

The Cuban Missile Crisis

Fifty years on

Bertrand Russell

Russell's driven activism to avert nuclear war over Cuba is recorded in his little book, Unarmed Victory, which Spokesman are republishing to mark the passage of half a century since the crisis. Here, we reprint part of Russell's opening chapter on 'The International Background'. But first of all, Nicholas Griffin, of the Bertrand Russell Research Centre at McMaster University in Canada, sets the scene.

The most anxious week of the Cold War

The crisis began on 22 October 1962 when America announced that spy flights over Cuba had revealed the construction of bases for Soviet medium-range missiles, and that America would impose a naval blockade on Cuba to prevent the delivery of further missiles. That day Russell appealed to Khrushchev and Kennedy to put world peace above their rivalries, and, the following day, he issued statements to that effect to the British press. On the 24th, to Russell's surprise, Moscow Radio broadcast a long, and relatively conciliatory, reply from Khrushchev, who, while condemning American piracy and refusing to back down, none the less promised to avoid reckless action and, most importantly, proposed a summit conference to resolve the crisis. Russell replied with further telegrams urging Khrushchev to stop the Russian ships then heading towards the American blockade and urging Kennedy to accept Khrushchev's offer of negotiations. Kennedy, who seems to have been prone to alarming outbursts of petulance throughout the crisis, reacted furiously to Russell's message: 'that son of a bitch', he said, could 'go and soak his head' (Brugioni, Eyeball to Eyeball, p. 405). His public response was similarly uncompromising, but less intemperately phrased.

Unknown to Russell and the world, however, the Russian ships carrying missiles to Cuba had already turned back, though the fate of the missiles already in Cuba still had to be decided. This second stage of the crisis proved even more dangerous than the first. On the 26th Russell

urged Khrushchev to remove the missiles, hoping that there might be some reciprocal gesture from the US. (The removal of American missiles from Turkey was frequently suggested as a *quid pro quo*, and even had some support at the British Foreign Office.) At the same time he wrote to Castro urging him to renounce the missiles and accept UN inspection of their removal. On the 27th an American spy plane was shot down over Cuba, under circumstances that have never been fully explained, and America issued a 48 hour ultimatum, placed its Strategic Air Command on full alert, and prepared to launch retaliatory strikes against Cuba to be followed by a full-scale invasion. The next day, Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles in return for an American undertaking not to invade Cuba, and the crisis was over.

Khrushchev's letter to Russell on the 24th was the first indication many in the West had had of Russian views on the crisis and the first even faintly hopeful sign that compromise was possible. As a result, the press, which had paid little attention to Russell's initial statements, descended en masse on Plas Penrhyn [Russell's home in North Wales], and Russell's subsequent interventions were widely, if not usually fully and accurately, reported. After the crisis was over, Russell said that he did not consider that he had 'altered the course of history by one hair's-breadth' (Clark, Russell, p. 600), and there is little reason to doubt this modest estimate. None the less, Russell's intervention did open a back channel for Khrushchev to put his case before the world. (He also used private American citizens, both in person in Moscow and through counsellors at the Soviet Embassy in Washington, to put proposals to the American government.) No doubt such unofficial channels were useful; no doubt, also, that Khrushchev would have found others had Russell not presented himself — though Russell's name did ensure that proposals put to him would receive wide publicity and would reach the press without a spin imposed by Western governments. Averell Harriman cited Khrushchev's letter to Russell as evidence that Russia did not intend to go to war over Cuba. And Arthur Schlesinger credited Harriman's intervention with encouraging Kennedy to keep diplomatic options open — to the chagrin of some of his military men who thought their finest hour was at hand. However minute Russell's influence on the course of the crisis may have been, it is impossible not to admire him for trying.

The Selected Letters of Bertrand Russell, Volume II
Edited by Nicholas Griffin

Betrand Russell wrote:

During the days of October 24 and 25 1962, those who had knowledge and imagination went through an anxious time. It seemed probable that, at any minute, war between America and Russia would break out and would involve, in all likelihood, the extinction of the human race. If you had private affections, if you had children or grandchildren for whom you had hoped a happy future, if you had friends whom you loved, you could expect their death in the coming week. Within this brief period of time, there would cease to be any to enjoy the poetry of Shakespeare, the music of Bach or Mozart, the genius of Plato or Newton. All the slow building up of civilization in art and science and beauty would be at an end—forever, so far as this planet is concerned. If you spoke of these things to your friends, they said: ‘But, surely, you can understand the great issues involved. Is the world to be governed by godless Communists (or, alternatively, rapacious Capitalists)? Is it not your duty to die for the right, without regard for whatever loss may be entailed?’ And so the great march towards disaster went on. I asked myself if there were no sane men in the seats of power. At the last possible moment, the answer came: Yes, there was one sane man. It happened that he was on the side of Russia. This was an unimportant accident. His sanity saved the world; and you and I still exist.

* * *

This crisis in October was so sudden and so swift that the usual forces making for conciliation had no time to act. There was no time for the United Nations to suggest conciliation. There was no time for the neutral nations to suggest compromises. There was no time for pacifist organizations to arrange demonstrations. In paralysed terror the world looked on as, hour by hour, the distance between American and Russian ships grew less. In the time available, only individuals could act. With little hope of success, I decided that I must telegraph to Kennedy and Khrushchev beseeching them to let the human race continue to exist. I had had reason, already, to think that Khrushchev might not be offended by my approach to him. I had sent a message to an international Congress in Moscow in which I said, *inter alia*:

‘The present situation is one involving imminent and daily peril, not only to the nations of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, but to all mankind. Of all the risks that are involved in this or that policy, none is even approximately as great as the risk of nuclear war. I should like every negotiator from the West to state: “I am firmly convinced that a nuclear war would be worse than the world-wide victory of Communism”. I should like every negotiator from the East to

declare: "I am firmly convinced that a nuclear war would be worse than the worldwide victory of Capitalism." Those on either side who refused to make such a declaration would brand themselves as enemies of mankind and advocates of the extinction of the human race. At present, negotiators tend to be obsessed by possible dangers in any suggested concessions to the other side and to forget that the continuation of the arms race involves far worse dangers than those that negotiators are apt to emphasize.'

Khrushchev had picked out this passage in my message for special commendation. In the West, the message was less favourably received: the pundits of the British Labour Party made an abortive attempt to have me expelled from the Party for talking to Communists.

In *Unarmed Victory*, I propose to relate from my personal point of view the history of two crises: the Cuban and the Sino-Indian, in both of which I tried to influence the leaders and public opinion on both sides. I shall be giving partly an account of what I tried to do and partly the relevant public events. I hope that the personal correspondence and documents which I shall be publishing will give a sense of immediacy and show the day to day development. It is a pleasure to me to have an opportunity to acknowledge publicly my debt to my secretary, Mr Ralph Schoenman, and to those in London who helped us, Mr Alastair Yule, Mr Christopher Farley, and Mr Nicholas Johnson. Mr Schoenman did super-human work, and did it excellently well, during both the nights and the days of those perturbed weeks of international crises when letters and statements, telegrams and telephone calls had to be dispatched and received at all hours round the clock. It is owing to him and to his colleagues and their helpers in London that I was able to keep abreast of the quickly moving events and to send out the letters and statements and telegrams that I wished to send. Many people sent letters to the Heads of the States involved.¹ I had good luck in being answered, and at considerable length. This encouraged me to continue. Many people seem to have been surprised that I should intervene in such matters without having any official status, but I think events show that, even in our highly organized world, there are things that a private individual can do which are much more difficult for a Minister or an organization. In particular, it is much easier to agree with a powerless individual without loss of face than it is to agree with those whose arguments are backed by H-bombs of almost infinite destructive power. Another advantage enjoyed by a private individual is the possibility of acting swiftly. This was especially important in the Cuban crisis.

Ever since 1914, I have been watching the world slide down hill, forget the comparatively civilized usages of the nineteenth century, forget all

lessons of toleration, and diminish, at an accelerating rate, both the degree and the extent of civilized life. I had wondered if there was anything that I could do to turn the world from this downward course. Officially, the victors in both World Wars were in favour of disarmament and of the creation of an international organization capable of preserving peace. In fact, however, the most powerful among the victors prevented, first, the League of Nations and, then, the United Nations from exercising decisive power in the direction of peace. The League of Nations suffered the fatal drawback that the US was not a member of it. It showed, from the first, a disastrous timidity in dealing with aggressive nations. When Italy bombarded a Greek island, the League of Nations decided that justice should be done by making the Greeks pay for the bombardment. When Italy invaded Abyssinia, there was a pretence of imposing sanctions, but care was taken to make them ineffective. Meanwhile, the rise of the Nazis created a new danger in the face of which the League of Nations was completely powerless. I had been a pacifist in the First War and, until after Munich, I hoped that a pacifist attitude would be possible in relation to the Nazis. I have never been a theoretical pacifist. I have always held that some wars have done more good than harm and that some wars are justifiable. In the early months of the First World War, which, as I have said, I opposed, I published an article in the *International Journal of Ethics* enumerating four kinds of wars which I should be prepared to support. I had hopes until after the time of Munich that the Nazis might be persuaded into not invading other countries. Their invasions of Czechoslovakia and Poland proved that this hope was vain, and at the same time evidence accumulated as to the utterly horrible character of their internal regime. The two factors led me reluctantly to the conviction that war against the Nazis was necessary. I still think that the Nazis could not be tolerated, but it cannot be said that the outcome of the Second World War was satisfactory. As soon as the German menace was—for a time, at least—overcome, the hostility between Russia and the West, which the War had suspended, broke out with renewed vehemence. In the United Nations, the veto in the Security Council resulted in impotence.

What was new, after the Second War, was the destructive power of nuclear weapons. When these came to be possessed by both sides, it became obvious that nothing desired by any Government could be achieved by nuclear war, but the strength and habit of tradition was such that Governments went on exactly as before, threatening each other and pursuing power and prestige even at the risk of complete disaster to all sides.

The immense destructive power of nuclear weapons made World War untenable and the death of Stalin made co-existence possible as well as necessary.

Unfortunately, anti-Communist propaganda of the time of Stalin has continued unabated since his death. We are told, and many of us believe, that non-Communists stand for freedom, while Communist Governments impose a kind of slavery. I will admit at once that there is not as much freedom in Communist countries as I should wish to see. But I must add that the same is true of the anti-Communist countries. It might be enlightening to compare the cases of Ivinskaya in Russia and of Morton Sobell in the US—both deplorable and against which I have protested vehemently. One might, also, contemplate the continued incarceration of prisoners in Greece, and the recent barbaric doings in France or Indian treatment of the Nagas as well as Chinese treatment of Tibetans, if one is inclined to congratulate oneself upon the freedom of non-Communists. It might even be well to contemplate the doings in Mississippi, South Africa and Notting Hill. Spain and Portugal are supposed to belong to the ‘free world’, although both have Governments which are abominable tyrannies. In America, Communism has recently become a crime. Throughout the years since Stalin’s death, there has been increasing freedom in the East and diminishing freedom in the West, with the result that, by this time, the difference is not very notable. Meanwhile, hatred and readiness for war are inculcated in the West and in China and India, but no longer in Russia.

I have tried, throughout recent years, to diminish intolerance and to make populations aware of what a nuclear war would mean. It is as part of this effort that I have been active in the two crises with which this book [*Unarmed Victory*] is concerned. It happens that in both these crises the Communists seem to me to have behaved better than their opponents, and this might lead the reader to suppose that I am more favourable to Communism than is, in fact, the case. A few words may serve to make my position clear.

I do not like Communism because it is undemocratic. I wrote a very hostile criticism of it after a visit to Russia in 1920, and the expectations which I then expressed were fulfilled in the time of Stalin. Both before and after this time, in 1896 and in 1934, I wrote very hostile criticisms of Marx, and I see no reason to recant what I then said. Communist regimes have been imposed by force in Eastern Europe and, no doubt, would have been imposed in many other places if it had been possible. The East German regime is called the German Democratic Republic, although it is imposed by an alien military force upon a population which is opposed to

it. The same may be said of Hungary, where Russia has exhibited the kind of imperialism that it condemns when practised by others, and, also of China in relation to Tibet. But there are, also, many aspects of Capitalism of which it is impossible to approve, especially in its dealings with underdeveloped countries. Capitalism in Katanga has shown itself just as evil as Communism in Hungary. And I think almost the same can be said of Capitalism in many parts of Latin America. For my part, I am a believer in democratic socialism. I dislike Communism because it is undemocratic, and Capitalism because it favours exploitation.

But whenever the question of peace or war is relevant, the merits of either side become insignificant in comparison with the importance of peace. In the nuclear age, the human race cannot survive without peace. For this reason, I shall always side with the more peaceful party in any dispute between powerful nations. It has happened that in both the disputes with which this book is concerned, the Communist side has been the less bellicose, but it cannot be said that this is always the case. And, where it is not, my sympathies are anti-Communist.

In *Unarmed Victory*, I shall be mainly concerned with local events in Cuba and the Himalayas, but I should like to preface this account with some more general observations. In Cuba, the contest was a naked one between Communists and anti-Communists. In the Sino-Indian dispute, on the contrary, the contest began by being purely nationalistic. China had its nationalism, and so had India. Neither appealed to the merits or demerits of Communism. In Cuba, assuming that the United States abides by its not very precise pledge to abstain from invasion so long as Cuba renounces nuclear arms, the outcome has been, on the whole, good. The installation of nuclear arms in Cuba would have been regrettable, as is their installation in any new territory. But we have not observed that either the US or Britain has taken a stand against Canadian nuclear weapons. In the first moment of Russian retreat, it was hoped that there might be a lessening of East-West tension, but this hope has rapidly faded. The West has persuaded itself, quite fallaciously, that Russia will always yield to a show of determination. Russia, on the other hand, has felt, as the British felt after Munich, that yielding to pressure must not become a habit. Consequently, the world situation remains much as it was before the Cuban crisis.

In the Sino-Indian dispute, the outcome remains uncertain. The Chinese, from the first, have offered negotiation, but whether India will now accept negotiation except on terms intolerable to the Chinese remains doubtful. Nehru has talked of a 'long war' and has been negotiating military support

from the US and Britain. If this long war takes place, the consequences are likely to be disastrous. It cannot be supposed that China can be defeated without the use of nuclear weapons, and, in spite of all differences between Russia and China, it remains probable that, if nuclear weapons are employed against China, Russia will come to her defence and the human race will become extinct. By invoking Anglo-American aid, India has transformed the war from a local boundary dispute to a part of the great contest between Communism and its opponents. At the time of writing, it is not too late to hope that this disaster may be averted by negotiations, but this profoundly important issue remains in doubt.

Every contest in every part of the world tends, at present, to become part of the great East-West contest. I believe this contest to be utterly foolish. I hold, with Khrushchev, that only misguided public opinion and the power-impulses of great States make the contest seem inevitable. China thinks otherwise, and so, apparently, do powerful forces in the US ...

Note

1 More than that, many people were calling together their co-workers in movements that had been striving for peace in the world and urging them to take what measures they could to bring a solution to the Cuban affair that would not annihilate us all. The Secretary-General of the Pugwash Movement of Scientists, Professor Rotblat, for instance, was busy telephoning and cabling to Pugwash scientists in the US and the USSR, urging them to use whatever influence they had on their respective Governments. An emergency meeting of the Pugwash Movement of Scientists of East and West was being proposed. The Vice President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, Alexander Topchiev, responded immediately and effectively. (Academician Topchiev has since this time died. He will be very greatly missed, in not only scientific but other relations between East and West.) He spoke to the Soviet Premier, and he accepted an emergency conference of scientists, and did what he could to forestall a military response from the Soviet Union. His efforts in this crisis were consistent with all that he sought to achieve in the Pugwash Conferences in bringing about understanding between East and West and in preventing nuclear war. Professor Rotblat found that his initiative was not responded to in the same measure by American scientists who, with the exception of Professor Linus Pauling and his wife Ava Helen Pauling, were notably silent. The Paulings cabled to the President and spoke out in clear and courageous terms as they always do, to a seemingly hysterical American public.