected Papers* 28 was becoming increasingly vivid for a section of Western public opinion that was correspondingly eager to see international tensions diminished. By the end of the period covered by the present volume some of these apprehensions and hopes, in Britain at least; had begun to coalesce into a bona fide movement of anti-nuclear protest in which Russell would assume a prominent leadership role. The advent of CND would also signal a shift of emphasis in Russell’s thinking about nuclear weapons and political action, and revive his connection—firmly established during the First World War—with the British dissenting tradition.

I. CONTENTS AND PRESENTATION

In terms of its central political theme—the nuclear peril—there is no clearly defined break between this volume and its predecessor. After September 1955 Russell continued

to follow paths charted by the anti-nuclear writings assembled in *Collected Papers* 28. There was no sudden change in his political understanding or priorities. A genuine world government backed by armed force provided the only sure guarantee of a stable peace (50, 52). In the short term, however, neutral states (or “uncommitted nations” as Russell preferred to call them) might help broker détente and arbitrate territorial disputes (5, 62). And the international scientific community, if properly mobilized, could enlighten official and public opinion about the precise nature and magnitude of the nuclear threat (3, 61). Such grounds for hope, however, could easily be undermined by the sources of fear, as Russell himself readily admitted. The international political backdrop against which he wrote and engaged in public affairs was not uniformly bleak throughout the twenty-seven months covered by *Collected Papers* 29. But the outlook was rendered distinctly threatening on occasion by developments addressed in the published and unpublished writings that are presented here.

Most generally, peaceful progress in international relations was constantly imperilled by the “mutual suspicions” (9, p. 39) of the rival blocs. This harmful legacy of mistrust impeded détente while accentuating the ever-present risk of nuclear war. Russell had a keen appreciation of the most volatile elements of international politics in the mid-1950s. The Cold War arms race was rapidly progressing towards a state of “mutual atomic plenty” (Wenger 1997, 102) in which both superpowers would have sufficient capacity to retaliate effectively against a preemptive nuclear strike. Some proponents of deterrence thought that these shared risks might create a peculiar sort of stability. The critics of nuclear weapons were not nearly so sanguine. But both parties could agree about certain dangers that were likely to persist until this position of nuclear stalemate was reached (i.e. in the mid-1960s). In March 1956 Russell correctly observed that “there is the knowledge on both sides that an immense and perhaps decisive advantage is to be gained by a surprise attack in the style of Pearl Harbor” (7, p. 33). Indeed, the Soviets and Americans were both striving desperately to achieve this strategic edge by developing missile guidance and delivery systems and by the increasingly frequent experimental explosion of their nuclear weapons. (The United States conducted thirty-two nuclear tests in 1957, compared to the eighteen that had been carried out the previous year, while the number of Soviet tests increased over the same period from nine to fifteen. The totals for 1958 were, respectively, seventy-seven and twenty-nine.) The successful development of a British hydrogen bomb (55, 56, 60), meanwhile, not only kindled the burgeoning worldwide opposition to atmospheric testing but also raised the spectre of an increasingly rapid and uncontrolled proliferation of nuclear weapons. Of equally acute concern was the prospect of a limited conflict such as Suez or Hungary escalating, either by recklessness or by inadvertence, into “the total and universal disaster that would result from a Third World War” (25, p. 131).

Although Russell was preoccupied in his political work with issues of war and peace, his writings continued to touch upon a wide variety of themes. The output and range would have been greater still if he had satisfied even a fraction more of the many solicitations received from publishers, editors, writers, broadcasters and sundry individuals and organizations the world over. Despite having passed “the high point of his career as a gad-fly, educator, counsellor to the perplexed, and intellectual entertainer” (Ryan 1988, 157), Russell was still prized as a provider of frequently provocative and

always elegant copy on a host of issues—historical and contemporary, enduring and ephemeral.

Having embarked on the venture which turned into the Pugwash movement, Russell may have preferred to devote more of his energy and attention to this political enterprise. Partly owing to the organizational difficulties of the project, however, 1956 was “a year of bits and pieces” for him (1969, 80). Amongst other things, he publicly protested the conviction and imprisonment of Morton Sobell (co-defendant of the executed “atom spies” Julius and Ethel Rosenberg) and became embroiled in an acrimonious dispute with the anti-Communist American Left (Part IV). Later in the year he was distracted briefly by the Suez crisis and the Hungarian uprising (Part in). Some of his time, both in 1956 and in 1957, was absorbed by the preparation of scripts for radio talks and by appearances as a panellist on *London Forum* (Part V) and the *Brains Trust* (Appendix XVI). Part II includes radio tributes to two old friends, George Trevelyan (13) and Gilbert Murray (18), as well as the six-part autobiographical series (16) that will be familiar to readers of *Fact and Fiction* (1961). Russell’s historical reflections on the foundations and spread of western culture (49 and 54) are presented in Part VI, along with a short message of congratulation to India and Pakistan on the occasion of their tenth anniversary of independence from British rule.

Between September 1955 and November 1957, Russell published some sixty-one articles, reviews, statements, contributions to books and letters to editors. Five of these texts are not reproduced here because they have been presented already in *Collected Papers* 11. The famous “Open Letter to Eisenhower and Khrushchev”, which was published on 23 November 1957, will appear in *Collected Papers* 30. Another five published texts have been omitted from the present volume because of their minor character, but they are nevertheless calendared in the Missing and Unprinted Papers section. Within the same twenty-seven-month span, Russell also managed to compose another fourteen pieces which appear in print for the first time in this volume. Paper 50 was written in September 1956 but remained unpublished until the appearance of *Fact and Fiction* five years later.

Five of the writings which have not previously appeared in print nevertheless reached an audience as talks aired by the BBC, while ten of the previously published papers also originated as radio scripts. Russell also participated with a variety of other speakers in ten radio discussions for *London Forum*. The edited transcripts of two of these programmes appeared subsequently in *London Calling*, the journal of the BBC’s Overseas Services. One of these publications is Paper 40; the other, a discussion of John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, features as Paper 67 in *Collected Papers* II and is therefore not printed in this volume. Two other papers in Part V (41, 42) have been published before, but the remaining six transcripts of these radio broadcasts have not appeared in print until now. The *Brains Trust*, a television programme on which Russell was a guest six times between February 1956 and October 1957, employed a similar but less narrowly focused discussion format. Abridged transcripts of five of these broadcasts have been assembled in Appendix XVI.

It became a source of growing frustration to Russell that he was able to talk about nuclear weapons and the Cold War only sporadically in this work for the BBC. International politics were debated in just one of the featured *London Forums* (44). As for the *Brains Trusts*, only a handful of the questions answered by Russell were concerned

with war and peace. In the summer of 1955 the director-general of the BBC had issued a directive “forbidding negotiations for broadcasts about nuclear weapons without prior approval by him of a general outline of both programme and speakers” (Clark 1975, 589). Only in Paper **57b** did Russell have an opportunity to expound upon his prescriptions for peace, and the idea for this talk came not from the BBC but from Russell himself. Although he lobbied strenuously for the broadcast to be repeated on the Home Service, it only ever aired to listeners overseas (see **H57**).

Russell was often interviewed by the British and foreign press; he also spoke at two public meetings (Appendixes VIII and XIII) and, more informally, on several other occasions as well. In addition, he issued a number of brief statements to be read aloud at public meetings hosted by organizations with whose objectives he sympathized. Finally, several authors, editors or publishers solicited short blurbs from Russell to help publicize a rather curious assortment of publications. These dimensions of Russell’s public and writing life are most fully documented in the Appendix section and in Missing and Unprinted Papers, although one of his commendatory writings has been included as a paper (**31a**).

II. PERSONAL, DOMESTIC AND FINANCIAL CONCERNS

Even in his mid-eighties Russell continued to exhibit the zest which in *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930) he had judged as indispensable to a good and useful life. Russell’s first biographer, Alan Wood, had many informal encounters with his subject during these years and often found him in sparkling intellectual form:

Perhaps my most vivid recollection is of going to the theatre with him, going on to a late supper at which he recalled with precision some Greek tags which he had learnt as a boy, and then driving him home to Richmond at half past one in the morning, with Russell talking the whole time about the exact reasons why he was led to reject Hegelianism in the 1890s.... (Wood 1957, 241)

While Russell was still incredibly energetic, his vigour had been curbed somewhat by an undiagnosed throat ailment that was suspected of being cancerous. These suspicions were disproved by tests undertaken (on a grimly coincidental note) the day after Russell had recorded a discussion of “The Immortality of the Soul” for BBC radio (**43**). In spite of this favourable diagnosis, the condition did not ease and Russell endured it stoically for the remainder of his life. He rarely alluded to the associated discomfort and inconvenience—he became unable to take solid food, for example—except jokingly, on occasion, to remark how his “affliction has been brought on by my attempting to swallow the pronouncements of politicians...” (to Elizabeth Trevelyan, 15 Aug. 1957; Russell 2001, 508).

As he aged, Russell became increasingly reluctant to travel—except between London and Plas Penrhyn, the house in North Wales which had been leased in June 1955 and became his and his wife Edith's principal residence the following July. Until then, when in London, Russell and Edith generally stayed at his house in Richmond, 41 Queen's Road. After its sale was completed in August 1956, Edith and Russell's flat at 29 Millbank, Westminster (acquired on a lease shortly after their marriage) became their sole London residence. Russell's absence from the Pugwash meeting disappointed some of the participants in the conference. Privately, he had cited concern for his health as the reason for his unwillingness to attend, explaining to one of his collaborators on the project, Eric Burhop, that his throat problem was aggravated "if I am exposed to fatigue" (3 June 1957). Yet, even if he had felt strong enough to make another transatlantic journey, his plans would likely have been scotched by the serious heart attack which Edith suffered on 6 June. A month later Russell's wife was still housebound and unable to stay out of bed for more than two hours; her normal activities (including taking Russell's dictation) did not resume until mid-August.

Throughout and beyond the period covered by this volume the mental health of John Russell remained grave, and Russell's relationship with his eldest son effectively non-existent. Since Susan Russell was no more stable than her ex-husband, Russell's guardianship of their three young children had become, as he told his daughter on 24 May 1956, "unavoidably my sole responsibility". Plas Penrhyn provided a haven of serenity for Anne, Lucy and Sarah (as it did also for Russell and Edith), but the move from London to North Wales, together with John's breakdown, added another layer of bitterness to Russell's rancorous dealings with his ex-wife Dora. Given Russell's complete estrangement from John, Dora assumed the burden of caring for him, along with the strain of asserting his rights of access to the children. Russell was frequently uncooperative in the latter regard, but in November 1955 he did agree to pay Dora a £50 quarterly allowance to help support John (see Monk 2000, 368–72).

At least Russell could meet such financial obligations, not to mention those of raising and educating his grandchildren. The days of lucrative lecture tours were over, but the royalties flowed in steadily. There were disbursements of £1,000 from Allen and Unwin in October 1955, January 1956 and January 1957 and two much larger payments as well, of £2,796 in April 1956 and £4,339 the following April—a reflection, in part, of the healthy sales of his latest essay-collection, *Portraits from Memory* (1956). From October 1955 to August 1957, Russell's pocket diary also records earnings of \$6,279 from Simon and Schuster. These handsome royalties from his principal English and American publishers were augmented by dozens of smaller payments from the BBC and from the vast array of publications for whom Russell had supplied or continued to supply articles. Despite these impressive earnings, Russell was not without financial worries. His responsibilities extended not only to three of his grandchildren, but also to his two surviving exwives, Dora and Patricia, and to both his sons. "This has absorbed almost all my capital", he complained to Kate (in denying her request for assistance), "and my earnings barely suffice" (24 May 1956, RA REC. ACQ. 435).

III. SCIENTISTS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The Russell-Einstein manifesto had begun by urging scientists to “assemble in conference to appraise the perils that have arisen as a result of the development of weapons of mass destruction, and to discuss a resolution in the spirit of the appended draft”—a plea for the governments of the world to renounce war as a means of resolving disputes (Russell *1955e; Papers* 28:318). A very preliminary meeting of this kind had been held, and addressed by Russell, at London’s County Hall in August 1955 (**59** in *Papers* 28). But the grander occasion envisaged by the manifesto was still a remote prospect. Even the meeting that was eventually held in Pugwash, Nova Scotia, was conceived as a prelude to something else on a bigger scale. At first, those invited simply constituted an “initiating committee” which would be entrusted with plotting a future course of action. None of this is to suggest that in the mid-1950s it was at all novel for the scientific community to be engaged in the public discussion of political matters generally or of nuclear weapons in particular. From the very advent of the nuclear weapons age, scientists had been reflecting on their peculiar moral and social responsibilities, with distinguished figures like Russell, Einstein and Max Born providing a lead.

Notwithstanding the central place of science and technology in the Cold War arms race, Russell remained confident that scientific technique, if judiciously harnessed, would confer enormous benefits on humankind. At the same time, though, he was perplexed by the unstable “mixture of advanced knowledge with primitive, undisciplined passion...” (**64**, p. 354). This deficit of political wisdom to technical skill had always existed, but the gulf had widened dangerously. Even so, Russell still regarded the pursuit of knowledge not power as the primary responsibility of the scientist, although the “present system under which some men have the power and others have the knowledge is very dangerous” (**31b**, p. 144). Simply by ensuring that “important knowledge is widely disseminated and is not falsified in the interests of this or that propaganda”, scientists were performing an invaluable service (**3**, p. 18). In addition to these “more general duties of scientists towards society, they have a quite special and exceptional duty in the present critical condition of the world”—namely, to ensure that statesmen and peoples were reliably informed about the “universal destruction” of a nuclear war (**3**, p. 15).

Not only did scientists have a singular responsibility to strive for détente, Russell believed, but they were also uniquely suited to such a role. Some scientists thought that their specialized technical knowledge might contribute to the resolution of such contentious political problems as the verification of an arms control agreement or the monitoring of a nuclear-test moratorium. Russell also thought in more general terms, of the capacity for objectivity which he associated with the scientific outlook. “We all have our prejudices in favour of one side or the other”, he had written the French Nobel laureate (and Communist) Frédéric Joliot-Curie, “but in view of the common peril it seems to me that men capable of scientific detachment ought to be able to achieve an intellectual neutrality, however little they may be neutral emotionally” (4 Feb. 1955). On a practical level, Russell had already urged as a “first step” the preparation of a detailed

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