

## The Nuclear Arms Race



*Michele Ernsting  
interviews Ken Coates*



*Bertrand Russell, Edith Russell  
and Ken Coates*

*In her second programme,  
Michele Ernsting interviews  
Ken Coates, editor of The  
Spokesman, and Chairman  
of the Bertrand Russell  
Peace Foundation. His  
comments appear in regular  
type, whilst editorial  
interventions and archival  
recordings that were cut  
into the interviews are  
printed in italic.*

*I met a traveller from an antique land,  
Who said: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of  
stone  
Stand in the desert... Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose  
frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless  
things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that  
fed;*

**Ken Coates:** I remember the first time I went to see Russell in his beautiful house in Wales, Plas Penrhyn. The very first thing that he did was to take me by the arm and push me up some wooden steps that he had built so that I could see out of the window across the estuary, on which his house looked out, and on the far side there was the house of Shelley. He took great pride in pointing out that was where the poet lived, and nowadays I'm thinking all the time about Shelley because Shelley gave us the answer to full spectrum dominance in his little poem Ozymandias. Ozymandias was Rameses the Second, the very cruel Egyptian pharaoh, and Shelley describes finding his ruined statue crumbling across the desert and coming across the plinth which still stood, upon which was written:

*My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:  
Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!*

**Coates:** 'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:  
Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'

*Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

**Coates:** And I think that is the normal end of power. It is a blind alley in evolution.

*Narrator:* Shelley's poem resonates for many these days. It's been used to describe both the toppled regime of Saddam Hussein and that of American President George W Bush. The two clashed over the issue of weapons of mass destruction. Iraq stands accused of possessing them against international agreements; America's arsenal of these weapons remains large and is still growing, also against international agreements. Some 50 years ago, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell was the first to warn the world of the dangers of nuclear proliferation.

*The producer cuts in the sound of a nuclear explosion*

*50 years ago, only a handful of men and women understood the implications of a nuclear arms race. The atom bomb had been deployed in Japan with devastating results and in 1954 the Americans detonated the first hydrogen bomb, a weapon whose destructive power was simply beyond the understanding of most people. Bertrand Russell clearly saw the danger and decided to raise the alarm.*

**Coates:** To begin with he thought that the atom bomb was a terrible thing but he did not think that it threatened the survival of humanity. But he knew from his scientific experience that the hydrogen bomb was completely, qualitatively different, and that it did threaten the survival of humanity. As you know, the United States detonated the first hydrogen bomb and I might say that rather rapidly the Russians were able to follow with their prototype, more quickly than the military experts in the West believed possible. But even the first bomb was enough to teach Russell that the second bomb was bound to follow. And that before very long proliferation of these weapons was inevitable. And the thought that two or more countries would develop hydrogen bombs with the intention of possibly using them meant, as far as Russell was concerned, that human survival was in peril. So something had to be done to mobilise public opinion which was alive to the danger which was pressing.

*The producer inserts a clip of Eisenhower saying: 'Today, the United States stockpile of atomic weapons, which of course increases daily, exceeds by many times the total equivalent of the total of all bombs and all shells that came from every plane and every gun in every theatre of war of all of World War Two. In size and variety the development of atomic weapons has been no less remarkable. The development has been such that atomic weapons have virtually achieved conventional status within our armed services. But the dread secret, the fearful engines of atomic might, are not ours alone. If at one time the United States possessed what might have been called a monopoly of atomic power, that monopoly ceased to exist several years ago. The free world*

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*has naturally embarked on a large programme of warning and defence systems. That programme will be accelerated and expanded. But let no one think that the expenditure of vast sums for weapons and systems of defence can guarantee absolute safety for the citizens of any nation.'*

**Coates:** There was a second argument that was very rooted in Russell's experience – that was the argument for world government. And he saw nuclear weapons as being the absolute justification and necessity for international authority. At one time he thought perhaps the Americans could provide that authority. He became disillusioned with that because of a series of actions by the US government both at home and abroad, but he never yielded in the thought that there should be a supranational authority and that nuclear weapons should not be in the hands of national governments. Russell was far in front of his time and even today this argument is not popularly received. I have tried quite hard to suggest reforms in the United Nations which might make it more possible, but it is far in front of what the national states are willing to accept, even in these days.

**Narrator:** *And back in Russell's day the Cold War was in full swing. But meanwhile the idea to warn the world of the nuclear threat was picked up by another group, this time a group of scientists. The Polish physicist Joseph Rotblat was one of them. He had worked on the building of the first atomic bomb in Los Alamos, New Mexico, up until 1944. He's the only scientist to have resigned from the so-called Manhattan project due to moral objections. His idea was to bring together scientists from East and West.*

**Rotblat:** The Cold War had begun, the Iron Curtain was there, which made it very difficult to communicate. But in the meantime the initiative was taken up by the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, and then I got in touch with him in 1954. Yes, it's very queer the way history works. I decided after 1945, after the Hiroshima bomb, I would have nothing more to do with nuclear weapons. So much so that I completely changed my line of research and I went into medical research, mainly trying to apply my knowledge of nuclear science to the treatment of cancer. But in the course of this I became interested in the action of radiation – why should radiation kill cancer? How can I prevent it from killing normal cells? – On the basis of my knowledge I came early to the conclusion that the nuclear tests could be a hazard to health, and many other people did not believe this. I was considered to be a bit of a rebel in the scientific community when I came out saying it was a danger, and Bertrand Russell knew about my views. Although he was not a scientist himself, he believed that scientists have a big role to play in this, and he came to the conclusion that it would be a useful thing to gather a group of scientists, if possible from both sides of the Iron Curtain, who will appeal to the world to tell them about the danger of this whole issue.

**Coates:** He chose Nobel prize-winners in the main, I think two of the six signatories in the beginning were not Nobel prize-winners, but they were men of

very great distinction and Russell naturally turned first to Einstein because of his preeminence in the field, and because of his confidence that Einstein would respond. As you know there's a story behind that.

**Rotblat:** The date was the 18<sup>th</sup> of April 1955. Bertrand Russell was flying from Rome to Paris when the captain announced that he'd just heard the news that Albert Einstein had died. And so when Russell heard the news he was completely shattered because he felt that without Einstein's endorsement the whole project will collapse. But when he arrived in Paris at his hotel there was a letter waiting for him, forwarded from London, a letter from Albert Einstein with his signature endorsing the statement. And this was one of the last acts of Einstein's life. It was because of this that the document became known as the Russell-Einstein Manifesto. And Russell asked a number of people to sign it and eventually 11 altogether signed it and this was made public at a special press conference in London, in Caxton Hall in July 1955. I was the youngest of all the signatories. That's the reason why I'm the only one still alive! I was involved in all the organisation. Russell was pessimistic about whether anyone would be interested in this issue so he said 'alright, let's have the conference at Caxton Hall, but we'll hold it in the smallest room otherwise it will look empty'. But during the week more interest came out so we decided to take the next size room and in the end the largest hall was booked and it was packed with people from the press from all over the world.

*The producer inserts a recording of Bertrand Russell saying: 'In the tragic situation which confronts humanity, we feel that scientists should assemble in conference to appraise the perils that have arisen as a result of the development of weapons of mass destruction, and to discuss a resolution in the spirit of the appended draft.*

*We are speaking on this occasion, not as members of this or that nation, continent, or creed, but as human beings, members of the species Man, whose continued existence is in doubt. The world is full of conflicts; and, overshadowing all minor conflicts, the titanic struggle between Communism and anti-Communism.*

*Almost everybody who is politically conscious has strong feelings about one or more of these issues; but we want you, if you can, to set aside such feelings and consider yourselves only as members of a biological species which has had a remarkable history, and whose disappearance none of us can desire.'*

**Coates:** Among the young, of whom I was one in those days, it was an electric message which carried with astonishing speed and our generation found itself arguing with very senior people and very clever people who reflected the old habits of mind about what wars were and the way in which politics was conducted. And we felt that Russell had opened up a new vista which was both horrific and at the same time inspiring in its challenge. Something had to be done to make the world different because we couldn't go on living in the same way we had inherited.

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**Narrator:** *Russell says he writes this manifesto not as a citizen of a nation, continent or creed, but as member of humanity, and today we speak so easily of global culture and community but was this an unusual sentiment at the time?*

**Coates:** I think so. I think it was not easy for people to think of themselves as part of humanity. You think, what was the world that engendered all these terrible weapons which also make a terrible investment? They cost millions and millions of dollars and that means that states have to secure vast parts of their national product for an awe inspiring military purpose. That is not a frame of mind which is conducive to thinking much about the broad problems of humankind. I think that Russell made a silent contribution to our development in that his thinking was infectious and it transmitted itself over the years, frequently to people who had no idea who first uttered the thoughts that they were now speaking.

**Rotblat:** The Manifesto was directed to the public in general to tell them 'Here you have a new situation. We find ourselves in an arms race with nuclear weapons of tremendous destructive power being built and prepared for use.' He explained what the effects would be if these weapons were used. And then he said 'here then is the problem which we present to you , stark and inescapable. Shall we put an end to the human race or shall mankind renounce war?' In other words the choice was given – not just give up nuclear weapons but give up war altogether. Because even if we manage to get rid of nuclear weapons, and this is very important because they are the immediate danger, even then you cannot ensure the future of mankind because you cannot forget or erase from your memory the knowledge of how to make the weapons, and therefore they could be rebuilt in the future. The only way to ensure that these weapons would not be used to bring an end to the human race would be if we get rid of war altogether. This was the main message which is still valid today.

**Coates:** One class of people who were prone to listen were the significant leaders of the military because they had some direct experience and knowledge. But quite a large proportion of our intelligentsia were very slow to assimilate these messages because they had no direct experience and because it was normal to think that you had wars, and they unfolded and stopped, and that life continued. And the idea that wars in future could carry this dreadful finality was an extraordinarily serious step to comprehend. I think there was a lot of resistance to the idea that mankind could be eliminated in this kind of war. So many thoughts had to be brought together, and one of the things that Russell did was to begin the discussion which subsequently burgeoned to show not only what happened when you had vast explosions and destroyed large cities and territories, but what happened in terms of the environmental consequences, the diffusion of radioactivity, the poisoning of the earth, air, sea and atmosphere, these consequences of nuclear exchanges were just not known to people.

**Rotblat:** We felt it was important to tell the public and we didn't know what the response would be. Russell himself, even after the conference, was still not sure whether this issue would be taken up. He felt pessimistic about the outcome. We

were all very surprised to see the reaction – it was taken up all around the world and lots of letters came in, not only from scientists but also from many ordinary people.

**Russell continues:** *‘We have to learn to think in a new way. We have to learn to ask ourselves, not what steps can be taken to give military victory to whatever group we prefer, for there no longer are such steps; the question we have to ask ourselves is: what steps can be taken to prevent a military contest of which the issue must be disastrous to all parties?’*

**Coates:** To an astonishing degree we still are trapped. Russell was addressing this huge mutation in the power of weaponry. Since then, there have been further mutations in the power of weaponry which are absolutely frightening. But we haven’t had a Russell who was able to explain them to new generations. Of course, the other thing which has altered beyond any description is the contestation of power in the world. Throughout Russell’s life you had a bi-polar world fundamentally which was marked out by the Cold War; the imbalance between the United States and its allies on the one side, and Russia and its allies on the other side.

**Rotblat:** On several occasions at that time we came very close, really, to the end of civilisation. Now this danger to a certain extent mitigated with the end of the Cold War. This had one important effect that I didn’t foresee, namely that with the end of the Cold War the public began to believe this was also the end to the nuclear threat. We no longer need to worry about it. And this was taken advantage of by a group of hard-liners, hawks, in the United States. They had been working for a long time preparing for this and a completely different approach. For all the years during the Cold War, we thought the nuclear weapon was a weapon of last resort to be used only if everything else has been exhausted. And this has changed completely. In the Bush nuclear policy, in their Nuclear Posture Review, which came out in January 2002, they declared that nuclear weapons should now be treated like any other weapons in the military armoury. In other words in the event of war you can now use any weapons including nuclear weapons. This is a very big change. People don’t realise how dramatic a change it is. And moreover, following from this policy the Americans are building new weapons because they need them for certain purposes. And if they build new weapons they have to be tested. We had a moratorium on testing which the Americans signed but did not ratify, and now they are going to break this moratorium. They are going to test. They will be starting a new nuclear arms race and this is what worries me. This is why I feel the present moment is far more dangerous than what we had throughout the whole period.

**Coates:** The arms contest is not finished but it is transformed, and there is no power on earth that can challenge the United States, which is overwhelmingly more potent than all others – in fact it has greater military might than the next 27 countries in the world combined. Now if that were all, maybe you could live with it easily. But it’s not all. The Americans have unfortunately developed with this huge capacity, a mentality, which is very worrying. Their military doctrine, which

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is an official military doctrine, that doctrine is called '*full spectrum dominance*': that is the capacity to dominate all decisions on earth, air, the seas and space and also in the world of information. That's a pretty daunting and frightening agenda. Domination is not a healthy instinct in any case, but to have total domination is an ambition which should make people ashamed, not proud. The thing that can keep humanity going for another century is co-operation, not domination.

**Russell continues:** '*There lies before us, if we choose, continual progress in happiness, knowledge, and wisdom. Shall we, instead, choose death, because we cannot forget our quarrels?*'

**Coates:** Russell thought that the collision between America and Russia could detonate hydrogen bombs which could make the planet uninhabitable. That didn't happen, and one of the reasons it didn't happen is because popular concern meant that governments proceeded with a real measure of caution. The one encouraging thing about the situation today is the new birth of popular concern. That is the real reform that makes other things possible. You can't reform the political institutions without a huge popular concern underpinning the change and this is perhaps what is emerging now when you have millions of people all over Western Europe and across to Turkey, hundreds of thousands of people in Pakistan, and people all over South America all expressing the same concerns. I feel that maybe this can distil a higher form of wisdom because amongst those people there are innumerable creative and clever people.

**Russell continues:** '*We appeal as human beings to human beings: Remember your humanity, and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new Paradise; if you cannot, there lies before you the risk of universal death.*'

**Coates:** It seems to me that domination will not prove to be a permanent feature of our political life. It's not an appealing idea. The example of Russell was that of a teacher: and a teacher can only operate by understanding and sympathising with his pupils. A relationship of power produces only warped individuals and cruelty...

*The producer cuts in the sound of a bomb explosion*

*Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

