A Pacifist at War

Bertrand Russell opposed the First World War at its sudden outbreak in August 1914. His opposition was to cost him dear during the difficult years that followed. Russell tells the story of his turbulent war, personal and public, in a selection of his letters and writings from these years, A Pacifist at War (Spokesman £9.99), edited by Nicholas Griffin of McMaster University in Canada, which holds Russell’s extensive Archives. In this excerpt, writing to his erstwhile lover Ottoline Morrell in June 1917, Russell recounts his visit to Leeds to celebrate the revolutionary changes taking place in Russia. The February Revolution had removed Tsar Nicholas II, the Provisional Government had been installed, and the October Revolution was still to come. By this stage in the war, Russell had growing doubts about the usefulness of his continuing work for the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF), which campaigned on behalf of thousands of conscientious objectors (COs) and others who were often brutally mistreated. Catherine Marshall struggled to maintain the NCF. The term ‘absolutist’ refers to imprisoned conscientious objectors who objected to any work or alternative service that would benefit the war effort. Professor Griffin sets the scene.

On 3 June 1917, a second mass meeting to welcome the Russian revolution was to be held at Leeds, organised by the Labour movement. Russell travelled to Leeds with Constance and Miles Malleson, Ramsey MacDonald and other Labour leaders. Russell was not among the platform speakers at Leeds, but he spoke from the floor in support of a civil liberties motion.
along the lines of the ‘Charter of Freedom’, and received a huge ovation. Three other motions were passed: one welcoming the Russian revolution; one urging peace without annexations or indemnities; and the last, the most radical of all, calling for the formation of workers’ and soldiers’ councils throughout Britain. Quite how radical this motion was proved a matter of some dispute. W C Anderson of the Independent Labour Party (ILP – the only political party which opposed the war), who moved it, said it was not intended to be subversive; Robert Williams of the Transport Workers’ Union, who seconded it, said it meant socialist revolution. Russell was evidently more impressed by Williams. But what quite rightly worried him, despite the euphoria of the meeting, was the weakness of the provisional committee that was set up to implement the fourth resolution. The lack of follow-up doomed any hope of a revolutionary peace in Britain.

[To Ottoline Morrell]  
[57 Gordon Sq.]  
5 June 1917

My Darling

I got back from Leeds yesterday. It was a wonderful occasion, but a little disappointing from the point of view of practical outcomes. Snowden and MacDonald and Anderson are not the right men¹ – they have not the sense for swift dramatic action. The right man would be Williams (of the Transport Workers), but he is not yet sufficiently prominent. Smillie is perfect except that he is old. The enthusiasm and all-but unanimity were wonderful – out of 2500, there were only about three dissenters. Nothing was lacking except leaders.

To my great surprise, they gave me about the greatest ovation that was given to anybody. I got up to speak, and they shouted for me to go on the platform, and when I got there they cheered endlessly. They applauded everything that had to do with C.O.’s – Allen’s name came up often, and always produced a great cheer.

It was a good beginning, but a very great deal remains to be done. MacDonald, whom I travelled down with, was persuaded we should be broken up by soldiers – he has lost his nerve – he does the things, but expects disaster.

The decision of the French Chamber today is bad.² But I feel almost sure peace will come in the autumn.

¹ All three were parliamentary constitutionalists.
² Amid strikes and mutinies the French Chamber of Deputies had met in secret session to discuss Franco-Russian relations and French war aims. The socialist deputies had tried to pass a resolution calling, among other things, for peace without annexations or indemnities. In the end, however, the Chamber declared, by 453 votes to 55, its confidence in the government’s ability to achieve the restitution of Alsace-Lorraine, the destruction of Prussian militarism, and the imposition of a war indemnity on Germany.
I find it hard to think of anything else. Poor Miss Marshall was there, her mind filled with niggly details of business – she seemed terribly out of place. She has gone away for a holiday now, so I can’t get a holiday till August – but her absence is in itself a holiday. I wish I could come to Garsington but I don’t know when I can. I go to Manchester this week-end for three meetings – otherwise I shall be here. Goodbye.

Your
B.

Events in Russia further weakened Russell’s belief in the usefulness of the NCF. In May he had gone so far as to draft a letter of resignation from his post as acting chairman in which he had explained his doubts:

Opposition to the government is likely to be strengthened, not so much by pacifist arguments as by economic considerations and resentment at interference with industrial freedom. It is difficult for the N.C.F. as an organization to take any part in such movements, which nevertheless are more likely than direct pacifist efforts to prove effective in moving the world in the direction in which we wish to see it move.

(Papers, vol. xiv, p. 163)

Although he did not submit his resignation, the sense that the NCF had ceased to be effective in either its immediate practical aims or in its long-term political ones dogged him through the rest of the year.

With time it had become easy for the government to ignore the lobbying of the NCF on behalf of COs. But then, in 1917, the absolutists found a most improbable ally. Margaret Hobhouse was a pro-war Conservative with close links to Lord Milner in the War Cabinet. Her son, Stephen (Milner’s godchild), having become a Quaker, was jailed in 1916 as an absolutist. But this did not change her opinion of the war: in a note left among his papers, Russell said that her son ‘persuaded her that Christianity and war were incompatible, so she gave up Christianity.’ Her son’s plight did, however, persuade her that the COs were being brutally and unjustly treated and she launched a campaign on their behalf. She took her concerns to Milner and he took them to the War Cabinet. From this stage on the NCF was surreptitiously involved, providing both Milner and Hobhouse with information. Milner seems to have been quickly persuaded that the COs were being badly treated, but Hobhouse felt he was unlikely to get far with the War Cabinet unless his concerns were backed up by a public campaign. This she proceeded to
organize, again seeking the advice of the NCF. Her public campaign was
centred round a small book about the COs, ‘I Appeal Unto Caesar’, which was
published over her name, although it was in fact written by Russell. Russell’s
authorship was a closely guarded secret; any suggestion he was involved would
have undermined the book’s effect. There are a few letters from Hobhouse to
Russell among Russell’s papers and a copy of the following letter to her. She
probably destroyed the original, and Russell’s other letters, to keep the secret
of the book’s authorship safe. ‘I Appeal Unto Caesar’ was a remarkable success.
It sold widely and received favourable notices from papers that would have
excoriated anything bearing Russell’s name. More importantly, it had a per-
ceptible effect in softening the government’s treatment of COs.

**[To Margaret Hobhouse]**

57 Gordon Square
6 June 1917

Dear Mrs. Hobhouse,

Your letter of the 4th June reached me yesterday. I did not suppose
that the Quaker booklet would be of much use for public distribution,
but the statistics at the end are useful. I quite agree with you that we
cannot expect sympathy for the Tolstoyian [sic.] view of life, but the thing
that we have to preach is that men ought not to be imprisoned for their
opinions even if those opinions are such as most people think harmful.

I feel also a certain scruple in agitating for the release of these men
without letting it be known what it is that they really believe. They care
more about their beliefs than about themselves, and they think, rightly
or wrongly, that they help the spread of their beliefs by being in prison
for them. It is hardly fair to them, or even really kind, to minimise in
any way their opposition to the views of the majority of mankind. I feel
sure this is what your son himself would think.

As you say, the War Office is playing the very game of the men it is
persecuting. This fact leads many of them and their friends to deplore
all attempts at securing their release. I do not myself take this view
because I care about the conduct of the nation and not only about the
C.O.s. But I think that we as well as the authorities realise that a
large proportion of the men in prison and of their sympathisers outside
dread nothing so much as release because they realise the immense prop-
ganda value of their continued imprisonment. The I.L.P. has done
everything it could. Its power is very limited. It was not the I.L.P. but
the Trade Unions which secured amnesty at the point of the bayonet.¹

¹ In May there had been a wave of strikes in the munitions industries which had forced Lloyd George
to launch an inquiry into their causes.
With regard to your letter of June 2, I have the pamphlet well in hand, and I think I quite understand the sort of thing you wish it to be. It will, of course, not be published by the N.C.F. since if it were it could not have the tone that you desire. I thought of making it an expansion of the previous memorandum, less official and more human in its tone, but preserving the same kind of moderation.

With regard to prison reform, I must say that I think Mr. Philip Kerr is deliberately trying to divert you into a direction in which your efforts will be enormously less useful to the C.O.s. I am whole heartedly in favour of agitation for prison reform, but those who hold that the C.O.s ought not to be in prison at all do not wish this question mixed up with the quite different question of the more enlightened treatment of ordinary criminals.

I think you would do well to induce the societies for prison reform to move in that matter, but to keep that quite distinct from the question of the liberation of C.O.s. That agitation ought to be conducted by different people and different methods. Mr. Kerr’s proposal seems to me intended to produce delay and to damp down an awkward agitation. I very earnestly hope that you will not fall in with it. But I am proposing to include in the pamphlet an account of prison conditions both in England and Scotland, and this will, I hope, help you in any agitation for prison reform that you may undertake.

My own view is that the prospect of securing unconditional release for the Absolutists within the next few months is very good. I think the whole tone of the world is changing so fast in the direction of greater liberality that it will soon become impossible for the Government to persist in the persecution of opinion. I do not wish to jeopardise the prospect of unconditional release by any agitation calculated to suggest that mere mitigation of punishment might be regarded as satisfactory.

I return Mr. Clark’s letter. The point of view expressed in it is that taken by most Quakers. I am grateful to you for letting me see it.

I hope to get the pamphlet finished early next week, and will send it to you as soon as it is typed. If you wish it to be in any definite way different from what I suggested, I should be glad to know.

Yours very truly,

Bertrand Russell

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1 One of Lloyd George’s private secretaries who was gathering information about the COs with a view to making recommendations on their treatment.
2 The letter is lost. Mr Clark was probably Roderic Clark of the Friends’ Service Committee.
Even unto Gaza

Though Bertie continued to visit Garsington, his relations with Ottoline became more and more strained. During a visit in late July there was clearly some mutual recrimination; it was perhaps the first time they had both recognized to each other that they were no longer in love. Characteristically, Bertie felt depressed and guilty about it when he got back to London.

[To Ottoline Morrell] [57 Gordon Sq.]
27 July 1917

I wrote you a horrible letter the other day. Today I will try to write more sincerely.

Everything that I do and feel now-a-days is the outcome of despair. Absolutely my whole being went into my love for you, but that turned to despair. I lost the belief that I could do any more philosophy, chiefly through Wittgenstein, and I lost the wish to do it through the war. The war at first raised hopes of new work in me – when I wrote Social Reconstruction I was full of hope. Then I realized that I had been much too optimistic about human nature. I have come to hate human life and to have hardly any belief in its possibilities. The work I do is insincere, because it expresses hopes that I really think delusive. I feel dimly that if I made a great enough effort I could find something to live for, but instinctively I put it off till after the war, because I don’t want to yield to my mood and give up peace-work; and also because I am so weary that I can’t think sanely. I have no real hold on life. I simply don’t know how to express the utter devastation inside me. I feel that I am rotting away inwardly. The walls stand for the present, but they must fall sooner or later. The sort of thing you and I had in common depended upon faith and hope, but now I have neither. I used to want to express pain when it had not gone so deep. Now I have no impulse to say anything sincere, and I am only writing this because you wanted me to say what was going on in my mind. I used to hope you could help me to overcome the fundamental despair, but gradually I found you couldn’t. I don’t regard it as a revelation of the truth of the world, but merely as a morbid state I have got into. There is no cure for it except rest. But unfortunately I can’t rest with you, because I can’t be superficial with you. I don’t think any good is done by expressing a despair which goes as deep as mine does, but my only way of not expressing it is to talk about things that don’t go deep. I am profoundly dissatisfied with myself. I should like to live an austere self-reliant life, but I shirk the pain of it. I should not if I had any clear belief, or anything that I felt I could do. Meanwhile I long for death with the same kind of intensity with which I long for the end of the war.
Pain that goes beyond a certain point isolates one, because one cannot escape from it through sympathy. My whole nature has wanted you and cried out to you, but in vain – you thought you could give the sort of response I ought to want, but it was not the sort I really did want. I feel entirely without hope as regards myself. I shall go on being undermined by pain until everything crumbles. The only problem is to put it off as long as possible.

Six months ago I started to write out what I felt, hoping to find some way out. But I broke off in the middle, because it was clear there was no way out. I send you the stuff I wrote – you can throw it away.¹

The whole trouble is lack of courage. I ought not to care how much I suffer. But things are really dreadful. These days the pavements have been chalked by the newspapers with the notice ‘Kerensky shoots traitors’ – all London has been gloating and hugging itself with voluptuous delight because Russian regiments that will not fight are being butchered.² How is one to bear such a world? I feel an alien, a being from another planet. Each fresh horror strikes at the raw place, and makes it quiver worse than before.

I know you don’t like my unhappy moods because they are so self-absorbed. But what am I to do? If you have any prescription I will consider it. But I know of none – and my feeling is that it is not fair to associate with people unless I keep my despair to myself. Please write to me – here – I shall tell Smith³ my address – probably I shan’t stay long in any one place.

Your

B.

The very next day, however, Russell was jolted, at least momentarily, out of this mood of despair by a bit of political excitement. After the Leeds conference the provisional committee had started work setting up workers’ and soldiers’ councils. Russell had persuaded the NCIF, though only by the narrowest margin, to seek representation on the councils. As a result on

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¹ This was probably the manuscript ‘Why do men persist in living?’ found among Morrell’s papers. See Papers, vol. xiv, pp. 26–7.
² The provisional government had not negotiated an end to Russia’s participation in the war and, early in July, had started a new offensive which had now turned into a rout. Faced with mutinies, desertions, and unrest during the so-called ‘July days’, the government, now under the leadership of Aleksandr Kerensky, had lurched to the right and was using troops still loyal to it to put down dissent.
³ Frank Russell’s butler. Russell was about to go on a holiday with Colette.
28 July Russell attended a meeting at the Brotherhood Church on Southgate Road to organize the London council. The government, which had welcomed the Kerensky revolution in March and been only mildly hostile to the Leeds conference, was now beginning to worry, and sterner measures were taken to prevent the formation of the councils. Leaflets were posted in pubs around the church denouncing the group as German spies and a large drunken mob broke into the building and attacked those inside. Several people were hurt and Russell would have been among them but for the intervention of the unknown woman mentioned in the next letter. The belated arrival of the police to save him was the result of circumstances that Russell learnt of only afterwards and gave him one of his best stories of the war:

Two of the drunken viragos began to attack me with their boards full of nails. While I was wondering how one defended oneself against this type of attack, one of the ladies among us went up to the police and suggested that they should defend me. The police, however, merely shrugged their shoulders. ‘But he is an eminent philosopher’, said the lady, and the police still shrugged. ‘But he is famous all over the world as a man of learning’, she continued. The police remained unmoved. ‘But he is the brother of an earl’, she finally cried. At this, the police rushed to my assistance.

(Autobiography, vol. ii, p. 32)

Though Russell goes on to say he went home in a mood of ‘deep dejection’, this was not how he described it to Ottoline later the same day.

[To Ottoline Morrell]

[London]

28 July 1917

I got shaken out of the mood of doubt and depression I was in by the events at our meeting this afternoon which was broken up. A vast crowd of roughs and criminals (paid) led, or rather guided from behind, by a few merely foolish soldiers (Colonials) broke in – it was only due to great self-restraint on the part of the delegates that there was no bloodshed. It was really very horrible. There were two utterly bestial women with knotted clubs, who set to work to thrash all the women of our lot that they could get at. The roughs had horrible degraded faces. The crowd outside as we were leaving was very fierce – several women had almost all their clothes torn off their backs. But absolutely no one showed the faintest trace of fear. Most women would have been terrified, but ours were not even flustered.

I realized vividly how ghastly the spirit of violence is, and how utterly I repudiate it, on whatever side it may be. The mob is a terrible
thing when it wants blood. The young soldiers were pathetic, thinking we were their enemies. They all believed we were in the pay of the Kaiser.

At one moment they all made a rush at me, and I was in considerable danger — but a woman (I don’t know who) hurled herself between me and them. They hesitated to attack her — and then the police appeared. She showed wonderful courage.

I found the whole thing bracing. I realized that there are things that I believe in and that it is worth living for — love, gentleness, and understanding.

The mob got in by smashing the doors, before our proceedings had begun. It is strange how the world loves its enemies rather than its friends.

Goodbye. Thank you for your letter this morning. Every word of it is true. ¹ I shall come back to real things in time — meanwhile one must exist somehow.

Your

B.

¹ Ottoline’s long (and largely illegible) reply to the previous letter.