

# Disarmament

*Bertrand Russell*

There are many who consider that the problem of agreed disarmament or reduction of armaments is the most important in the field of international relations and the one to be first dealt with. I do not share this view. Needless to say, I consider agreed reduction of armaments very important and I favour the complete prohibition of all nuclear weapons, whether strategic or tactical. I see, however, two objections to treating this as the central and primary problem: First, as the experience of the last thirteen years has shown, disarmament conferences cannot reach agreements until the relations of East and West become less strained than they have been; second, the long-run problem of saving mankind from nuclear extinction will only be postponed, not solved, by agreements to renounce nuclear weapons. Such agreements will not, of themselves, prevent war, and, if a serious war should break out, neither side would consider itself bound by former agreements, and each side would, in all likelihood, set to work to manufacture new H-bombs as quickly as possible. These two considerations belong to different ends of the long road towards secure peace. The first prevents nations from starting along the road; the second shows a possibility of their being deflected after travelling a long way towards the goal. For these reasons, I should regard agreed disarmament as a palliative rather than a solution.

Nevertheless, the importance of any agreed measure of disarmament would be very great indeed. Perhaps its first and greatest importance would consist in the proof that negotiations between East and West can bear fruit in measures that all sane men must welcome. The second gain would be a diminution of the risk of unintended war.

*An extract from Bertrand Russell's 1959 book, Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare.*

The present readiness for instant retaliation makes it possible for some wholly accidental misfortune, such as a meteor exploding an H-bomb, to be mistaken for enemy action. Since it is assumed, probably rightly, that a Great Power, if embarked upon nuclear war, would begin by destroying the seat of government of the enemy, it is inferred that subordinate commanders must not wait for orders from headquarters but must carry out plans previously arranged to meet the emergency. Many things more probable than collision with a meteor might initiate a war that no Great Power had intended. One such cause would be a mechanical defect in radar. Another would be a sudden nervous breakdown of some important officer as a result of the stress caused by appalling responsibility. A third, and even more likely source of danger, will arise when many countries have nuclear weapons. It will then be possible for a small country with an irresponsible, chauvinistic Government, to make a nuclear attack which would be interpreted as coming from a major Power and would, therefore, lead to world war before the error was discovered. For such reasons, the present state of the world, and still more the state which will exist when, as now seems nearly certain, a great many States possess H-bombs, involves quite appalling dangers which could be very greatly lessened by disarmament agreements.

A third reason for desiring a reduction of armaments is economy. The importance of this reason is likely to increase and become more evident during the next few years. Western Governments, faced by fear of mounting expenditure, have recently adopted the view that nuclear weapons almost alone could afford adequate defence. This view is being increasingly challenged by experts on the ground that the United States could suffer unendurably from a nuclear attack and would, therefore, be very unwilling to provoke a nuclear war. It follows that, if the West is to be capable of resisting the East without disaster, it must be able to conduct non-nuclear wars, although the ability to do so involves enormously increased expenditure. Apart from this somewhat technical consideration, one must assume that, so long as the arms race continues and remains a matter of life and death to both sides, new inventions will constantly increase military expenditure until both sides are reduced to subsistence level. The only escape will be when both sides realize that it is more profitable to keep one's own citizens prosperous than to be able to kill those of other countries.

The fourth gain which may be secured by disarmament agreement is that they may show the necessity of deciding disputes by arbitration or by some international tribunal, rather than by war or the threat of war. This is an almost inevitable logical consequence of any such agreement. Decision by war implies the use of the whole of a nation's strength if that is necessary for victory. A disarmament agreement on the other hand, so long as it is

respected, implies that the Government is not using its whole strength in preparation for war. This leads inevitably to the conclusion that new methods of settling disputes must be sought. Granted that a reduction of armaments is desirable, we are faced at once by formidable problems. After studying the proceedings of disarmament conferences, it is almost impossible not to be lost in a morass of technicalities, with arguments this way and that and well-founded objections that are met by equally well-founded retorts. So long as the East-West tension remains what it has been, I do not think that we are likely to escape from this morass. Suppose the East offers to agree to the abolition of all nuclear weapons. The West at once retorts that the superior man-power of the East would give it an unfair advantage unless conventional armaments were reduced at the same time. Suppose this admitted. The next question that arises is: To what figure should the conventional armaments of East and West be reduced? Suppose this agreed, there arises a third and most difficult question: What enduring measures of inspection will insure that an agreement is being loyally carried out? Hitherto it has been found that such questions could be prolonged *ad infinitum* and that negotiators could continue throughout many years to advocate disarmament without incurring the risk of bringing it about. If disarmament negotiations are to succeed, it will only be when each side is persuaded that the other has abandoned the hope of conquest.

There is, it is true, one measure which is already within the sphere of practical politics, and that is the abolition of nuclear tests. What makes this measure already possible is that scientists are agreed in believing that no serious nuclear test can be concealed, given a system of inspection so little onerous that neither side objects to it. Although the stoppage of tests is only a small step, it will nevertheless be very welcome if it takes place. It will be welcome, first, because it will put an end to the increase of radioactive substances in air and water and food which at present is causing an increase of cancer and leukaemia and genetic damage of unknown magnitude. It will be welcome, in the second place, because any agreement between East and West is to the good and tends to diminish tension. It will be welcome, in the third place, because it will make it more difficult for new Powers to join the 'Nuclear Club'. For these reasons, we must all ardently hope that an agreement to abolish tests will be reached.

Apart from the absence of any genuine governmental desire for disarmament, the greatest difficulties are connected with the question of inspection. On this subject there is an admirable book: *Inspection for Disarmament*, edited by Seymour Melman, and published by the Columbia University Press, New York, in 1958. So far as I am able to judge, the investigations contained in this book are completely honest and aim solely at

a just estimate of facts and probabilities. Broadly speaking, the conclusion reached in this book is that inspection could prevent the manufacture of new nuclear weapons, but that it probably could not prevent a dishonest Government from concealing some part of the stocks existing at the time when an agreement was concluded. There is a valuable account of the devices by which the German Government, after the First World War, concealed the armaments which it created in defiance of the Treaty of Versailles. In this case, the acquiescence of the German Government in the disarmament clauses of that Treaty was not voluntary, but was only a reluctant acquiescence in the consequences of defeat. I think we may infer that no disarmament agreement will be reliable unless all signatory States are sincerely convinced that it is to their own advantage, and not only to that of potential enemies. This re-enforces our earlier contention that disarmament must result from better relations between East and West, and cannot, by itself, be a cause of such better relations.

Given a genuine desire for peace on both sides, it should be possible, without undue delay, to agree that no new nuclear weapons should be manufactured. This is a measure which could be enforced by inspection without great difficulty. Aerial inspection, especially, would make the concealment of large plants almost impossible, even in the remotest regions of Siberia or Alaska. The destruction of existing stocks of H-bombs should follow, but offers greater difficulties, and, if it is to be carried out without altering the balance of power, it will have to be accompanied by a reduction of conventional forces. I doubt whether an agreement to this effect will be concluded until there is a genuine readiness on both sides to renounce war as an instrument of policy.

I should like, in conclusion, to say a few words about the increase of general well-being that would result if such measures of disarmament as we have been discussing were carried out. I put first among the gains to be expected the removal of that terrible load of fear which weighs at present upon all those who are aware of the dangers with which mankind is threatened. I believe that a great upsurge of joy would occur throughout the civilized world and that a great store of energies now turned to hate and destruction and futile rivalry would be diverted into creative channels, bringing happiness and prosperity to parts of the world which, throughout long ages, have been oppressed by poverty and excessive toil. I believe that the emotions of kindness, generosity and sympathy, which are now kept within iron fetters by the fear of what enemies may do, would acquire a new life and a new force and a new empire over human behaviour. All this is possible. It needs only that men should permit themselves a life of freedom and hope from which they are now excluded by the domination of unnecessary fear.