

## RUSSELL'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS WAR

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Laura Slot. *Consistency and Change in Bertrand Russell's Attitude towards War*.  
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This book was originally submitted as a master's thesis at the Department of History, School of Arts and the Humanities at Utrecht University in August of 2007. The only difference between the thesis and the book is that some illustrations have been added and that the pagination has changed. The book is freely available online through <http://www.sidestone.com>.

In the Preface Slot says: "Many comments on Russell by historians had to do with either consistency or change in his political attitude. In this thesis I attempt to grasp the more fundamental motivation for his theories, mentality and action during each of the three major wars of the twentieth century" (p. 9).

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze which elements in Russell's attitude towards war have been consistent, which have been subject to change, and for what reasons. Three periods are being discussed in a comparative perspective: the First World War (1914–30), the Second World War (1930–45) and the Cold War (1945–70).

Russell's writings are categorized in these periods. Every chapter elaborates five themes: (1) Russell's ethics, (2) his relation to the public, (3) his political activities, (4) his stance towards national and international politics, and (5) his ideas on peace and the future.

In criticism, one can wonder why Slot didn't begin with Russell's attitude towards the Boer War and let the first part of her thesis end with the outbreak of the Great War. However, in the first chapter "At War with the War: 1914–1930" she does mention that Russell supported the English cause to begin with, until he had his experience of "mystic insight" in the beginning of 1901, when he became a pro-Boer and a Pacifist within five minutes, which sounds like quite a paradoxical accomplishment to me.

Anyway, Slot quotes a very interesting letter to Miss Rinder from 30 July 1918. Russell starts with raising the question: "Is it not odd that people can in the same breath praise 'the free man's worship' and find fault with my views on the war?" (*Auto.* 2: 88). Slot then goes on to quote the following parts of the letter:

The free man's worship is merely the expression of the pacifist outlook when it was new to me.... How could any one, approving the free man's worship, expect me to join in the trivial self-righteous moral condemnation of the Germans? ... There is a possibility in human minds of something mysterious as the night-wind, deep as the sea, calm as the stars, and strong as Death, a mystic contemplation, the "intellectual love of God". Those who have known it cannot *believe* in wars any longer, or in any kind of hot struggle. If I could give to others what has come to me in this way, I could make them too feel the futility of fighting. But I do not know how to communicate it: when I speak, they stare, applaud, or smile, but do not understand. (Slot, pp. 20–1)

It would have been good if Slot had tried to establish by quotations from Russell exactly what he meant with "the pacifist outlook" when it was new to him, and used that as a point of reference to decide how and why he later modified

his initial convictions. A page earlier she refers to Russell's article "The Ethics of War" from 1915, where he differentiated among four types of war: (1) wars of colonization, (2) wars of principle, (3) wars of self-defence, and (4) wars of prestige. He considered the first two most likely to be justified, the third as rarely justified and the last type as never justified. Slot continues:

Russell, in line with the nineteenth century liberal traditions, had no direct objections towards war of colonization, because he considered it a way of extending the civilized world and it would lead to the merit of a survival of the fittest. The good cause of those wars would become clear after the war was over. It should be noted, however, that his views on imperialism quickly changed as tensions between the colonized and the colonizers started to grow. (P. 19)

She also quotes Russell's *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916): "I have never been a complete pacifist and have at no time maintained that all who wage war are to be condemned. I have held the view, which I should have thought was that of common sense, that some wars have been justified and other not."

Pacifism covers a spectrum of forms and degrees, and I don't know exactly what Russell meant by "complete pacifist", but I think that when he went to bed on 10 February 1901, he was as a "complete pacifist" as anyone could possibly have been. I'm surprised that his first "conversion" experience didn't turn him into a vegetarian, too.

Slot doesn't introduce the difference between those who are pacifists on deontological grounds and those who are pacifists on utilitarian grounds. Gandhi was against violence of any kind and at any time; he was against it regardless of its consequences. Russell's pacifism was of a different species: he calculated the pros and the cons, what Slot calls his "mathematical" approach. As a utilitarian pacifist it's hard to be accused of being inconsistent, which seems to be Slot's major defence of Russell. It's like saying: "I'm a vegetarian, as long as it doesn't mean I have to starve to death."

Up to *Which Way to Peace?* (1936) and a few more years Russell held on to his "extreme pacifism", as he called it, when he entered the U.S. with his children from his second wife and his third wife and their son in 1938. But when he realized what Hitler and his friends were all about, he said he would have joined the army himself, if he hadn't been too old to serve his country. I don't know exactly how Russell thought he would have been able to contribute to the defeat of the Nazis, but he was probably serious.

In spite of Slot's interesting comments regarding Russell's attitudes towards the First and the Second World Wars, the third chapter "Catastrophe or Civilization: 1945–1970" made me the most excited. Here she brings up Russell's insistence of forming a world government to control the use and spread of nuclear power. She claims that: "There is no doubt, however, that Russell supported a preventive war against Russia" (p. 60). She brings up Ray Perkins' nu-

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anced analyses, but is unable to come up with independent conclusions.

Then she moves on to the Vietnam War and Russell's opposition to it. But my general criticism of her thesis is that she hasn't done any independent research, and doesn't bring new insights to this conflict. She relies heavily on Alan Ryan's book on Russell and quotes him—throughout her thesis—more than she quotes Russell himself.

Her final chapter, "Conclusion", starts: "From the Boer War to Vietnam Russell's attitude remained remarkably consistent" (p. 83). According to my standards that's having very low expectations of "being consistent", when in reality it boils down to "changing your opinion according to circumstances". It's generally difficult to accuse a utilitarian of "being inconsistent", since that's not one of his or her trump cards. Russell's attitudes towards different wars were "flexible" more than anything else. And there's nothing wrong with that, if survival of the human race is the ultimate goal, which sounds like a good idea to me.

There is really nothing new in Slot's thesis, and it has many minor mistakes regarding dates and other facts, but she should be applauded for bringing us the first attempt to summarize the views of one of the greatest peaceniks the world has seen. And I agree with her that "The most remarkable consistency in Russell's political attitude is perhaps his plea for world government" (p. 86).

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