

## DID RUSSELL ADVOCATE PREVENTIVE ATOMIC WAR AGAINST THE USSR?

DAVID BLITZ

Philosophy and Honors Program / Central Connecticut State U.  
New Britain, CT 06050, USA  
BLITZ@MAIL.CCSU.EDU

Russell's statements in the immediate post-World War II period about war with the Soviet Union have generated considerable controversy. Some commentators interpret his declarations as if he advocated a preventive war against the Soviet Union. To the contrary, Russell advanced a strategy of conditional threat of war with the aim not of provoking war, but of preventing it. However, Russell was unable to satisfy his critics. Despite initial accuracy in his restatements of what he had originally said, Russell erred in later affirmations, lending credence to the erroneous view that he had something to hide.

### INTRODUCTION

Whether Russell advocated a preventive atomic war against the USSR in the period 1945–49<sup>1</sup> remains a matter of controversy. It has been discussed by all biographers of Russell from Alan Wood to Ray Monk, and was the subject of a debate in the pages of *Russell* between Douglas Lackey and Ray Perkins, Jr. It was recently the object of an exchange of letters between Nicholas Griffin and Lord Lawson in *The Economist*. The subject is rendered more noteworthy not

<sup>1</sup> The period covered goes from the end of World War II to the explosion of the Soviet A-bomb in 1949. Russell's support of what I term "conditional threat of war" continued as late as 1952.

only because of the perceived inconsistency of a noted pacifist advocating war—and atomic war at that—but also because of the numerous occasions on which Russell denied having advocated such a position, then recognized that, in a way, he had.<sup>2</sup>

My claims are the following: (a) Russell's position with respect to the USSR during the period was consistent with the philosophy of non-absolute pacifism which he shared with Einstein, and is best understood in terms of the exception clause which he had previously invoked during World War II; (b) Russell did not advocate preventive war, in the sense of making a call for immediate and unconditional war—rather, he proposed a conditional threat in order to prevent war; (c) Russell's policy of conditionally threatening war was a strategy for a specific period of time during which he thought pressuring the Soviet Union might induce it to accept international authority and avoid the arms race; (d) Russell assigned varying probabilities to the likelihood of war, from low to high depending on circumstances, but his preference was for a negotiated agreement separating the opposing Communist and anti-Communist forces, despite the low probability he assigned to such an outcome; (e) Russell's denials of having advocated preventive nuclear war were consistent with his public statements, and not an attempt to cover up his motivation, despite later confusions in his recollections of what he said.

#### NON-ABSOLUTE PACIFISM AND EXCEPTIONAL WARS

That Russell would argue in favour of threatening the USSR with war—which he did on many occasions during the period under question—would seem to be inconsistent with his position as a pacifist, and therefore startling and even shocking. But Russell on almost as many occasions indicated that he was not a pacifist in the traditional sense of the term: an individual opposed to all wars at all times and places. Russell

---

<sup>2</sup> The major discussions start with Wood, Chap. 22. Clark devotes a chapter to the matter, "19: Towards a Short War with Russia?" I. F. Stone had drawn new attention to this problem in a 1972 talk at the Bertrand Russell Centenary Celebrations at McMaster University; see Stone, "Bertrand Russell as a Moral Force in World Politics", *Russell*, n.s. 1 (1981): 7–26. Moorehead visits the topic in her Chap. 17, pp. 467ff. Monk considers it in Monk, 2: Chap. 9, "The Bomb Goes Off", which also deals with aspects of Russell's philosophy and family life at the time. For Lackey and Perkins, see note 18; for Lawson and Griffin, note 22.

---

was a non-absolute pacifist, and it is in this context that his statements need to be situated in order to be properly understood.<sup>3</sup> Non-absolute pacifism as a philosophy consists of two related claims: (1) the principle that wars are evil and must be prevented, and (2) the recognition that some, an exceptional few, can be supported as necessary evils. Russell admitted that the Second World War fell under the latter, rather than the former clause, and he believed, at the beginning of the post-war period under consideration, that a similar exceptional situation might still be at hand:

I make, however, one exception to the condemnation of wars in the near future. A powerful group of nations, engaged in establishing an international military government of the world, may be compelled to resort to war *if* it finds somewhere an opposition which cannot be peacefully overcome, but which can be defeated without a completely exhausting struggle.<sup>4</sup> (Italics added)

The salient point is to determine what type of opposition justified invoking the exception clause. The opposition which Russell had in mind was opposition to the strategic objective of world government. Russell, who had been converted to pacifism as a result of his debates with Louis Couturat during the Boer War, had been shocked by the outbreak of the First World War. He came to realize that an abstract appeal to humanity's best ideals would often be submerged by that same

<sup>3</sup> Russell's non-absolute pacifism was already evident in "The Ethics of War", written at the beginning of World War I, and reprinted in *Justice in War-Time* (Chicago: Open Court, 1916); also *Papers* 13. Russell identified four types of wars: "(1) Wars of Colonization; (2) Wars of Principle; (3) Wars of Self-Defence; (4) Wars of Prestige", and he indicated that some wars of the first two categories had been justified, but only in the past, and only insofar as they had advanced the cause of civilization; his focus in the paper as a whole was to oppose the then raging First World War. During the Second World War, Russell supported resistance to Hitler, considering that the ferocity of the Nazi attack on Western civilization constituted the special and exceptional conditions that justified war to defeat it, as he stated in his letter "Dr. Russell Denies Pacifism", *The New York Times*, 27 Jan. 1941, p. 14, which was subtitled by the editor "Believes, as Always, That Some Wars Are Justified and Others Are Not". For a theoretical presentation of Russell's non-absolute pacifism, see his article "The Future of Pacifism", *American Scholar*, 13 (winter 1943-44): 7-13. The issue is discussed at length in my article, "Russell, Einstein and the Philosophy of Non-Absolute Pacifism", *Russell*, n.s. 20 (2000): 101-28.

<sup>4</sup> Russell, "Humanity's Last Chance", *Cavalcade*, 7, no. 398 (20 Oct. 1945): 8-9.

---

species' baser instincts. Consequently, he became an advocate of world government as a means of restraining this tendency. The role of a world government, Russell believed, should be limited to questions of international security. But it had to possess an armed force equipped with the most modern weapons, in order to force recalcitrant states to accept the international order. The achievement of world government would not in itself result in world peace, but it would provide the privileged means to progress towards that ultimate goal.

After World War II, Russell identified the Soviet Union as the main threat not only to world peace, but to western civilization. For Russell, Russia—the term which he used in preference to the USSR—had replaced Nazi Germany as an expansionist, totalitarian regime. Russell had not always held such a view. He had initially welcomed news of the Soviet revolution in 1917, mainly because it meant that the Russians withdrew from the world war which he opposed. But in the course of his visit to the Soviet Union in 1920 he was repelled by the doctrinaire Marxist ideology of the Communist Party and the despotic nature of the Bolshevik state. Nonetheless this did not lead him to designate the Soviet Union as an enemy of world peace before World War II. What changed after 1945 was that the Soviet Union emerged from the war with newly acquired territory—including the Baltic republics—and a clearly expressed desire to expand its sphere of influence throughout Eastern Europe and the Far East. From a sympathetic point of view this might have appeared as a purely defensive policy, aimed at securing a buffer zone for the Soviet Union, which had suffered some 25 million dead in the preceding conflict. But Russell shared the predominant Western view that Soviet actions, either militarily through its expanded Red Army, or politically, through its client Communist Parties, were aimed at increasing the Russian sphere of domination, up to and including Western Europe.

There was certainly evidence for this view. In the immediate post-war period, Russell was alarmed by what he believed to be the systematic mistreatment of German refugees by the Russians and their allies, and publicly denounced this in the House of Lords, comparing the Soviet actions to those of the defeated Nazis: "The Russians, and the Poles with Russian encouragement, have, I regret to say, adopted a policy of vengeance, and have so far as I am able to discover, committed atrocities very much on the same scale and of the same magnitude as those of

---

which the Nazis were guilty.”<sup>5</sup> His concern grew as the Soviet Union rejected the Baruch Plan for the international control of atomic energy and nuclear weapons (1946–47), and reached a further high point during the Berlin Blockade (1948–49) when the Soviets blocked all ground traffic in and out of the city, forcing an airlift to supply its citizens with food and supplies. All during this period Russell was growing increasingly alarmed at the prospect of a nuclear arms race once the Soviet Union developed the atomic bomb, as it did in 1949.

Russell’s view during this period of the threat posed by the Soviet Union was based on these concerns, and not, as was the case with the official “cold warriors” in the US and Britain, with the anti-capitalist goals of the Communists which were deemed a threat to the Western powers’ wealth and control. To the contrary, Russell was himself a socialist, though of a moderate “guild socialist” orientation. Moreover, unlike the “cold war” strategy of the right, Russell was unwilling to sacrifice civil liberties at home, and progressive governments abroad, to the anti-Soviet crusade. So while his position was strongly anti-Soviet, it was not one focused on overthrowing the Communist regime at all and any cost.

Russell’s view favouring conditionally threatening war was not an isolated comment or expression of personal feeling. Rather, it was part of a plan he had developed to promote global peace. In isolation the statement appears to be in direct contradiction to his pacifism; indeed it might be seen, as Monk sees it, as a sign of bellicism. But as part of an overall policy it was aimed at serving Russell’s ultimate goal of peace. Russell often talked of his “policy” towards the Soviet Union, and in what follows, I argue that this was a strategy aimed at removing the main obstacle to world government.

#### THREAT AS A STRATEGIC POLICY

Typically, since Clausewitz, strategy has been considered as the coordination of battles to win a war, and tactics as the coordination of forces to win a battle.<sup>6</sup> In the political sense, strategy is the focusing of efforts to

---

<sup>5</sup> Russell, “[The Situation in Central Europe]”, *Parliamentary Debates* (Lords), (5), 138 (5 Dec. 1945): cols. 376–80 (at 376).

<sup>6</sup> “According to our classification, therefore, tactics teaches the use of armed forces in

achieve a national, or in the case of Russell, an international objective, either directly, by a decisive achievement, or indirectly, by removing an obstacle to a goal. For Russell, the ultimate end was world peace; the strategic objective was international government, and the strategic obstacle was the Soviet Union. The problem was not primarily the Soviet social structure, but rather its leaders' rejection of trans-national authority under the guise of protecting state sovereignty, coupled with their ambition of increasing the Russian sphere of influence, up to and possibly including Western Europe. The strategy which Russell proposed—that of conditionally threatening war should the Soviet Union not accept specific conditions, such as agreeing to the international control of atomic energy—was specific to the international context of the second half of the 1940s.

The relationship between strategy and goals is not straightforward. Edward Luttwak, in his study of strategy as the logic of war and peace, has drawn attention to this complicated relationship, which he terms “paradoxical”.<sup>7</sup> Strategy has an inner logic which often violates common-sense intuitions about the relationship between ends pursued and means that are used. As an example, Luttwak notes that it may be better for a military commander to move forces along the poorer of two roads leading to a desired target, since the better road will likely be more heavily defended. A slower advance is, “paradoxically”, the better choice. Similarly, a military defeat, by drawing enemy forces from a more important task, may facilitate ultimate victory. At the strategic level, it may be necessary to use force to restore peace. A recent example was the NATO bombing of Serbian forces, where the use of deadly force was employed to end the more serious genocidal actions against the Albanian minority. Russell's threat of force was a paradoxical strategy in this sense as well: the threat of war was intended to prevent war, and served the ultimate goal of world peace.<sup>8</sup>

engagements, and strategy the use of engagements to attain the object of the war” (Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* [New York: Modern Library, 1943], Book 11, Ch. 1, p. 62).

<sup>7</sup> Luttwak, *Strategy: the Logic of War and Peace*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U. P., 2002; 1st ed., 1987).

<sup>8</sup> There is, of course, paradox and paradox, in the sense that some paradoxes are simply contradictions. The slogan popularized during World War 1, “the war to end all wars”, was vicious in this latter sense: the Allies who put forward this notion had no intent of ending war. Rather they wanted to appeal to those among the public who were

---

That Russell's policy was a strategic one focused on a time-specific obstacle is indicated by his willingness to change it when circumstances changed. Once the arms race was fully engaged, in particular, after both the US and USSR had exploded hydrogen bombs—the US in 1952 and the USSR two years later—Russell shifted to a different strategy. The ultimate aim (world peace) and the strategic goal (international government) remained the same, but the obstacle was now the arms race to which both the US and the USSR had become committed. The strategic policy that Russell adopted was to propose a special mediating role for the neutral countries, which he hoped would make an objective inquiry into the disastrous effects of nuclear war, and then use their influence to persuade the superpowers of the folly of their course of action. But even India, with whose government Russell was quite close, was unable to take up this proposal, and the policy was abandoned by the second half of the 1950s. By then Russell was persuaded that the US was becoming the major obstacle to world peace, indicated in part by his interpretation of the public exchange of letters he undertook with Khrushchev and John Foster Dulles (acting on Eisenhower's behalf) in 1958,<sup>9</sup> and then further confirmed by his analysis of the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, where he valued above all Khrushchev's removal of the missiles as a means of ending the conflict. By the mid-1960s, under the influence of the war in Vietnam, Russell identified the US as the main obstacle to world peace. This led to Russell's participation in the campaign to denounce the US intervention in Vietnam, the organization of

not persuaded by the usual patriotic slogans. Immediately after the war, however, the victorious powers imposed such conditions upon the losers as to fairly well guarantee further war, and thereby contributed to the rise of the Nazis in Germany, who exploited the population's dislike for the crippling reparations.

<sup>9</sup> The letters were initially published in *The New Statesman*, and then printed as a book under the title *The Vital Letters of Russell, Krushchev, Dulles* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1958). By the late 1950s, Russell would argue that submission to the Soviet Union was preferable to war, apparently the exact opposite of what many took his position to be a decade earlier. But the contradiction is only apparent, and in his writings of the late 1950s, Russell maintained that there was yet a third alternative to war or submission: the development of a movement for disarmament and the abolition of war, of which he was a prime participant. Similar to the period under question, those who stripped away Russell's preferred option, and saw only war or submission, treated him as a partisan of capitulation. But Russell was not arguing "better red than dead" in the following sense: though he did prefer the former to the latter, he considered there was yet another way out of the dilemma.

---

the International War Crimes Tribunal, and Russell's support for the Vietnamese liberation movement, all of which shocked Russell observers as much as his threat of war against the USSR a quarter century earlier.

In short, Russell passed through at least three phases in his analysis of the strategic obstacles to international government and world peace: (1) the Soviet Union as the main obstacle in the period 1945–49; (2) a period in the 1950s when both superpowers, and their arms race, were identified as the main obstacle; and (3) the period of the 1960s when he identified the United States as the main obstacle. As the strategic obstacles changed, so did Russell's policy, with the additional feature that each succeeding strategy became less abstract and more personal: from the conditional threat of war, about which Russell had little control beyond distant relations with the British Labour government, to the proposal for mediation by neutrals, for which Russell had contacts at least with the Indian authorities and a number of leaders in developing countries, to the ban-the-bomb protest movements, where he exercised leadership positions. This process culminated in the establishment of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, with Russell as the centre of an informal diplomatic network of relations with foreign heads of state.

#### PRESSURING THE SOVIET UNION

In order to better understand the character of the policy that Russell favoured for dealing with the Soviet Union during 1945–49—the threat of force, up to and including its use—it is helpful to compare his strategy with that proposed by the one other prominent thinker who shared his non-absolute pacifism: Albert Einstein. Both men agreed on the need to prevent a nuclear arms race in order to avoid omnicidal disaster, and both agreed on the need for international government as guarantor of world peace. But they disagreed on the means to accomplish this strategic objective, and therefore on policy. For Russell, the United States should take the lead in forming an international alliance, which would be the embryo of a future world government. The Soviet Union should be pressured, up to and including the threat of war, to join. Russell went on to affirm that it might only be as the result of yet another war that such an international organization would be set up, using compulsion to bring the defeated power—which he assumed would be the Soviet Union—into the world government:

---



There might be a period of hesitation followed by acquiescence, but if the U.S.S.R. did not give way and join the confederation, after there had been time for mature consideration, the conditions for a justifiable war, which I enumerated a moment ago, would all be fulfilled. A *casus belli* would not be difficult to find.

Either the voluntary adherence of Russia, or its defeat in war, would render the Confederation invincible, since any war that might occur would be quickly ended by a few atomic bombs. ("Humanity's Last Chance", p. 9)

At the strategic level, Russell believed that firmness and leadership were the only alternative to appeasement. His argument was based on reasoning by analogy: Just as appeasement had failed to stop Nazi Germany in the period leading up to World War II, so too would it fail with Soviet Russia. For this analogy to work one has to accept, as Russell did, that Soviet Russia was now playing the same role in the international system as the Third Reich had previously done. A second aspect of Russell's strategy, the call for American leadership, was also based on the analogy to the pre-war situation. US isolationism, Russell believed, had encouraged Hitler to launch his attacks both to the west and east; while US involvement in the war after Pearl Harbor hastened the German and Japanese collapse. In the current situation, a return to US isolationism would likewise serve to embolden Stalin, while the assumption of international leadership by the US would have the opposite effect, moderating and perhaps ending his ambitions, particularly in Western Europe. Russell's conclusion was that only a form of confrontation, to be formulated as threats to compel Russian compliance, would be successful:

The policy most likely to lead to peace is not one of unadulterated pacifism. A complete pacifist might say: "Peace with Russia can always be preserved by yielding to every Russian demand." This is the policy of appeasement, pursued, with disastrous results, by the British and French Governments in the years before the war that is now ended. I myself supported this policy on pacifist grounds, but I now hold that I was mistaken. Such a policy encourages continually greater demands on the part of the Power to be appeased, until at last some demand is made which is felt to be intolerable, and the whole trend is suddenly reversed. It is not by giving the appearance of cowardice or unworthy submission that the peace of the world can be secured.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Russell, "The Atomic Bomb and the Prevention of War", *Polemic*, no. 4 (July-Aug. 1946): 15-22 (at 21-2).

Einstein, like Russell, was a non-Marxist socialist who was opposed to the Soviet dictatorship, but his evaluation of the Soviet Union was less negative, and his tactic toward it, though not one of appeasement, was nonetheless rather different from Russell's:

I am in favour of inviting the Russians to join a world government authorized to provide security, and if they are unwilling to join, to proceed to establish supranational security without them.... Those who create the organization must understand that they are building with the final objective of obtaining Russian adherence.<sup>11</sup>

The source of the difference was twofold. On the one hand, Russell's criterion for invoking the exception clause of non-absolute pacifism was weaker than Einstein's. Whereas for Einstein, the enemy force against which war could be justified had to aim at the destruction of life "as such", placing the threat at the level of Nazi genocide, for Russell it sufficed to have an opponent determined to destroy modern civilization, through the elimination of its cultural elite, thus placing the threat at the level of the Soviet gulag. Einstein focused on the Soviet people, who had lost so many of their number to the Nazi onslaught, while Russell focused on the Soviet leadership, which aimed at increasing its sphere of influence in Europe.

Whereas Russell's policy was one which involved a threat of war, Einstein's was not, and it might be preferred on these grounds alone. However, given Russell's analysis that the main obstacle to an effective world authority was the Soviet Union, then not dealing with the Soviet problem, and deferring it to later as Einstein proposed, would only lead to failure. International organizations in the twentieth century were developed, and most major states acquiesced to them, only in the aftermath of major wars—the League of Nations after World War I, and the United Nations after World War II. Leaders were willing to forfeit some, though not much, state sovereignty in the hopes of preventing further global conflict. By not dealing with the most pressing problem at hand, Einstein's proposal was not such as to motivate states to accept the further, more significant limitation on national sovereignty presupposed

---

<sup>11</sup> Einstein, "Atomic War or Peace", *Atlantic Monthly*, 180, no. 5 (Nov. 1947): 29–32 (at 31).

by their participation in the sort of international authority which he and Russell proposed, and which went far beyond the relatively powerless United Nations Organization, where the major powers had the veto. Einstein held it possible to deal directly with the strategic objective, and bring about real international authority without dealing with the Soviet problem, whereas for Russell this could not be accomplished except first by removing the main obstacle, which was Russian intransigence and expansionism. This was the point of Russell's refusal to collaborate with Einstein in 1947 (though they were able to work together in the changed circumstances of the mid-1950s).

The question remains: was there an appropriate strategic policy in 1945–49 other than that of threat, which would not involve appeasement, but would be more active and likely to mobilize than Einstein's? Here a weakness in Russell's argument appears: although he stated that he was privately in contact with government specialists on military strategy, he did not publicly debate the strategic and policy theorists of the time. In particular, he did not analyze, or even appear to be acquainted with, the writing of authors such as George Kennan who were addressing the same problem. Kennan is best known for his "long telegram" just after World War II, alerting US policy-makers to the threat of Soviet foreign policy in the post-war period, and the "X" article in *Foreign Affairs* which proposed the policy of containment to deal with that threat.<sup>12</sup>

Kennan based his analysis on two factors: "the innate antagonism between capitalism and Socialism" (p. 572), which he took to be the underlying factor, and the Soviets' belief in their own infallibility, which he took to be an aggravating factor. Nonetheless, he identified one aspect of Marxist ideology that, curiously enough, mitigated the immediate threat: the belief in the inevitability of Communist victory. As a result, the Kremlin was "under no ideological compulsion to accomplish its purposes in a hurry" (p. 574), and could allow itself the luxury of patience in dealing with long-term ideological questions. Kennan then proposed his policy of containment: "In these circumstances it is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet

---

<sup>12</sup> Kennan, under the pseudonym "X", "The Sources of Soviet Conduct", *Foreign Affairs*, 25 (1947): 566–82.

Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” And he continued, in words that should have called for a response from Russell:

It is important to note, however, that such a policy has nothing to do with outward histrionics; with threats or blustering or superfluous gestures of outward “toughness”. While the Kremlin is basically flexible in its reaction to political realities, it is by no means unamenable to considerations of prestige. Like almost any other government, it can be placed by tactless and threatening gestures in a position where it cannot afford to yield even though this might be dictated by common sense.... For these reasons it is a *sine qua non* of successful dealing with Russia that the foreign government in question should remain at all times cool and collected and that its demands on Russian policy should be put forward in such a manner as to leave the way open for a compliance not too detrimental to Russian prestige. (Pp. 569–70)

Kennan proceeded from a much narrower perspective than Russell: his strategic goal was the defence of the national interests of the United States, whereas Russell saw the need for the US to take the lead in establishing international authority that transcended national interests. Nonetheless, both identified the Soviet Union as the main obstacle to achieving their strategic objectives, and as is evident from Kennan’s other writings, both had a commitment to world peace. It would therefore have been interesting to have Russell’s opinion on Kennan’s analysis of flexibility in Russian foreign policy and his warning on the futility of threats as a means of modifying Soviet behaviour. This remains a weakness in Russell’s project, as he was unable to refine his policy through debate with related, but differing strategic plans. As a result, Russell’s many statements on the question, in newspapers, journals and broadcasts, tended to be more repetitive than amplificative. We are left with a more limited question: whether Russell’s threat of war amounted to an advocacy of preventive war?

**CONDITIONAL THREAT OF WAR (“CTW”)  
VS. ADVOCACY OF PREVENTIVE WAR (“APW”)**

In what follows I will refer to the policy advanced by Russell as “conditional threat of war”, formulated as follows:

---

CTW If Russia does not acquiesce in the Baruch Plan for the international control of atomic energy, then the West should conditionally threaten war.

This occurred in a variant form before the Baruch Plan, and after as well (during the Berlin crisis, for example), where the focus was on directly warlike activities of the Soviet Union: if Russia does not cease its aggressive activities towards European countries, then the West should threaten war conditionally. This implied as well that the West should be militarily prepared to deal with a provocation by the Soviet Union, a point Russell stressed especially after 1949, to the point of supporting the development of hydrogen weapons as a deterrent to the Soviet A-bomb (a position he abandoned after the devastating effects of the hydrogen bomb were revealed in tests during 1952–54).<sup>13</sup>

I will contrast this position with a different one, “advocacy of preventive war”, a position often attributed to Russell, but one that I will argue he did not defend:

APW Because Russia did not acquiesce in the Baruch Plan for the international control of atomic energy, the West should wage preventive war.

Similarly, a modified version of APW can be formulated substituting aggression against a European country for rejection of the Baruch Plan as the trigger for war, or “*casus belli*”: because Russia has fomented a Communist coup in country *X* (or invaded it), the West should wage immediate, preventive war. APW contradicts the principle of non-absolute pacifism which Russell advocated, according to which the non-absolute pacifist may acquiesce to armed conflict only as self-defence against a real aggression putting into jeopardy civilisation itself. A preventive war is conventionally defined as “a war initiated in the belief that military conflict, while not imminent, is inevitable, and that to

---

<sup>13</sup> For the earlier position, see Russell, “Is a Third World War Inevitable?”, *World Horizon*, 1, no. 2 (March 1950): 6–9. For his significantly modified policy after 1953, see “The Hydrogen Bomb and World Government”, *The Listener*, 52 (22 July 1954): 133–4, and, of course, “Man’s Peril from the Hydrogen Bomb”, *The Listener*, 52 (30 Dec. 1954): 1,135–6.

---

delay would involve greater risk.”<sup>14</sup> To initiate war on the belief or fear that it is inevitable violates Russell’s philosophy in two ways: firstly, in ascribing inevitability to historical events, a position more in line with Hegelianism or Marxism than with Russell’s view of history as contingent; and secondly, in initiating attack rather than responding to one.<sup>15</sup>

CTW, however, does not contradict non-absolute pacifism, if, as has been argued above, it is a strategy to deal with an obstacle to attaining the necessary mechanism—that of world government—through which perpetual peace alone can be achieved. To advocate preventive war (APW) is to urge the mobilization of military forces for the waging of war; whereas to conditionally threaten war (CTW) is to urge the object of

---

<sup>14</sup> This is the current US Department of Defense definition, reproduced in Christopher Morris, ed., *Dictionary of Science and Technology* (San Diego: Academic P., 1992). It should be compared with the same source’s definition of pre-emptive attack: “An attack initiated on the basis of incontrovertible evidence that an enemy attack is imminent” (also available online at <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/> [last visited 15 Oct. 2002]). Thus, while a pre-emptive attack is a response to an immediate danger and may lead to a full-scale war, a preventive war is a response to a future danger, where the initiator of the war prefers to fight sooner rather than later. The problem with preventive war in theory is the notion that future hostilities are inevitable, presupposing certainty with respect to an opponent’s intentions, an evaluation necessarily biased by the evaluator’s preconceptions. In practice, the doctrine of preventive war easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, since once attacked, the opponent is likely to respond in kind, confirming to the initiator the hostile stance of its opponent. As a result, the notion that preventive war is a justified means of self-defence is dubious at best, and a smoke-screen for aggression at worst.

<sup>15</sup> It is important to distinguish between anticipatory self-defence which actually prevents an otherwise unpreventable attack, and the claim to preventive war which merely serves to camouflage an aggressive and/or unnecessary hostile action. International jurisprudence recognizes the criteria set out by US Secretary of State Daniel Webster in 1842, concerning the sinking of an American ship, the *Caroline*, in 1837 as it was transporting men and supplies to aid the rebels in Upper Canada (present day Ontario). The ship was sunk at night by the British Navy, who claimed a right to armed self-defence since the ship was being used to seize Canadian territory and abet insurrection. In rejecting the British claim, Webster stated that any preventive armed action had to meet the criterion—thereafter known as Webster’s criterion—that the danger was “instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means or moment for deliberation” (Webster to Ashburton, 27 July 1842, quoted in “The *Caroline* and McLeod Cases” by R. Y. Jennings, *American Journal of International Law*, 32 [1938]: 89). This formulation then found its way into the domain of international law as a statement of the necessary conditions for the justification of pre-emptive attack—see Yoram Dinstein, *War, Aggression and Self-Defence*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2001), pp. 218–19.

---

the threat to satisfy the conditions necessary to avoid the war.<sup>16</sup>

Part, but only part, of the distinction between the CTW and APW lies in the use of the terms “advocate” and “threaten”. I suggest that “advocate” designates the intended goal of a policy, while “threaten” indicates a subordinate strategy. Consider the analogy to a prosecutor in court. She has as her goal, for which she is the advocate, proving the guilt of the accused. She will develop a strategy for the prosecution depending on the specific circumstances of the case. Suppose that a defence witness, whose past is shady and who is known to lie, falsely testifies for the accused. The prosecutor may threaten that witness with charges of per-

<sup>16</sup> After 1949, the United States rejected preventive war as a cold war strategy against the USSR. The defining national security document of that policy, *NSC-68*, released on 14 April 1950, pointed out:

Some Americans favor a deliberate decision to go to war against the Soviet Union in the near future. It goes without saying that the idea of “preventive” war—in the sense of a military attack not provoked by a military attack upon us or our allies—is generally unacceptable to Americans....

Apart from this, however, a surprise attack upon the Soviet Union, despite the provocativeness of recent Soviet behavior, would be repugnant to many Americans. Although the American people would probably rally in support of the war effort, the shock of responsibility for a surprise attack would be morally corrosive. Many would doubt that it was a “just war” and that all reasonable possibilities for a peaceful settlement had been explored in good faith. Many more, proportionately, would hold such views in other countries, particularly in Western Europe and particularly after Soviet occupation, if only because the Soviet Union would liquidate articulate opponents. It would, therefore, be difficult after such a war to create a satisfactory international order among nations. Victory in such a war would have brought us little if at all closer to victory in the fundamental ideological conflict.

(Sec. ix, “Possible Courses of Action”, in Ernest R. May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68* [Boston: Bedford, 1993], pp. 69–70)

Recently, however, in the post-cold war period of the new “war on terrorism”, the Bush administration has revisited and endorsed the preemptive war option, now applied to Iraq and other regimes that it wants to change. The recently released *National Security Strategy of the United States* declares:

The United States has long maintained the option of preemptive actions to counter a sufficient threat to our national security. The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction—and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack. To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively.

(Sec. v. “Prevent Our Enemies from Threatening Us, Our Allies, and Our Friends with Weapons of Mass Destruction”, reprinted in the *New York Times*, 22 Sept. 2002, online edn.; and at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/ns55.html> [visited 10 Dec. 2002]).

The consequences of the large-scale deployment of this strategy are ominous.

---

jury if he continues to lie on the stand. Now, we readily admit that the prosecutor advocates the guilt of the accused, proposes a strategy for pursuing the case, and conditionally threatens the witness as part of it.

This analogy can be extended as follows. Suppose the prosecutor, once a guilty verdict has been obtained in a capital murder case, demands the death penalty (in the US, where such penalties are still regrettably permitted). Now this is quite different from that of the police officer who, before the trial had begun, made the conditional threat that if the accused did not admit his guilt, he would be subject to prosecution under the death penalty rule. Once the verdict has been rendered and the court has moved to the penalty phase, the prosecutor is an advocate of the death penalty, since this is the only remedy for which she is pleading. Earlier, before the trial, the police officer had made a conditional threat, offering the prisoner a choice. The two are not the same, since for the prosecutor, advocacy of the death penalty is the goal of her penalty phase presentation, while for the police officer, threat of the death penalty is a means to a different goal: that of obtaining a confession from the accused. Russell's case is more like that of the police officer than that of the prosecutor.

In other words, Russell's intention was the prevention of war, through a strategy which may appear paradoxical, but which is not inconsistent with that goal. This contrasts with the intention of APW, which is to wage immediate war. It is instructive to distinguish Russell's conditional threat of war from a real example of the advocacy of preventive war. The mathematician and game theorist John von Neumann, in speaking of the Soviet Union, was reported to have said: "If you say why not bomb them tomorrow, I say why not today? If you say today at 5 o'clock, I say why not at 1 o'clock?"<sup>17</sup> Although von Neumann also preceded his statements by "if", there are no conditions that could be satisfied to warrant the non-application of the bombing, whereas for Russell there were. The intention depends in part on the theory in

---

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in William Poundstone, *Prisoner's Dilemma* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 4. The proximate source is Steve J. Heims, *John von Neumann and Norbert Weiner: from Mathematics to the Technologies of Life and Death* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT P, 1980), p. 247, who refers the ultimate source of the quote to C. Blair, "Passing of a Great Mind", *Life*, 25 Feb. 1957. Poundstone sees only a difference in degree between Russell's statements of threats of war, and von Neumann's clear advocacy of preventive war.

---



which the statement is embedded, and not exclusively on the statement. The problem is not therefore a semantic one of the difference between “advocate” and “threaten”, but a theoretical one related to the role that statements using each verb play in a more general setting.

The Perkins–Lackey debate touched on the problem of conditional threats as well, along with the likelihood of their being carried out.<sup>18</sup> Ray Perkins, Jr. proposed an analysis of three types of statements Russell made, based on the core statement-type, “We ought to wage war against the Soviets unless they agree, under threat of war, to international controls.” This core statement is then modified as a type  $c_1$  statement by the addition at the end of the sentence of the modifier “and they will probably agree”, and a type  $c_2$  statement by the addition of the phrase “and they will probably not agree”. The “ $c$ ” stands for conditional, so that for Perkins the condition is the greater or lesser likelihood of Russian acquiescence to the threat. When proposed without either qualifier, Perkins labels the statement as type  $u$  (for unconditional). Perkins argued that Russell’s public claims were usually of type  $c_1$ , which presumed likely Soviet compliance, without the need to carry out the threat, rather than of type  $c_2$ , where war was probable (though not guaranteed, as in the case *PWu*, which Perkins holds that Russell never defended). According to Perkins this meant that Russell defended “a policy rather less bellicose than what is usually attributed to him”. On Perkins’ view, the controversy over the 1948 Westminster School talk arose because it was perceived as type  $c_2$ , even though upon analysis it can be shown to be of type  $c_1$ . The only exception was contained in a 1948 letter to an American correspondent, Walter Marseille (see below), which was of type  $c_2$ .

Perkins’ analysis differs from that made in this paper. Perkins admits that Russell did in fact advocate preventive war, while I claim that Russell did not publicly advocate preventive war; rather he proposed the strategic policy of conditionally threatening war. While Perkins’ distinction between the three types of threat ( $c_1$ ,  $c_2$  and  $u$ ) is helpful in analyz-

---

<sup>18</sup> (1) Douglas P. Lackey, “Russell’s Contribution to the Study of Nuclear Weapons Policy”, *Russell*, n.s. 4 (1984): 243–52; (2) Ray Perkins, Jr., “Bertrand Russell and Preventive War”, *Russell*, n.s. 14 (1994): 135–53; (3) Lackey, “Reply to Perkins on ‘Conditional Preventive War’”, *Russell*, n.s. 16 (1996): 85–8; (4) Ray Perkins, Jr., “Response to Lackey on ‘Conditional Preventive War’”, *Russell*, n.s. 16 (1996): 169–70.

---

ing the variations in Russell's position (once the sentences are reformulated as CTW, not APW), it does not capture Russell's CTW position adequately. The conditional nature of Russell's statement has more to do more with the "unless" part of Perkins' formulation of Russell's position: "We ought to wage war against the Soviets *unless* they agree, under threat of war, to international controls", than the codicil concerning the likelihood or not of Soviet compliance.<sup>19</sup>

Douglas Lackey, in his rejoinder to Perkins, denied the relevance of the conditional/unconditional distinction, since on his view even unconditional statements have conditions given by the intentions of the maker of the statement. What I will argue in the following sections of the paper, following in spirit though not in detail Perkins' position, is that there is a real distinction between conditional and unconditional statements about war, corresponding to APW and CTW above; in particular, that conditional statements allow for an enumeration of cases upon which strategic thinking can be based, while unconditional ones lock in one and only one course of action. But, in agreement with Lackey, though for different reasons, the question of the likelihood of the threat being carried out is not decisive for the justification of the statement containing the threat.<sup>20</sup>

#### CONDITIONAL THREAT AND THE "MISSING" CASE

The widespread view is that indeed Russell did advocate preventive war against the Soviet Union. This claim is largely based on a talk which Russell gave in November 1948 for the New Commonwealth at Westminster School. It has recently been discussed again, in an exchange of letters between Nigel Lawson (Lord Lawson of Blaby, a former chancellor of the exchequer), a student at the time at Westminster School who attended the talk, and Nicholas Griffin, editor of Russell's *Selected Letters*,

---

<sup>19</sup> Technically, "*A unless B*" (where *A* = "We ought to wage war" and *B* = "The Soviet Union complies") should be translated in propositional logic as "*A* is inequivalent to *B*" (either *A* or *B*, but not both). This biconditional can then be broken down into its conjoined conditionals: "If *A* then not-*B*" and "If *B* then not-*A*".

<sup>20</sup> Lackey describes Russell's statements for 1946–48 as "threatening a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the Soviet Union" ("Russell's Contribution to the Study of Nuclear Weapons Policy", p. 244).

---

Volume 2 of which covers this period.<sup>21</sup> Lawson remembers the event as follows:

Needless to say, Russell advocated a pre-emptive nuclear strike on strictly humanitarian grounds. In a nutshell, he pointed out that at the time the Soviet Union did not yet possess a nuclear capability but that it would very soon do so, after which all history made it clear that sooner or later there would be a war between the two superpowers that would be infinitely more devastating than either of the two world wars through which he had lived. The only way of preventing this Armageddon, he concluded with remorseless if unpalatable logic, was for America to launch a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union before it acquired the bomb: after that it would be too late.<sup>22</sup>

Griffin, in his reply (*ibid.*, 11 Aug., p. 14) pointed out that Lawson had not remembered that the three alternatives were prefaced by the conditional “*if the present aggressive Russian policy was persisted in*” (emphasis in the original), properly pointing out that since the matter was clearly dealt with as a conditional it should not be construed as a direct call to action, or advocacy of preventive atomic war. Lawson retorted that notwithstanding the condition, Russell “expected that it [the Russian policy] would be [persisted in]”, making the action of preventive atomic war the only logical conclusion (18 Aug., p. 14). Griffin replied that Russell advocated a continuation of the West’s policy of containment, “backed by a threat of war”; and that this was not the same as advocating pre-emptive nuclear attack (25 Aug., p. 18). But for Lawson, as for many other listeners and subsequent readers of Russell’s statement, the conditionals had been stripped away, leaving bare the terms “aggressive Russian policy”, “war” and “atomic bombs”, which were then concatenated together to form the notion that Russell advocated a preventive nuclear attack on the Soviet Union.

A closer examination of the talk in printed form<sup>23</sup> shows that Russell clearly formulated his proposal as a conditional. But more importantly, the conditional formulation was part of a more general enumeration of

---

<sup>21</sup> See *SLBR*, 2: 426–8, for a discussion of the period.

<sup>22</sup> Lord Lawson, “Bertie and the Bomb”, Letters, *The Economist*, 4 Aug. 2001, p. 16, in response to the unsigned review of *SLBR*, Vol. 2, *ibid.*, 21 July 2001, p. 70.

<sup>23</sup> Russell, “Atomic Energy and the Problems of Europe”, *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 115 (1949): 39–43.

---

cases which, I believe, is essential to the philosophy of non-absolute pacifism. The task for the absolute pacifist is to organize opposition to each and any war. But the non-absolute pacifist has to analyze cases to determine when a war may exceptionally be justified. Once Russell had concluded that the Soviet Union under Stalin represented a sufficient threat to western civilization to fall under the exception clause, he had to consider the various alternatives. In what follows, he uses both disjunction to exhaustively enumerate possible cases, and implication to propose actions appropriate to each:

The question is *whether there is to be war or whether there is not*; and there is only one course of action open to us. That is to strengthen the Western Alliance morally and physically as much and as quickly as possible, and hope it may become obvious to the Russians that they can't make war successfully. *If there is war, it should be won as quickly as possible.* That is the line of policy which the Western Nations are now pursuing. (P. 41, italics added, with "is" in the second italicized passage being italicized in the original)

Russell believed that in either case (war, or no war), the preferred policy was one of Western strength. In the best case scenario, this would dissuade the Russians from initiating war, while in the worst case scenario, this would make for as brief a war as possible. In what follows, I will refer to the best case scenario as case (d), for reasons to be explained below. The most controversial part of his talk was the following response to the question: "If there is another war, what would be the chances of survival of this country? What would be the economic consequences?" The response, reported in the third person, reformulated the question as considering the alternatives "if the present aggressive Russian policy was persisted in", and Russell considered three cases (a)–(c). The first two considered war before and after the Russians had the atomic bomb, and the third, laconically termed "submission", presumed no war, but immediate Western capitulation. What is missing is the fourth possibility: no war, with Russian acquiescence to international controls of atomic energy and a form of world government. This is precisely the alternative I have lettered as (d) above. Neglecting this fourth possibility gives an altogether sinister interpretation to Russell's reported response:

As he saw it there were three alternatives *if the present aggressive Russian policy was persisted in*: (a) War with Russia before she has the atomic bombs, ending

---

fairly swiftly and inevitably in a Western victory; (b) war with Russia after she has the atomic bombs, ending again in Western victory, but after frightful carnage, destruction and suffering; (c) Submission. We could say to the Russians “Come in and govern us, establish your concentration camps, do what you like.” This third alternative seemed to him so unutterably unthinkable that it could be dismissed; and as between the other two the choice to him, at least, seemed clear. (P. 43, italics in the original)

It is interesting to note that Russell considered the conditional nature of his response (“if the present aggressive Russian policy was persisted in”) so important, that one of the few corrections to the typescript he made before publication was to specify that those words be italicized. This is because the three cases (a)–(c) presupposed that condition; while a fourth case—labelled (d) above—presupposed the opposite condition: that Russian policy changed. Russell’s full analysis can be summarized in the table below, with indication of his clearly expressed preferences for each scenario:

CASE	SUBCASE	COMMENT	PREFERENCE
(a) War	Before USSR has atom bomb	Ends swiftly with Western victory.	(2) Preferred to atomic war once USSR has the bomb.
(b) War	After USSR has atom bomb	Much more destruction than in immediately preceding case.	(3) Preferred to capitulation.
(c) No war	West submits to the Soviets	Capitulation of West, destruction of Western civilization.	(4) Least preferred of all options.
(d) No war	Soviets agree to atomic energy control and some form of international government	Can only be achieved by Western preparedness to show Soviets they can’t win war.	(1) Preferred to all other options.

---

A reasonable hypothesis to explain Lawson's interpretation of the talk is that members of the audience simply retained cases (a)–(c) based on their recollection of the last part of the talk—the question period—without recalling case (d), which was mentioned earlier in the body of the talk. Although Russell had carefully formulated his proposals in the conditional, making explicit the conditions that first had to be realized before the consequent actions were to be undertaken, Lawson appears to have stripped away the terms “if ... then ...” and remembered the talk as a series of affirmations. Both of these effects have contributed to the continuing myth that Russell advocated preventive atomic war, when in fact what he did was enumerate possible cases and propose conditional responses, including the use of threats of war as a strategic policy in the existing circumstances.

#### POSSIBILITY, PROBABILITY AND PREFERENCES

I will term Russell's methodology for analyzing the international situation as “enumeration of cases”, where he considers three factors in developing his strategy: the logical possibilities or scenarios, the likelihood or probability of each, and their desirability both intrinsically and realistically. In another article the same year as his Westminster School talk, “The Outlook for Mankind” (1948),<sup>24</sup> Russell began: “Let us begin by enumerating the logical possibilities, without regard to the question whether they are probable or desirable” (p. 238). He distinguished six possibilities, three of which involved no world war, and three of which did, as follows:

Let us begin by enumerating the logical possibilities, without regard to the question whether they are probable or desirable.

First: Russia may convert the Capitalist world, and a Communist empire extend over the whole earth.

Second: Russia may revert to Capitalism, and take to willing co-operation with the West.

Third: Each side may concede to the other a definite sphere, and the world may be divided as the medieval world was divided, between Christendom and Islam, perhaps with occasional minor conflicts as inconclusive and peripheral as

---

<sup>24</sup> *Horizon*, 17 (April 1948): 238–46.

the Crusades.

These three possibilities do not involve a world war. If there is a world war, there are three further possibilities:

Fourth: America may be victorious and establish an American world empire.

Fifth: Russia may be victorious and establish a Communist world empire.

Sixth: The war may end in a draw, after which, presumably, each side will prepare for the next bout; or, possibly, they may belatedly revert to the third possibility, as was done at the Peace of Westphalia after the Thirty Years' War.

Russell then evaluated the likelihood of each of these possibilities. He considered case 1 (Russia converts the West) and case 2 (Russia reverts to capitalism) highly unlikely, given the tenacity with which both Americans and Russians then asserted their respective systems. Case 3 (*modus vivendi* and long-term world division) also seemed unlikely, given Russell's view that the Russians were insincere in their calls for co-existence. Significantly, however, this possibility was deemed less unlikely than the previous two, with the result that Russell was able to value it as a preference. Of the three war options, case 4 (America victorious) was considered the likely outcome by Americans and by Russell, case 5 (Russia victorious) was considered the likely outcome by the Russians only, while case 6 (draw that prepares yet another war) was not rated, though the possibility that it might not lead to another war was considered.

Russell's crystal ball was not as good as he might have hoped, as case 3 (coexistence of both systems) did come to pass in the period 1949–91, followed by case 2 (collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union). But the probabilities Russell assigned are less important than the preferences he associated with each case, with the one exception that he excluded evaluating scenarios that were deemed highly improbable:

The above review of possibilities has been necessary before considering what we should attempt and what it is permissible to hope. It seems to result from our survey that what would be best would be an agreement to partition the world and not interfere in each other's zones; next to that, a war soon, ending in an American victory; next, a Russian victory; and, worst of all, a draw. (P. 243)

In summary form, Russell's analysis looks as follows:

---

POSSIBILITY	PROBABILITY	PREFERENCE
A: No War		
1: USSR converts world to Communism	Highly improbable	Not ranked as the likelihood is so small.
2: USSR reverts to capitalism	Highly improbable	Not ranked as the likelihood is so small.
3: Division of world into stable and separate blocs	Unlikely	(1) First preference, most preferred since it does not involve war.
B. War		
4: American victory	Believed likely by Americans and Russell	(2) Desirable, second preference, since it involves victory of liberty, albeit at the price of war.
5: Russian victory	Believed likely only by Russians, not Americans or Russell	(3) Undesirable, but third ranked preference compared to the next, worst outcome.
6: Inconclusive, leading to further (fourth) world war (or possibly, reverting to case 3 situation)	None stated	(4) Most unwelcome outcome, could lead to annihilation of humanity in subsequent war.

And he noted, that while he considered it possible to avoid war, he doubted whether it was likely:

The only possible way, so far as I can see, of avoiding a war between Russia and America, is to make it obvious to the Russian Government that, in a war, America would be victorious. It is obvious that the Marshall Plan, combined with a West-European Union, gives the best hope of this, as well as of bringing victory to the West *if there is a war*. But for the reasons already given it is very difficult to persuade the Russians that they would not win. *I do not myself believe*



*that it is possible to persuade them, and therefore I expect a war.* Nevertheless, we should do all in our power to make the Russians afraid of war. Fortunately, the measures necessary to that end are exactly the same as those involved in preparing for war if it should come, namely to build up the economic and military strength of Western Europe in close alliance with the United States.<sup>25</sup> (*Ibid.*, p. 243, italics added)

From the above analysis, three conclusions follow: (1) Russell's conditional threat was not dependent on his analysis of the probability of compliance by Russia, (2) Russell continued to prefer a non-war solution, despite the low probability he assigned it, and (3) he continued to favour a policy of threats as a means of preserving peace.

#### THREAT AND RISK/BENEFIT

An interesting analysis of this type of problem is made by the ethicist R. M. Hare, who has argued that it is not always the case that "what it would be wrong to do, it would be wrong to threaten to do."<sup>26</sup> The key to his analysis is the point that "it seems to me that there could be, and well may be now, situations in which the expectation of utility, that is, of preference-satisfaction, would be maximized by making threats the carrying out of which would not maximize utility" (*ibid.*, p. 77). Hare does not discuss Russell's views, but his analysis can be made explicit as follows. There are four cases to be examined, corresponding to the four combinations of threat/no threat and war/no war: (1) no threat and no war, (2) no threat and war, (3) threat and no war, and (4) threat and war. Preponderance of benefits from the pacifist point of view is obtained in the two no-war cases (1) and (3), while preponderance of risks is incurred in the two war cases (2) and (4). Benefit may be considered as positive utility, risk as negative utility.

---

<sup>25</sup> This was generally Russell's view for the period 1948–52. In *How Near Is War?* (London: Derricke Ridgway, 1952), he estimated at six to four the chances of war (p. 15).

<sup>26</sup> Hare, "War and Peace", in *Essays on Political Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Paperbacks, 1989), p. 77.

---

	NO WAR	WAR
No threat	(1) Spontaneous success of coexistence	(2) Failure of appeasement and isolationism
Threat	(3) Success of threat as pressure tactic	(4) Failure of threat to prevent war

Russell's position was that it was worth taking the risk involved in case (3), of threat made, but war prevented. On Hare's analysis, this would be justified only if two inequalities hold:

(i) The benefit involved in not making a threat and no war resulting (success of spontaneous coexistence, case 1) is less than the risk that not making a threat will only hasten war (failure of appeasement and/or isolationism, case 2). Russell believed that coexistence without a threat was unlikely, given Soviet expansion in Eastern Europe, so that its overall value as an option was low. At the same time, he considered the likelihood of war as great without a threat, based on the analogy to pre-war appeasement by Britain and isolationism by the US. In other words, not threatening produced more risk of war than benefit of peace, and should be avoided. This does not, in itself, justify threatening, which has to be analyzed on its own terms.

(ii) The benefit of threatening war, without having war (threat of war as preventive, case 3) is greater than the risk that threatening war will lead to war (failure of threat to prevent war, case 4). Conditional threat of war might result in the Soviet Union backing down, thereby achieving the aim of the threat and preserving peace. But even if war did result, the outcome was likely to be favourable to the West and the war to be over quickly, so the failure of the threat to obtain its immediate goal—peaceful coexistence—would lead to the success in the next round of the “game”—Western supremacy.

Much depends on how the threat/war box (case 4) is viewed. For Russell, the war outcome was a failure of the paradoxical strategy of threats of war to prevent actual war. But for his critics, this box should be labelled “preventive war”, since on their view the threat of war was simply a ruse behind which lay the intention of waging preventive war. I argue that Russell favoured case (3): threaten war to prevent war; his critics claim that he actually favoured case (4), interpreted as advocacy of

preventive war. This misalignment of perceptions also played a role in the problem of Russell's denials.

#### RUSSELL'S DENIALS

One final aspect of the controversy remains to be analyzed: Russell's repeated denials—and worse than that, occasional retractions of his denials—of having advocated preventive atomic war with the Soviet Union. These have seemed to most of his readers and critics as self-serving, and an indication that there was something to hide. Rather than constituting smoke screens behind which he tried to maintain his new-found respectability with the Labour Party as Ray Monk has claimed (see below), they rather show Russell trying, though not very successfully, to set the record right, and then succumbing to some, though not all, of the misunderstandings of his critics.

There are three distinct periods in Russell's analysis of his own statements: (1) an initial period, roughly from 1948 to 1953, when he was generally correct in stating that he supported CTW and denying that he approved of APW; (2) the period 1954–59 when under continued pressure by critics, he misstated his own views in meta-statements about them; (3) a third period, 1959–67, when Russell then repeated these more or less inaccurate accounts as if they were what he had actually stated in 1945–49. The problems involved in the second and third periods do not, however, modify the content of what Russell stated as his policy, and admitted with a high degree of accuracy during the first period.

#### FIRST PERIOD: CORRECT CLAIMS WITH RESPECT TO APW AND CTW

The very first of Russell's denials was made immediately after the Westminster School talk in 1948. Although Russell had made similar statements on the threat of war on many previous occasions, it was this case which attracted the most attention, in part based on a very unfavourable report in *Reynolds News*.<sup>27</sup> One of the first places that Russell attempt-

---

<sup>27</sup> Reported in *Reynolds News*, 21 Nov. 1948, as "Schoolboy Challenges Bertrand

ted to repair the damage was at his alma mater, Cambridge (where he had attended Trinity College and had been teaching since 1944). The 27 November 1948 edition of *Varsity*, a Cambridge Weekly Newspaper, headlined, “Earl Russell Denies Atom War Reports: Misquoted in London Press, Did Not Say ‘Attack Russia’”. Russell, as he was to do again later, attacked the report as an “intentional misrepresentation”. In particular, Russell rejected the claim that he had ever said: “Either we must have a war against Russia before she has the atom bomb or we will have to lie down and let them govern us.” This is a denial of APW. An examination of the text of Russell’s speech, both in typescript and as printed, shows that Russell did not make the quoted comment, though, curiously, Ray Monk, following Caroline Moorehead, quotes him as if he had.<sup>28</sup>

To the contrary, Russell continued, stating a version of CTW: “What I really said was that it was infinitely to be hoped that there would be no war, but that the best way to avoid war was to be prepared for it.” He further admitted that at the end of the meeting he declared “that in the event of war our chance would be better while we had a monopoly of the atom bomb.”<sup>29</sup> This is not in contradiction to CTW. Rather, it expresses Russell’s preference for a less destructive rather than a more destructive war, if war were to occur. Such a less destructive war, given the evolution of weapons of mass destruction, would also be earlier rather than later.

In a letter to *The Observer* (28 Nov. 1948), Russell continued his response to the fallout from the Westminster School address, situating the distinction as between urging immediate war, i.e. preventive war,

Russell”. The column “What We Think” was devoted to the issue. Entitled “Prophet of Despair”, it was highly critical of Russell, calling his ideas worthy only of a “caveman” (*ibid.*, p. 4).

<sup>28</sup> Monk, 2: 302, bases himself on Moorehead, p. 469, but she does not include an endnote reference to this quotation. The source of the quotation is the *Reynolds News* article which Russell repudiated as false. The quotation does not occur in the article in *Nineteenth Century* which reproduces Russell’s talk and the ensuing question period. Monk’s failure to note that the quotation is not one made by Russell is unfortunate.

<sup>29</sup> And he concluded, “Wherever I go in the country I must watch what I say, for I stand in danger of being grossly misrepresented.” He would need “three months” to undo the damage; the only thing to be fully believed in newspaper reports were “cricket scores and stock exchange prices” (*Varsity*, 27 Nov. 1948, p. 1). The controversy at Cambridge, as elsewhere, did not go away, and in 1950 Russell felt obliged to resign from the honorary presidency of the Cambridge Labour Club.

---

and urging the threat of war. "I did not, as has been reported, urge immediate war with Russia. I did urge that the democracies should be prepared to use force if necessary, and that their readiness to do so should be made perfectly clear to Russia."<sup>30</sup> Again, he admitted CTW and denied APW.

For his Nobel Prize speech of 11 December 1950, Russell chose as his topic "What Desires Are Politically Important". Noting that a major psychological source of war was the unfulfilled desire for adventure, he proposed, only partly in jest, that large cities should have venues for such thrill seekers that would satisfy their desires without recourse to war, and he suggested two: artificial waterfalls with fragile canoes, and bathing pools filled with mechanical sharks. He continued: "Any person found advocating a preventive war should be condemned to two hours a day with these ingenious monsters."<sup>31</sup> This does not appear as a self-criticism, so certain was Russell that he had not advocated preventive war in the previous period.

In 1951 Russell responded to a criticism made of him the previous year in the *New Statesman*. In the 18 November 1950 issue, "Critic" had noted: "After the last war, even more deeply troubled by the spread of communism than he was by the power of Rome which he had often denounced, he decided that it would be both good morals and good politics to start dropping nuclear bombs on Moscow."<sup>32</sup> Russell demanded, and was given, a lengthy reply, in the form of a letter printed in the 21 April 1951 issue. Russell reproduced a number of quotes from his writings in favour of peace, and added in conclusion that he had advanced CTW:

I will admit that at one time I had hopes of a shorter road to general peace. At the time of the Baruch proposal for internationalizing atomic energy, I thought it possible that *the Russians might be induced by threats to agree to this proposal and thereby to save the world from the atomic armaments race upon which it is now embarked*. But this hope proved vain. After the Berlin blockade and the

---

<sup>30</sup> In Ray Perkins, Jr., ed. *Yours Faithfully, Bertrand Russell: a Lifelong Fight for Peace, Justice, and Truth in Letters to the Editor* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), pp. 191–2.

<sup>31</sup> Reprinted as "Politically Important Desires", Pt. 11, Chap. 11 of *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1954), p. 168.

<sup>32</sup> "Critic", *New Statesman and Nation*, n.s. 40 (13 Nov. 1950): 449. Russell's reply is "Lord Russell and the Atom Bomb", *ibid.*, 41 (21 April 1951): 448, 450.

---

rape of Czechoslovakia I stated emphatically, what I still hold, that the Russians ought to be informed that the West would not tolerate further aggressions of this sort. (P. 450, italics added)

In 1952 Russell was questioned by journalists at the Fleet Street Forum and the transcript was published as *How Near Is War?* The relevant question he was asked was phrased in terms of an “ultimatum”: “Not long ago you were quoted as demanding that the West should send the Russians an ultimatum that they should either toe the line or have an atom bomb dropped on them. Will you tell us whether you were misreported and, if not, what accounts for the slight difference between that line and the one you now advocate?” (p. 18). Russell responded with a contextualization of his CTW to the Russian refusal to accept the internationalization of atomic energy:

I thought, at the time, there was something to be said for *trying to bully the Russians into accepting that Baruch report*. Of course that situation has now gone, entirely. First of all the Russians also have the atom bomb; in the second place the Americans are no longer in that mood—you cannot give those terms any longer. (P. 19, italics added)

On 17 October 1953 Russell’s letter to a correspondent who had queried him on this question was reprinted, with Russell’s permission, in the *Nation*. He once again denied APW, this time citing it as a “Communist invention”. “The story that I supported a preventive atom war against Russia is a Communist invention. I once spoke at a meeting at which only one reporter was present and he was a Communist, though reporting for orthodox newspapers.”<sup>33</sup> This is a denial of APW, but it became a problem in 1959 when Russell, in response to a criticism by a correspondent, incorrectly believed that he had denied CTW in this letter (see below).

The clearest exposition of his position was made in an article published in March 1958, “Why I Have Changed My Mind”, and reproduced as an appendix, entitled “Inconsistency?”, in his 1959 book, *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare*. Referring to the period surrounding the

---

<sup>33</sup> Russell, “Bertrand Russell and ‘Preventive War’”, *The Nation*, 177 (17 Oct. 1953): 320.

Baruch proposal, he admitted CTW: "I thought, at that time, that it would be worth while to bring pressure to bear upon Russia and even, if necessary, to go so far as to threaten war on the sole issue of the internationalizing of atomic energy."<sup>34</sup> He continued: "My aim, then as now, was to prevent a war." And he concluded: "I do not deny that the policy I have advocated has changed from time to time. It has changed as circumstances have changed" (p. 91). This summary is interesting, both for its emphasis on the obligation Russell felt to change his political views as the world changed, and for his continued insistence that what he had done was propose a policy of threatening Russia.

Biographers of Russell who have paid careful attention to his published words and studied his archival letters, such as Clark and Monk, are nonetheless not satisfied. Speaking of the 1948 Westminster speech, Clark commented:

Nowhere in all this did Russell urge, in so many words, the starting of preventive war, while the qualifying "if" about Russian intentions added a conditional that many reports ignored; nevertheless, emphasis on the obvious fact that a war before Russia had nuclear weapons would be less disastrous than war afterwards was perilously close to it. (P. 525)

And he later commented with respect to Russell's statement of his position for the 1952 Fleet Street interview:

The statement—which overlooked Russell's advocacy of finding a *casus belli* long before the Baruch proposals—was not formally a plea for preventive war; but complete dissociation from the policy demanded a considerable semantic wiggle. (P. 526)

Whether Russell was indeed "perilously close" to APW and just a "semantic wiggle" away from it, Clark nevertheless admitted that formally, Russell did not advance it. But when Clark, and other commentators, considered a further set of statements by Russell, where confusions between CTW and APW were made by Russell himself, and where he claimed he had forgotten having made statements threatening war, willingness to give Russell the benefit of the doubt failed.

---

<sup>34</sup> Russell, *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), pp. 89–90.

**SECOND PERIOD: CONFUSED OR INCORRECT ADMISSIONS**

The second period I identify is characterized by two criticisms made of Russell's inconsistencies, one in 1954 and another in 1959. Whereas in the first period (1948–53) Russell had focused directly on what he had said in 1945–49, he now was forced to defend what he said he had said in his preceding clarifications. In this situation of meta-claims, mistakes began to accumulate. In particular, Russell admitted that (1) he had stated APW when in fact he had stated CTW; (2) believed that he had stated CTW only privately in 1948, when in fact he had stated it on numerous public occasions; and (3) claimed that he had forgotten ever having formulated CTW, until reminded by readers who published letters from him which contained anti-Soviet statements.

In "A Prescription for the World", which appeared in *The Saturday Review* in August 1954, Russell announced the shift in his strategy to a campaign against the danger of nuclear omnicide. The changed circumstances of the destructive power of hydrogen-bomb war now precluded any form of threat of war: "Organized war, an institution which has existed for some six thousand years, has at last become incompatible with the continued existence of the human race."<sup>35</sup> Walter Marseille, the Berkeley psychiatrist to whom Russell had written a letter on the danger of the Soviet Union in 1948, forwarded that letter to the *Saturday Review*, which published it, along with Russell's reply, as "1948 Russell vs. 1954 Russell".<sup>36</sup> The accompanying editorial note indicated that Russell's 1954 article "appeared to reject" the "aggressive anti-Soviet policy" which he had expressed in 1948. In the letter to Marseille, Russell had argued that as a result of a war with Russia, Western Europe "will be lost to civilization for centuries", and went on to say:

Even at such a price, I think war would be worthwhile. Communism must be wiped out, and world government must be established. But if, by waiting, we could defend our present lines in Germany and Italy, it would be an immeasurable boon.

---

<sup>35</sup> Russell, "A Prescription for the World", *Saturday Review*, 37, no. 35 (28 Aug. 1954): 9–11, 38–40.

<sup>36</sup> *Saturday Review*, 37, no. 42 (16 Oct. 1954): 25–6.



I do not think the Russians will yield without war. I think all (including Stalin) are fatuous and ignorant. But I hope I am wrong about this. (8 May 1948; *SLBR*, 2: 429)

This strong expression of personal opinion was not unique. Russell's intense dislike for Stalinist Russia was evident in his personal letters written immediately after the war, particularly those to his close confidant Gamel Brenan and her husband, Gerald. Writing from Trinity College to Gamel Brenan just two days after VE day, Russell was gloomy and pessimistic about the future:

This "Victory" is dreadful. Hatred of everybody by everybody, Germans to be homeless and starving, Russia already taking on the role the Nazis were playing, the next war already clearly in prospect. I have not at any time felt more unhappy than now. (10 May 1945, RA Rec. Acq. 705)

Russell's attitude did not improve in the following months, and his mind appeared quite set on the notion that Russia was going to occupy the role as destroyer of civilization that the Nazis had been forced to vacate. His pessimism was reinforced by the reality of the A-bombs, which had been dropped on Japan just weeks before this note was sent by Russell to Brenan:

I see very little hope for the world. There is no point in agreements not to use the atomic bomb, as they would not be kept. Russia is sure to learn soon how to make it. I think Stalin has inherited Hitler's ambition for world dictatorship. We must expect a war between USA and USSR, which will begin with the total destruction of London. I think the war will last 30 years, and leave a world without civilized people, from which everything will have to be built afresh—a process taking (say) 500 years. (1 Sept. 1945; *SLBR*, 2: 410)

In the same letter he expressed himself most clearly about his personal wish, in the depths of his gloom and pessimism, for a swift resolution to the danger of Soviet Russia. Yet the words that follow, though they represent Russell's feelings or state of mind, do not constitute a policy he would ever "dream of advocating": a preventive atomic war of the US against the USSR:

There is one thing, and one only, which could save the world, and that is a thing which I should not dream of *advocating*. It is, that America should make

---

war on Russia during the next two years, and establish a world empire by means of the atomic bomb. This will not be done. (*Ibid.*, italics added)

Here there is no conditional formulation; merely a desire for an action. Expressed in a personal letter this is no more than what one might ordinarily expect from such a form of communication: indicating to a close personal friend a fear for the future.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Russell very early on states that he does not intend to advocate unconditional, or preventive war. But when a similar expression of Russell's views appeared in the letter to Marseille, it seemed to Marseille, many commentators, and indeed even Russell at times, to be a case of Russell's advocacy of preventive war with the USSR. Indeed, given Russell's imperative, "Communism must be wiped out ...", it could easily be seen by a reader as APW, had it been made in a public statement of Russell's policy, which—significantly—it was not.

The context of the 1948 letter to Marseille may explain its vociferous tone. 8 May 1948, when the letter was sent, was just weeks after the beginning of the Soviet blockade of West Berlin, and about a month before the relief of the city was undertaken through the US-led airlift. Russell was particularly attuned to the plight of the German civilian population after World War II, and had denounced Soviet mistreatment of them in the harshest terms. Consequently, it is not surprising that Russell used such strong language in his letter to Marseille, given the recent action of the Soviet authorities to prevent food and supplies reaching the people of West Berlin.

In his 1954 response to Marseille, Russell admitted having favoured a policy of threats after the Soviet rejection of the Baruch proposal: "I thought at the time that perhaps the Russians could be compelled to accept the offer by the threat of war in the event of their continued re-

---

<sup>37</sup> Rupert Crawshay-Williams, a close personal friend of Russell's at the time, explained his views as follows: "When he was feeling calm, he would simply say that the methods of Communism were as bad as those of any totalitarian state including Nazi Germany. But, when he was provoked—for instance, by us [Crawshay-Williams and his wife], who believed that there was nothing in Russia so bad as the Nazis' concentration camps and extermination—then Russell would often get excited. He would start to say that Russia was far worse than Germany and he would boil over into making large and comprehensive generalizations about "all Russians" (*Russell Remembered* [New York: Oxford U. P., 1970], p. 22).

---

fusal.” This is recognition that he did advance CTW. He went on to note that times had changed, with the Russian acquisition of the bomb: “Those who still advocate war seem to me to be living in a fool’s paradise.” Russell continued that he did “not now, any more than at an earlier time, advocate appeasement or a slackening in rearmament, since either might encourage the Communist powers in aggressive designs and would therefore make war more likely.”<sup>38</sup> The impression that an unsympathetic reader would take away from this exchange was that Russell had admitted defending APW, reading “advocate war” for “advocate preventive war”. This use of “advocate”, however, is ambiguous as between “advocate conditional threat of war” (CTW) and “advocate the waging of preventive war” (APW).

This ambiguity persisted in his 1959 interview with John Freeman on the BBC.<sup>39</sup> Freeman asked Russell if he had defended APW: “Is it true or untrue that in recent years you advocated that a preventive war might be made against communism, against Soviet Russia?” Russell responded: “It’s entirely true, and I don’t repent of it.” This seems to be an admission of APW, but Russell went on to say that despite his disappointment with the Soviet rejection of the Baruch plan, he had proposed CTW, not APW: “... not that I advocated a nuclear war, but I did think that great *pressure* should be put upon Russia to accept the Baruch proposal, and I did think that if they continued to refuse it *might* be necessary actually to go to war.” He readily admitted that making a threat presupposes that it may have to be carried out: “I thought then, and hoped, that the Russians would give way, but of course *you can’t threaten unless you’re prepared to have your bluff called*” (p. 505, italics added).

The problem of what may be called (on analogy to the previous case) 1954 Russell vs. 1953 Russell was noted almost immediately by a reader of *The Listener*, Winthrop Parkhurst, who returned to the advocate/threaten debate. He began with a quote from Russell’s 17 October 1953 letter to *The Nation* denying that he had ever supported a preventive war: “The story that I supported a preventive atom war against Russia is

---

<sup>38</sup> “1948 Russell vs. 1954 Russell”, p. 25.

<sup>39</sup> “Bertrand Russell Reflects: a Conversation on B.B.C. Television with John Freeman”, *The Listener*, 61 (19 Mar. 1959): 503–5. See also Russell’s further comments, to a letter from Winthrop Parkhurst: “Bertrand Russell’s Television Broadcast”, *The Listener*, 61 (28 May 1959): 937.

---

a communist invention.” Parkhurst then quoted from Russell’s 1954 letter to *The Saturday Review* to the effect that “I thought, at that time, that it would be worth while to bring pressure to bear upon Russia, and even, if necessary to threaten war on the sole issue of the internationalizing of atomic weapons.”

Russell in 1953 denied APW, while in 1954 he admitted CTW. But this was not Parkhurst’s reading: “Mr. Russell may not like to explain how, having formerly advocated preventive war, he can charge a reporter with writing a slanderous report of such advocacy” (*ibid.*). In other words, Parkhurst read Russell as denying APW in 1953 (which he did) and then admitting APW in 1954 (which he did not), and incorrectly concluded that he was inconsistent.

In response, Russell complicated the problem by accepting that there was in fact a contradiction: that his having “at one time favoured a policy of threats against Soviet Russia which might have led to war” did not “accord” with his 1953 letter to *The Nation*. To further muddle the matter, he affirmed that he had “completely forgotten that I had ever thought a policy of threat involving possible war desirable”, the fact of which was supposedly brought to his attention by Walter Marseille in 1954. Not only did Russell now agree that there was a conflict between what he said in 1954 and what he said in 1953, when in fact there was not, but he added a reason for it—forgetting that he had favoured a policy of CTW—which contradicted his many statements of the threat, as well as his admission on almost as many occasions that he had made the threat. It was at this point that even a sympathetic biographer such as Clark could only express dismay and endorse the view that Russell had stated APW and was trying to hide it. In this context, Clark returned to a comment Russell had made in a 1945 publication, before the Baruch plan, about finding a “*casus belli*” if the Soviet Union did not desist in its aggressive activities, and combined this with the 1959 statements, to conclude:

His explanation that he had simply forgotten what he had said, given in *The Listener* after the Freeman interview, and later in his autobiography, would be more acceptable if applied to one speech rather than to a long series of articles and statements, the first made months before the appearance of the Baruch proposals. It might be possible to argue that his disavowal of advocating preventive war was based on the most academic interpretation of the term: that advocating the threat of war unless a potential enemy submitted, even though being

---

prepared to have your bluff called, was not advocacy of a preventive war. But even this questionable escape-route is blocked by Russell's own statement to Freeman and to his earlier suggestion that "a *casus belli* would not be difficult to find".<sup>40</sup> (Clark, pp. 529–30)

Clark concluded that the "truth seems simpler": Russell was trying to "brush under the carpet" his bellicose period, now that, after 1955 and the Einstein–Russell declaration, he was again an advocate of peace. Monk as well loses what little patience he may have had for Russell at this point, and sees the 1959 Freeman interview and letter in response to Parkhurst as the culmination of a long period of Russell's attempt to cover-up his "war-like pronouncements" (Monk, 2: 303), initiated after the 1948 Westminster speech in order to protect his new-found respectability with the British Labour Party. Typically, Monk segues into a discussion of Russell's unhappy personal life, and leaves the matter at that.

Of Russell's major biographers, Clark is by far the more detailed and analytic in his discussion of the period. But for him, as for Monk, the 1959 "muddle" is the *reductio ad absurdum* of Russell's position. I disagree, and suggest a different explanation as follows. Russell found himself in an untenable situation. Despite his accurate denials of APW and ready admission of CTW, the matter was continually brought up as if it were discovered anew. His exasperation increased through the later part of the 1950s, to the point where, unwisely, he was willing to admit to APW if that admission would dissipate the hostility and allow him to explain why he had, in fact, favoured CTW.

The use of the term "advocate war" was a further source of confusion, and eventually, even to Russell, came to signify either APW or CTW. In practice, the distinction meant little in the new period of the hydrogen-bomb arms race begun in 1954, and Russell shifted strategy to take into account this new international situation where the threat of war was no longer justified. But theoretically, and for historical purposes, the distinction remains capital. The impression of wrongdoing—

---

<sup>40</sup> Alan Ryan shares this view: "Whether this was old age catching him out, it is hard to say; if it was a deliberate attempt to deceive, it was uncharacteristically cowardly, and inept too, when the printed record was too easily accessible" (*Bertrand Russell: a Political Life* [London: Allen Lane the Penguin P., 1988], p. 180).

---

ultimately, of advocating preventive war—as evidenced by a perceived effort to hide the past or cover it up was established in the minds of commentators, and passed into Russell scholarship with Clark’s otherwise excellent, archivally based biography.

### THIRD PERIOD: 1959–67

Although Russell correctly stated his position as late as 1958, in the article “Why I Have Changed My Mind”, reprinted as “Inconsistency?”, the Freeman–Parkhurst confrontation caused him to present his positions differently thereafter. Three types of errors occur in this period: (1) Russell’s claim that he proposed conditional threat of war only in 1948, (2) that the threat was made only in private letters and conversation, and (3) that he had forgotten about having made the threat until reminded by correspondents.

In August 1960 Russell dictated to his wife, Edith Russell, a document to be sent to Russell’s publisher, Sir Stanley Unwin, entitled “Bertrand Russell’s Work for Peace”. In a portion of the document formulated in the first person, and in Edith Russell’s hand, Russell stated his erroneous claim that he had made CTW only privately, in 1948:

1948–50. While America had a monopoly of atomic weapons, I favoured the Baruch Plan, which would have entailed their abandonment by the United States and an undertaking by Russia to abstain from making them. When Russia refused to adhere to the Baruch Plan, I thought that the United States could compel adherence, if necessary by the threat of war. (*I never urged this publicly*, but only stated this view in private correspondence—since published—and conversation. (6 Aug. 1960; p. 3 of the dictated manuscript; p. 2 of the typescript in the third person, italics added; RAI 220.024190)

Russell maintained the same position in 1962 when he was queried by a schoolboy who had refused to join the Cadet Corps.<sup>41</sup> This was a

---

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Bone, editor of the forthcoming *Man’s Peril, 1954–55* (Vol. 28 of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*), includes a further example of the type of correspondence Russell had on this issue, starting with a letter to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* by Horace King, a Conservative MP. King considered that Russell’s 1961 position in favour of unilateral British nuclear disarmament was in conflict with his former position in favour of Western armaments to deter Soviet aims made in a 1955 television interview. In a letter to Mrs. P. E. Wilson on the purported contradiction, Russell said, speaking of

protest against war for which he was inspired by Russell's writings and example. The young man, Christopher Perry, stated: "The other day I became involved in an argument with a Commander of the Navy and he advises me not to believe anything Bertrand Russell has to say because soon after the war he advocated war with Russia, then H-bomb-less, which is inconsistent with the present cause" (undated letter of June 1962). Russell responded, pointing out that his views changed as the underlying circumstances that prompted those views themselves changed: "Of course, I have changed my views on things. In ninety years events have changed as well." He then continued:

I said *privately* that it should even be said that this issue [the Baruch Plan] was of such importance that we might consider war were an atomic race to be instituted. I did not *advocate* a war with Russia; I urged that the terrible urgency of the issue be impressed upon Stalin so that he might realise just how seriously the Baruch plan was desired by the West. Since the arms race itself has taken place the very fears which motivated me to urge so strongly the internationalization of atomic power have led me to call for immediate halt before the danger becomes final death for us all. (13 June 1962, first italics added; RAI 630)

A similar exchange occurred with Miriam Dyer-Bennett where Russell stated, in response to her query on his earlier positions:

I advocated that the Soviets should be informed in 1948 of the tremendous importance of the proposal to internationalize atomic energy, and to be warned that the consequences of not coming to agreement on this would be a disastrous arms race. I urged those who supported the internationalization of atomic energy to inform the Soviets that the consequences of failure to agree might be war. *I did not propose an attack upon the Soviet Union*, but an ultimately serious effort to avert what then seemed to be an inevitable arms race, the consequences of which we are now experiencing. (14 Sept. 1962, italics added; RA Rec. Acq. 236)

When Dyer-Bennett indicated that she would share his letter with others, Russell responded: "I am most pleased that you found my letter

the period surrounding the Baruch Plan: "I emphasize that I did not advocate war but urged the Americans to convey the intensity of their feeling that the internationalization of atomic power was essential to survival" (Russell to P. E. Wilson, 21 Dec. 1961; RAI 720). For a full discussion on the matter, see *Papers* 28: 434-5.

---

of use to you and I should be in your debt if you could contribute towards putting the lie to the fiction that I have advocated war against the Soviet Union” (21 Oct. 1962).

Russell’s final public statement on the matter was in Volume 3 of his *Autobiography*. Russell remained unrepentant that he had at one time favoured a policy of CTW, claiming that had his “advice to threaten war been taken in 1948”, the “evils” that have developed as a result of the Cold War “might have been avoided” (p. 8). This is a consequentialist argument for CTW, but Russell continued as if CTW had been made only in 1948, and then only privately:

None the less, at the time I gave this advice, I gave it so casually without any real hope that it would be followed, that I soon forgot I had given it. I had mentioned it in a private letter [to Walter Marseille] and again in a speech [at Westminster School] that I did not know was to be subject of dissection by the press.... Unfortunately, in the meantime, before this incontrovertible evidence was set before me [that he had favoured CTW, by Marseille, in 1954], I had hotly denied that I had ever made such a suggestion [denial of APW in 1953]. (*Auto.*, 3: 18; identification of references in square brackets added)

The layers of confusion in this, Russell’s last statement on the matter, were no doubt exasperating to biographers from Clark through Moorehead to Monk. But many a great thinker has been known to be a poor chronicler of the evolution of his own thought, and autobiographies, though valuable, are not the final word. After all, the Darwin industry would soon be put out of work if it were to accept his own view, as stated in his *Autobiography*, that the idea of natural selection came to him one day while reading Malthus’ *On Population*. The actual story is a bit more complicated. So too for Russell, and the fact that, after a period of repeatedly correct presentations of his views (1948–53), he caved in under the weight of his critics’ misunderstandings and his own inability to dissuade them from those misunderstandings (1954–59), and partially misrepresented his own views thereafter (1959–67), does not change what his views originally were. Russell summed up most accurately his view as follows, reading “pacifist” in the context below as “absolute pacifist”:

This advice of mine is still brought up against me. It is easy to understand why Communists might object to it. But the usual criticism is that I, a pacifist,

---



once advocated the threat of war. It seems to cut no ice that I have reiterated *ad nauseam* that I am not a pacifist, that I believe that some wars, a very few, are justified, even necessary. They are usually necessary because matters have been permitted to drag on their obviously evil way till no peaceful means can stop them. (*Auto.*, 3: 18)

The “usual criticism” that Russell was inconsistent because, although a pacifist, he once advocated preventive war needs to be rejected for a variety of reasons. Firstly, Russell was a non-absolute pacifist who admitted, exceptionally, the support of some wars; so he was not a “pacifist” in the usual sense of the term. Secondly, his support for the conditional threat of war was not advocacy of preventive war. Rather, it was the key component in a strategic plan to force the USSR to accept international control of atomic energy, relinquish territorial ambitions in Europe, and participate in an embryonic form of world government. The aim of this strategy was to avert or to prevent world war, not to advocate the waging of a preventive war. Thirdly, Russell’s policy was specific to a period of time, 1945–49, when Russell believed that it would either bring about the desired result—Soviet acquiescence—or better prepare the West for a defence of its basic values in the face of Soviet aggression. Fourthly, Russell in his statements up to 1959 was consistent in admitting that he favoured a policy of conditional threat of war, even if during the period after 1959 he incorrectly stated that he voiced this policy only in 1948 and only in private. Finally, when the international situation changed and the nuclear arms race between the two superpowers risked an atomic holocaust, Russell shifted his strategy to take this new reality into account, not because he regretted or wanted to hide his previous policy, but because changed circumstances demanded a changed policy. All through these shifts in strategy, there remained one constant to which these strategies were subordinate, as means to an end: the goal of international government to advance the cause of world peace.

---