

## Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)

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Description One of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century, Bertrand Russell made fundamental contributions to logic, philosophy of mathematics, epistemology, and metaphysics. He combined his academic work with a lifetime of political and social commentary and political activism. Russell was born into the upper echelons of the radical wing of the British aristocracy. (In 1931 he inherited an earldom from his brother.) His grandfather, Lord John Russell, who twice served as prime minister under Queen Victoria, had been responsible for the electoral Reform Act of 1832, the first and most difficult step in transforming Britain into an electoral democracy. Both Russell's parents died before he was four and he was brought up by his grandmother, who educated him at home with the help of a number of private tutors. In 1890 he went up to Trinity College, Cambridge to study mathematics, switching to philosophy in his fourth year. Afterwards he worked mainly on philosophy of mathematics as an independent scholar until 1910, when he took up a lectureship at his old college.

Although he wrote on German Marxism in the 1890s and campaigned for women's suffrage before the First World War, it was the outbreak of war in 1914 that turned him decisively to activism. Although too old for military service, Russell strongly supported the conscientious objectors and opposed the war in every way he could. As a result, he was fined, dismissed from his position at Cambridge, deprived of his passport, and eventually jailed. After losing his lectureship at Cambridge he earned his living by his writings as a public intellectual, with only occasional periods of subsequent academic employment.

In 1917 he had welcomed the Bolshevik revolution which had taken Russia out of the war. But a visit to Russia in 1920 left him appalled at the authoritarian nature of the Bolshevik regime. At the same time he realized that a less brutal regime would not have prevailed against the old order that he, as much as the Bolsheviks, wished to see overthrown. It seemed that any force sufficient to overcome a tyranny would have to be as tyrannous as the regime it opposed. Faced with this conundrum, Russell favoured incremental political reforms over revolutionary changes brought about by Marxist class-warfare, and through the interwar years, embarked on campaigns for long-term social reforms, which he hoped would make human beings less hurtful and intolerant of each other. He campaigned against organized religion, which he thought a major source of cruelty and intolerance; and for a much more liberal attitude to sexual relations. Education was especially important, and in the late 1920s, along with his

second wife, Dora Russell, he ran a small experimental school, intended to produce children who were international in their outlook and free from prejudice. Politically, he favoured as much individual autonomy as possible, government action to improve social conditions, and the resolution of international disputes by diplomacy and arbitration.

From 1914 onwards a horror of war was the strongest of his political motivations. He was not, however, an absolute pacifist. He held that war was justified if the consequences of fighting it would be less catastrophic than the consequences of not doing so. In accord with this principle, he remained a pacifist through the 1930s, hoping that the Nazis might be tamed by wise diplomacy and fearing that aerial warfare would reduce the cities of Europe to the state of the front in World War I. When war broke out in 1939 Russell came reluctantly to support it as a lesser evil than Nazism. The development of nuclear weapons, however, changed Russell's calculus of lesser evil. A war waged with such weapons, which might well wipe out the entire human race, could have no possible justification.

Russell opposed nuclear weapons in every way he could. In 1955, with Albert Einstein, he launched the Russell-Einstein manifesto, an international appeal to scientists out of which emerged the first political collaboration of scientists from both sides of the Cold War. The Pugwash movement, as this collaboration became known, played a significant role behind the scenes in the negotiation of the partial nuclear test ban treaty of 1963. Russell appealed personally to world leaders in support of disarmament and again in 1962 for a peaceful resolution to the Cuban Missile Crisis, an appeal to which the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev responded publicly. In 1963, he engaged through emissaries in shuttle diplomacy in an unsuccessful attempt to settle the Sino-Indian border dispute. He also organized mass protests against nuclear weapons, first in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, then in the more radical Committee of 100 which launched a campaign of civil disobedience in Britain. As a result of the latter action, he was jailed again in 1961. In his final years he was deeply involved in opposing the Vietnam War and in 1967-8 he organized an International War Crimes Tribunal to investigate American conduct of the war. In 1963 he set up The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation to continue his political work after his death. Among a wide range of activities, the Peace Foundation cultivated links with dissidents in the Soviet Bloc during the final years of the Cold War and was influential in the European Nuclear Disarmament movement of the 1980s.

Russell wrote more than seventy books. His most important philosophical books are: *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903), *Principia Mathematica* (with A.N. Whitehead, 3 vols. 1910-13), *Our Knowledge of the External World* (1914; rev. 1926), *The Analysis of Mind* (1921), *The Analysis of Matter* (1927), *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (1924), *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (1948). His social and political writings include: *German Social Democracy* (1896), *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916), *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (1920), *The*

*Prospects of Industrial Civilization* (with Dora Russell, 1923), *On Education* (1926), *Marriage and Morals* (1929), *Freedom and Organization* (1934), *Power* (1938), *Authority and the Individual* (1949), *New Hopes for a Changing World* (1951), *Why I am not a Christian* (1957), *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare* (1959), *Has Man a Future?* (1961). His shorter writings are being published in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* (35 vols., 1983 - ). Russell's papers are kept at The Bertrand Russell Archives, McMaster University.

Suggested  
Reading:

**Clark, Ronald W.** 1975. *The life of Bertrand Russell*. London: Joanthan Cape.

**Moorehead, Caroline.** 1992. *Bertrand Russell. A life*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson.

**Ryan, Alan.** 1988. *Bertrand Russell: A political life*. London: Allen Lane.