

# LECTURE ON WAR AND PROPAGANDA

BERTRAND RUSSELL

## INTRODUCTION BY MICHAEL D. STEVENSON

After lecturing at the University of Chicago during the 1938–39 academic year, Bertrand Russell moved to California in March 1939 with his wife, Patricia (“Peter”), and son Conrad and accepted a three-year appointment at UCLA. He then immediately embarked on a little-known speaking tour. Russell left California by train during the night of 31 March/1 April, and he lectured in Baton Rouge (LA), Nashville (TN), Cleveland and Dayton (OH), Baltimore, New London (CT), Boston, Saratoga Springs (NY), Philadelphia, and New York City before returning to the West Coast beginning 24 or 25 April.

Although Russell wrote Peter during the tour that he was “sick of pontificating”,<sup>1</sup> his lecture topics reveal his keen interest in international affairs. Three primary topics dominated Russell’s speeches. First, he addressed the positive and negative role the US might play in global political and military matters. On the one hand, Nazi Germany might be contained and war averted if the US firmly asserted it would intervene on the side of Hitler’s opponents in any future war. This form of collective security that Russell frequently espoused by early 1939 marked a shift in his thinking on pacifism, since he had rejected the utility of collective security between 1936 and 1938.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, America’s decision to remain completely neutral might result in a European conflict that would destroy all participants and allow the US to emerge as the “dictator of the world”,<sup>3</sup> although Russell often argued as well that America might play a positive role in rebuilding an international governance system after a war in Europe if it remained neutral.

Second, Russell continued to publicly support British appeasement policies. His most detailed defence of Chamberlain’s conduct at Munich had been published in February 1939,<sup>4</sup> and he repeated this view to audiences during his tour, most notably in a vigorous debate with Maurice Hindus in Baltimore on 12 April. Chamberlain, Russell proclaimed, was a sincere man “activated by a guid-

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<sup>1</sup> Russell to P. Russell, 15 April 1939, RA2 710, box 8.19 (as with the other letters cited).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *Which Way to Peace?* (London: Michael Joseph, 1936), Ch. 4.

<sup>3</sup> “Sees War in 1939, U.S. as Dictator”, *Detroit News*, 9 April 1939, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> “Munich Rather Than War”, *The Nation* 148 (4 Feb. 1939): 173–5.

ing motive—the desire to preserve the peace of the world”,<sup>5</sup> and he repeated his belief that Britain should stay out of any European war against Germany, a pacifist stance about which he expressed private reservations during the tour.

The third focus of Russell’s lectures involved the modern use of propaganda. He had been keenly interested in propaganda since the start of World War I, largely focusing on its malignant uses by governments. But as World War II approached, Russell had developed a much more nuanced view of propaganda in *Which Way to Peace?* and *Power* that identified its traditional baleful form while promoting the positive application of propaganda in the press and in educational settings to encourage free thought and diversity of opinion. Russell fully expounded his views on modern propaganda at several tour stops. In Nashville on 5 April, for example, he informed an audience at Vanderbilt University that irrational propaganda would be one of the leading factors in the downfall of totalitarian European states. In Germany, the subjugation of scientific truth to Nazi ideology had caused the mass exit of scientists. “In 25 years”, Russell maintained, “this will mean that their engines of war will be so far behind those of the nations which have encouraged free thought that the totalitarian government will have caused its own defeat”.<sup>6</sup>

The document printed here is a newspaper account published in the *Dayton Journal* of Russell’s address in Dayton on 10 April at the NCR Auditorium, a large facility with a seating capacity of nearly 2,300, adjacent to the famous National Cash Register manufacturing facility on Main Street. The talk was organized by Dayton’s Nomad Club, formed in 1927 and consisting of members who had travelled outside the US; among the speakers at the Nomad Club before 1939 were flight pioneer Orville Wright and Russia’s Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich. Russell expressed contradictory evaluations of his speech. On 10 April, he wrote to Peter from the Biltmore Hotel: “Here I am at the end of my day in Dayton, where cash registers & Frigidaires come from. All went off well here....” But three days later, after debating Hindus in Baltimore, Russell informed his wife that “I was encouraged by the success of my speech, the more so as I had spoken badly at Dayton.”

Despite Russell’s differing private opinions of his performance, the account of his lecture and his answers to audience questions provides fascinating insight into his thinking on a host of issues in the early months of 1939. Russell eloquently expressed his views on the negative role of propaganda in fomenting international discord, the use of education in counteracting national hysteria, and the triumph of individual liberty—albeit after the passage of “a great number of years”. Russell’s continued to support the Munich Pact, and he expressed the hope that the US would be able to revive democracy in the world

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<sup>5</sup> “Chamberlain Is Defended by Lord Russell”, *The Sun*, Baltimore, 13 Apr. 1939, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> “Dictators Doomed, Russell Declares”, *Nashville Tennessean*, 6 Apr. 1939, p. 13.

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if it remained neutral in a future war. The repeated reference to “collective hysteria” in the report demonstrates Russell’s interest in crowd psychology and herd mentality that he expressed throughout the interwar period and into the 1950s. The speculation about Hitler’s assassination, the German dictator’s mortality, and a potential power struggle between Hermann Göring and Joseph Goebbels is remarkable and not found in any of Russell’s writings in this period. Finally, the concluding sentence documenting his belief that the recent British guarantee of Poland’s sovereignty enjoyed “the almost unanimous public opinion of England” is a tantalizing indicator that he might support a future war against Germany—a position he would not formally espouse until May 1940.

This newspaper account of Russell’s April 1939 speech in Dayton, therefore, provides a superb overview of his activities and viewpoints in a period of time during Russell’s American exile from 1938 to 1944 that has traditionally been ignored by Russell scholars. The document printed here is a transcription of the article from the original print copy of the *Dayton Journal*, 11 April 1939, p. 3.

**“LORD BERTRAND RUSSELL BELIEVES WAR INEVITABLE”**

**BY ELIZABETH M. DOODY**

**T**he philosopher who is above nationality more than the Englishman, spoke last night in the N. C. R. auditorium when Lord Bertrand Russell addressed members and friends of the Nomad club. He spoke on the subject, “War and Propaganda”.

“If one is to understand war,” said Lord Russell, “one must understand its roots in human nature. War and the passions that lead to war have something that lies deep in the individual, especially in a collection of individuals.”

Being connected with a group, loyal to everything within, hating everything outside, has much to do with war, he explained. Propaganda is useless unless it appeals to something instinctive in the people. It can immensely magnify the passion to which it appeals. It can determine what alien group shall be hated. It can turn one nation against another. It can cause excitement and stimulate fear and rage. “In our worst we unite”, declared Lord Russell. “In our best we are separate.”

“Propaganda can give assurance of the justice of a cause”, he asserted. “It produces a kind of muddle-headedness in which one can have incompatible satisfactions at the same time.”

It is easier to make people hate Jews than capitalists, the speaker declared. The Nazis, he explained, have deftly utilized class hatred of capitalists by turning it against Jewish capitalists.

*A kind of madness*

A good speaker, spot-lighted, can get the people worked up as their blood flows faster. It is a very dangerous fact about human nature, Lord Russell pointed out, that if one gets enough people and applies the right stimuli, he can

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produce a kind of madness to a point where the crowd is willing to kill others. Mechanical devices have so increased the number to which a man can speak that a collective hysteria can be produced.

But this collective hysteria must not be met by its own methods. The only result of such counter action is to produce an hysteria just as bad. When people are worked up to hate Nazis, they are no better than the Nazis, whose trouble is that they hate so many people.

“Fear is a terrible passion which produces cruelty,” explained the speaker, “and I believe we shall see much of that cruelty in the very near future.”

Propaganda has led the ordinary unpolitical German to feel that Germany stands almost alone in the world as a nation with a sincere desire for peace. The other wicked nations around it forces it to arm. “You can’t hope that a people in a state of terror can take a rational means to protect itself against that which produces the terror”, he declared. Nor can one hope for anything but disaster if the fear of other nations forces them again to defeat Germany to get it out of its militaristic mood.

“What can we do”, Lord Russell asked at this point, “to create a propaganda that will produce rationality instead of irrationality?”

“I see very little hope”, he declared, “for another war to be avoided. The weapon of propaganda is much more intense than before. Let us suppose that Germany is defeated and that we say, ‘We did not impose a severe enough treaty. We will impose a more severe one’ and we will accomplish less than ever. It will just be an inevitable, terrible thing.”

Any permanent peace, he believes, must be international, imposed by an international authority. The League of Nations was too weak. Press and schools must carry international propaganda. Every day there should be truthful interpretation of international events, with insistence on refutation of untruths used for purposes of propaganda.

“But something can be done in the schools”, he asserted, “without waiting for international authority. The art of coming to the right conclusions can be taught. An aim of education can be that of passing calm judgment on data presented. Some of this data would stir the emotions. Some would not.”

### *Immunize against eloquence*

Because it is impossible in the modern world to protect people against the worst kind of propaganda, Lord Russell would immunize the students against eloquence by presenting to them the eloquent speeches that have been made in the past for causes now recognized to be wrong. He would have them learn by trial that what is commended by science is better than what is commended by eloquence. His educational aim would be to teach people to learn to infer from newspaper reports what really happened, to draw the right inferences from party speeches. He would, in the class-room, check old newspaper accounts with the interpretations of history.

He would have each person capable of thinking for himself, hence differently,

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in contrast with the Nazi ideal, which would turn children into circus animals, who do tricks on command.

“The really important thing in life”, he declared, “is the individual—what is in a man’s soul.”

Lord Russell believes that there is now a new kind of madness that comes from collective excitement, that it will pass and the individual will come into his rights. “Mass propaganda, mass hysteria, mass fear, all these must be kept from growing”, he proclaimed, “if mankind is to live together. I think this condition will come, but there will be a great number of years before it.”

In a question period which followed his talk Lord Russell asserted that if the United States remains neutral in the next war, it will be able to revive democracy in the world after that war. If it goes into the war, democracy may revive after that war, though there can be no assurance. If it does not revive in America, it will not in Europe.

### *Single federal authority*

The preservation of the world from war he declared to be very complicated, to be able to be accomplished only through the creation of a single federal government possessing single authority and armed forces. He predicted at least a temporary suspension of democracy if war comes.

He expressed the opinion that England would be satisfied with United States neutrality in case of war provided the United States would supply the democracies’ needs, extending this aid to munitions—“though,” he added, “in case of war this feeling may change.”

He believes that no gift of colonies to Hitler will satisfy him. “Nothing will satisfy a man of his mentality short of the whole world,” he declared, “and then he would want to get hold of Mars.”

Questioned as to what Hitler’s assassination might bring about, he answered that it might be a very good thing. “The whole thing might break up. Goering and Goebbels might fight. One might appeal to public opinion and when an appeal to public opinion comes, there will be a break-up.” He added—“And—Hitler is mortal.”

He declared that he believed the Munich pact defensible at the time it was made and still defensible on four counts. The demand for incorporation of the Sudeten Germans was not in itself unjust. It would have been dreadful to bring on world war for a cause not in itself unjust. In the second place England and France were not well prepared. Third, it was right to take any chance, however small, to avoid so dreadful a thing as world war. No one could be sure that Hitler would go on to take the remainder of Czechoslovakia. No one could be sure that he would not stop with what he had taken. Fourth, any length of time war is put off strengthens England and France, even with Germany gaining the support of Czechoslovakia.

Lord Russell believes that the pledge given by England to Poland has the almost unanimous public opinion of England behind it.

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