

RUSSELL AND PREVENTIVE WAR: A REPLY TO DAVID BLITZ

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David Blitz has provided a valuable contribution to Russell scholarship on the perplexing controversy concerning Russell's alleged preventive war phase following World War II (1945–49) when many Russell scholars and commentators have claimed that Russell supported a preventive war against the USSR. Blitz provides a very comprehensive overview of Russell's ideas during this period and of the evolution of his thought on war and peace in the atomic age and its consistency with the non-absolute pacifism in World War I which he shared with Einstein.¹

But on the specific question of whether Russell advocated preventive war against the USSR in the period in question, a lot of what Blitz has to say is either not new, or oversimplifies the matter by ignoring important details.

Blitz answers his article's main question in the negative: Russell did not advocate preventive war; rather he "proposed the strategic policy of conditionally threatening war" (p. 21). I essentially agree. But where Blitz distinguishes between advocating "preventive war" and the "conditional threat of war", I distinguish between "unconditional" and "conditional" advocacy of preventive war. I don't really care whether one chooses to call Russell's advocacy in the years following World War II "a form of preventive war" or not, so long as we understand that what he advocated was, as I originally put it, that:

PWc The us/West ought to wage war against the Soviets unless they agree, under threat of war, to international controls (of atomic energy/armaments).²

¹ David Blitz, "Did Russell Advocate Preventive Atomic War against the USSR?", *Russell*, n.s. 22 (2002): 5–45.

² Ray Perkins, Jr., "Bertrand Russell and Preventive War", *Russell*, n.s. 14 (1994): 136.

This is essentially what Blitz means by “conditionally threatening war” (although, for reasons given below, I’m not quite satisfied with his analysis). My “unless” formulation is logically equivalent to the following conditional:

If, under threat of war, the Soviets do not agree to international controls, then the us/West should wage war against them.³

It’s important to be clear about what we mean by putting the Soviets “under threat of war” here. Russell’s examples make it reasonably clear that he intended an unambiguous message to be conveyed directly to the Russians: that failure to comply with the us/West’s call for international controls would mean war, i.e. that the us/West would initiate war against them. In Russell’s words: “I think you could get so powerful an alliance that you could turn to Russia and say, ‘It is open to you to join this alliance if you will agree to the terms [international controls]; if you will not join us we shall go to war with you’.”⁴

I also agree, as I made clear in my original article, that Russell never publicly espoused preventive war in the sense of advocating that the us/West should immediately wage war against the Soviet Union. But Blitz’s formulation and explanation fall short of accurately explicating what Russell was up to in the period in question in several ways: (a) Blitz fails to give due importance to the fact that Russell publicly advocated the threat of war only when he thought there was a reasonable chance that the Soviets would comply with the threat. (b) Although he acknowledges the fact, Blitz underplays the importance of Russell’s willingness, failing Russian compliance, to carry out the threat. And (c) Blitz’s inattention to the issue of the likelihood of Soviet compliance causes him to fail to identify and explain an important error in Russell’s later accounts.

(a). This fact has a lot to do with the question of Russell’s moral culpability. And while some seem to think that the outcome-expectation on the part of the advocate is irrelevant to the moral question,⁵ I believe it is relevant and partially vindicates Russell from charges of advocating an immoral policy; certainly Russell thought so. Utilitarians commonly distinguish between the objective rightness or wrongness of an action and its subjective rightness or wrongness,

³ Blitz notes correctly that “*A* unless *B*” can sometimes be translated as a bi-conditional, although it’s always safe to translate it as the conditional “If not-*B* then *A*”. The bi-conditional is logically equivalent to “either *A* or *B* but not both” which he wrongly gives as equivalent to the conjunction “If *A* then not-*B* and if *B* then not-*A*”. His second conjunct should be “If not-*B* then *A*”.

⁴ “The International Bearings of Atomic Warfare”, address to the Royal Empire Society, 3 Dec. 1947, published in *United Empire*, 39 (Jan.–Feb. 1948): 18–21.

⁵ See D. Lackey, “Reply to Perkins on ‘Conditional Preventive War’”, *Russell*, n.s. 16 (1996): 85–8.

i.e. the praiseworthiness or blameworthiness of the agent. Russell himself did.⁶ Belief about the likelihood of compliance with the threat surely bears on the question of moral culpability. The moral difference between an advocate who believed the Soviets would comply and one who believed they would not is the moral difference between an agent who believes his or her plan of action will *not* result in war and one who believes it *will*. Moreover, an agent who thought war a very likely outcome of the threat would be advocating something tantamount to the advocacy of (preventive) war in Blitz's sense, i.e. advocating war unconditionally. Curiously Blitz seems to take no position on this moral question, although he does seem to think that, as a matter of fact, Russell's advocacy of the threat of war was independent of his belief about the likelihood of Soviet compliance.

After a long discussion of Russell's April 1948 *Horizon* article, Blitz writes:

From the above analysis, three conclusions follow: (1) Russell's conditional threat was not dependent on his analysis of the probability of compliance by Russia, (2) Russell continued to prefer a non-war solution, despite the low probability he assigned it, and (3) he continued to favour a policy of threats as a means of preserving peace. (P. 29)

Conclusions (1) and (3) are drawn mistakenly, in my judgment, and depend on an irrelevant sense of "threat". In the *Horizon* piece, Russell doesn't recommend anything like what I have above called putting Russia "under threat of war" to secure compliance with international controls. In that article, as in virtually all his articles in 1948, Russell does not advocate overtly threatening the Soviets with war. (One exception is "The Future of Mankind," *The New Leader*, 6 March 1948. There Russell advocates PWC, but says he has "no opinion" on whether the Soviets would comply or not.) The international scene was growing tense at this time. The Soviets had engineered a Communist coup in Czechoslovakia in late February, and at the end of March the Russians had begun interfering with movement into Berlin which precipitated a crisis which lasted until mid-May 1949, when the Soviets lifted the Berlin blockade. The feasibility of advocating the threat of war to secure Soviet compliance to international controls was a non-starter during most of 1948. Instead, Russell advocated a *defensive* strategy: "There is only one way in which peace can be preserved, and that is by such a show of strength that Russia will not venture on any further aggression." But he adds that he doubts this will work, and that he expects war "probably in a few years" (*Horizon*, p. 246). As we know, Western relations with the Soviets improved (as did Western defences—NATO was born

⁶ B. Russell, *Religion and Science* (London: Oxford U. P., 1997; 1st edn., 1935), p. 228; *Philosophical Essays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968; 1st edn., 1910), p. 32.

in March), and by the summer of 1949, but before the advent of the Soviet bomb, we find Russell advocating once again a variation on the 1945–47 idea of threatening the Russians into compliance with international controls:

We should, when the time is ripe, insist on the acceptance of this scheme [the Baruch Plan] or some equivalent.... We must, therefore, while we can, insist—even to the point of war, if necessary—on the measures that are necessary to make the world less dangerous for the future of mankind than it is at present.... The total abolition of serious war is now for the first time a technical possibility. If we of the West use our power wisely, we may realize this possibility by persuading or compelling the Russians to agree to what is necessary.⁷

He doesn't venture an opinion on whether the Russians are likely to comply without war. But he does note the improved international climate, and he gives some reason to hope that a threat, or even persuasion, might succeed without war: "If it can be made obvious to the Russians that the west is more powerful than they are, it is to be expected that they will change profoundly and become very much more amenable" (*ibid.*). Of course, by the end of the 1940s Russia got its own bomb and the means to deliver it, and the "threat of war" strategy was no longer viable, and Russell ceased to utilize it.

(*b*). Blitz's analysis of the "conditional threat" gives it an unduly benign character. As Blitz puts it, Russell proposed that:

CTW If Russia does not acquiesce in the Baruch Plan for the international control of atomic energy, then the West should conditionally threaten war.

This makes Russell's proposal sound like the worst Russia would get would be a Western threat of war. We must remember that Russell himself said, as Blitz later acknowledges (p. 39), that he was prepared to have the West's "bluff called" by a Soviet refusal to comply. So, under the "conditional threat", a continued refusal by Russia would be met with, not a *threat* of war, but with war itself. This, as I said above, is tantamount to advocating war unless Russell believed that the threat was likely to be complied with, or at least that he didn't believe that the threat was likely to be rejected.

(*c*). Finally, I'd like to address the issue of Russell's apparent misstatements about his "conditional threat". As Blitz observes, and as I made clear in my original article, Russell himself equivocated on "preventive war". Sometimes he took it to mean "immediate war", i.e. proposing to wage war unconditionally against the Soviet Union. He denied, correctly, that he had ever advocated war in this sense. (For example, his denial in the 1953 *Nation* letter.) Sometimes he

⁷ "Ten Years Since the War Began", *The New Leader*, 32, no. 36 (3 Sept. 1949): 6.

understood the term to mean “the threat of war”—to be made to force Soviet compliance with international controls—and which would issue in war on condition that the Soviets failed to comply. This I have called advocating (preventive) war conditionally. Blitz prefers to call this “advocating a conditional threat of war”. That’s all right, so long as we understand that Russell was advocating that the West wage war against Russia on condition that the threat should fail to secure compliance. Russell admitted to advocating war in this sense. (For example, in his 1959 *Listener* interview with John Freeman.) I pointed this out in my original article, and it’s essentially the same point that Blitz makes in his.

But Blitz fails to come to grips with Russell’s attempt in his autobiography to cast the private Marseille letter (May 1948) as an advocacy of the same sort as, and on the same moral level with, his earlier advocations of conditional threat of war. In both his autobiography and in the 1954 *Saturday Review* piece, Russell mischaracterizes his 1948 letter as advocating the threat *in the belief that the Russians would comply*.⁸ This was not so. As he wrote to Marseille in the 1948 letter: “I do not think the Russians will yield without war.” I have speculated as to how Russell could go wrong in recounting this matter. My tentative conclusion is that he wished to obscure this detail of the record because he saw that it was morally problematic, especially for one who was becoming an international leader in an effort to prevent nuclear war—an effort that was to become the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Pugwash Movement. For such an important undertaking he needed to maintain his humanitarian credibility. Of course, if one believes with Lackey, and apparently with Blitz, that expectation of compliance is not relevant (Blitz says “not decisive”) to the “justification of the statement of the threat” (p. 22), there’s nothing to be concerned about: Russell, in the Marseille letter, was merely advocating the conditional threat of war which had as its main objective the prevention of war and, as such, was quite different from an advocacy of preventive war—something that Russell, Blitz insists, never did. But what I claim, and I think what Russell realized, was that the Marseille letter was advocating a conditional threat which, given his belief about Soviet non-compliance in May of 1948, was morally tantamount to advocating war unconditionally. Even though it was a private letter, and even though Russell had by then ceased publicly to advocate his conditional threat of war to force Soviet compliance, it was still a morally problematic suggestion and one which must have caused him considerable embarrassment when Marseille made it public in 1954.

⁸ “1948 Russell vs. 1954 Russell,” *The Saturday Review*, 37, no. 42 (16 Oct. 1954): 25.
