Russell and the Cuban missile crisis

by Al Seckel

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS lasted only thirteen days, from 15 October to 28 October 1962. For thirteen days the world was brought closer to the edge of a nuclear war than it had ever been before. Throughout this time Bertrand Russell sent an amazing series of telegrams to President John F. Kennedy, Chairman Nikita Khrushchev, U Thant (then Secretary General of theUnited Nations), Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, and other heads of state, and to major newspapers such as the *Manchester Guardian*, London *Times* and *New York Times*. Then, within forty-eight hours of Russell's telegrams, the Tass news agency began broadcasting an important reply to Russell from Chairman Khrushchev, an event that brought Russell nearer to the centre of the scene, causing the press, TV and radio correspondents to rush to interview the "nonagenarian intellectual in carpet slippers in his cottage in North Wales", and find out why the head of a powerful state used a ninety-year-old philosopher in this power game.

Appraisals of Russell's effect on the crisis span the full range of the spectrum, from Ronald Clark's negative statement, "there is no evidence to suggest that Russell's intervention affected the course of events",[1] to claims by some of his followers that his actions were a determining factor in preventing World War III. Many contemporary newspaper accounts lauded his intervention as bringing about the turning-point in the crisis,

[1] Ronald Clark, *Bertrand Russell and His World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p. 110.

while many standard historical accounts, i.e., Abel,[2] Allison,[3] Dinnerstein,[4] Kennedy,[5] and Larson,[6] either ignore Russell's involvement completely or merely mention him in passing. Typical is Robert Kennedy's account in *Thirteen Days*; he just reprints Russell's telegram to Kennedy and Kennedy's well-publicized rebuke. This treatment reinforces the general misconception that Russell had no real importance in the affair and that Khrushchev only reversed course because America flexed her muscle. Russell himself thought his actions were significant enough to publish an account of them in his book *Unarmed Victory*.[7] What is attempted here is an examination of the actual effect Russell's telegrams had on the peaceful resolution of the Cuban missile crisis and a determination of Russell's proper role in the events.

The progress of events deserves a brief synopsis. The overthrow of Cuba's Batista government in 1958 by Fidel Castro, and its supersession by a regime which leaned ideologically on communism and economically on the Soviet Union, lead to threats of invasion by American-based exiles, supported in greater or lesser degree, overtly or covertly, by U.S. authorities. In 1961 the threats culminated in the American-sponsored attack by Florida-based exiles on the Bay of Pigs, a disastrous failure which cost President Kennedy much prestige. A year later American spyplanes identified the construction of nuclear missile bases on the island, and evidence showed these were being established and serviced by Russia. Kennedy was strongly against the idea of America being within close range of nuclear-tipped missiles. Late on 22 October, Kennedy declared a blockade of Cuba, aware that Russian supply ships were approaching the island. It was at this time that Russell stepped openly onto the international stage.

Russell, however, had been aware of the tension building some weeks earlier. On 3 September 1962 he issued the following statement to the press:

[2] Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966).

[3] Graham Allison, *The Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

[4] Herbert Dinnerstein, *The Making of A Missile Crisis: October 1962* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1976).

[5] Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971).

[6] David Larson, *The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963).

[7] The publication of *Unarmed Victory* was met with disdain by the press. The *New York Times* (28 July 1963) called it "not only enraging but also outrageous". The London *Spectator* (5 April 1963) greeted the book with "contempt and pity". And Roy Jenkins of *The Observer* (4 July 1963) felt that the "old man's vanity had been at work."

> The situation in Cuba involves a serious threat to the peace of the world. The Cubans have every right to the government that they wish and if it is a communist government it in no way justifies American intervention. If the United States invades Cuba it may provoke a dangerous warlike action from the Soviet Union. If Russia supplies arms and troops to Cuba the danger of unwise and warlike action by the Americans will be increased with the imminent risk of world war. The situation demands a definite undertaking by the government of the United States not to invade Cuba and by the Soviet Union not to give armed support to Cuba. Precipate action by either may provoke world-wide disaster.[8]

This prescient statement was ignored by the press and by both the United States and the Soviet Union. Statements continued to flow from Plas Penrhyn, but these too were ignored. On 18 October Russell addressed a telegram to U Thant expressing his grave concern at the seriousness of the international situation; he also requested an opportunity to address the General Assembly. Russell was politely turned down because of U.N. procedures. Russell believed that time for a reasonable solution was running out. He wrote later:

> In paralyzed terror the world looked on as, hour by hour, the distance between American and Russian ships grew less. In the time available, only individuals could act. With little hope of success, I decided that I must telegraph to Kennedy and Khrushchev beseeching them to let the human race continue to exist. I had had reason, already, to think that Khrushchev might not be offended by my approach to him. (*Unarmed Victory*, p. 8)

Following Kennedy's midnight announcement on October 23rd that the blockade had started, Russell dispatched five telegrams, among them:

> To President Kennedy: "Your action desperate. Threat to human survival. No conceivable justification. Civilized man condemns it. We will not have mass murder. Ultimatums mean war.... End this madness."
>
> To Chairman Khrushchev: "I appeal to you not to be provoked by the unjustifiable action of the United States in Cuba. The world will support caution. Urge condemnation to be sought through the United Nations. Precipitous action could mean annihilation for mankind." (*Unarmed Victory*, p. 37)

[8] *Unarmed Victory* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963) p. 27.

Meanwhile, Khrushchev had responded to Kennedy's announcement of the blockade. Khrushchev accused the President of threatening the Soviet Union and asserted that the blockade was not going to be observed. The Soviet Union would instruct its vessels bound for Cuba not to obey the orders of American naval forces. If any effort were made to interfere with Soviet ships, "we would then be forced for our part to take all action that is necessary."[9] This letter implied that Russia was quite willing to go to war over the Soviet installations in Cuba. The world appeared to be in its darkest hour. Headlines appeared in the press such as those in the *Daily Sketch* of 25 October, "Khrushchev orders SAIL ON—OR SINK. U.S. WAITS ... WATCHES" (*Unarmed Victory*, p. 33). Then, suddenly some light began to appear. Khrushchev publicly responded to Russell's cable in a long letter published by Tass on 24 October. It was a key letter, showing for the first time some sign of compromise. Khrushchev wrote in part:

> Lord Bertrand Russell:
>
> ... I understand your worry and anxiety. I should like to assure you that the Soviet government will not take any reckless decisions, will not permit itself to be provoked by the unwarranted actions of the United States of America.... We shall do everything in our power to prevent war from breaking out.... The question of war and peace is so vital that we should consider a top-level meeting in order to discuss all the problems which have arisen, to do everything to remove the danger of unleashing a thermonuclear war. As long as rocket nuclear weapons are not put into play it is still possible to avert war. When aggression is unleashed by the Americans such a meeting will already become impossible and useless. (*Unarmed Victory*, pp. 42–5)

It is evident from the last two sentences that the only thing that could lead the Russians to war was American aggression. As Herbert Dinnerstein has pointed out, "What is striking about the letter is what it failed to say. Gone was the commitment to defend Cuba, gone also was the statement that Cuba had the right to whatever weapons she needed for her self-defense. Not even an indirect commitment to go to Cuba's defense if she were attacked was made. The *only* demand was the ending of the blockade; presumably everything else was negotiable."[10] This was quite an impressive turn-around from the letter that Khrushchev had sent Kennedy the day before.

[9] Kennedy, p. 58.
[10] Dinnerstein, p. 244.

How did Washington view Khrushchev's public letter to Russell? Arthur Schlesinger writes of the night of the 24th:

> I received a call from Averill Harriman. Speaking with unusual urgency, he said that Khrushchev was desperately signaling a desire to cooperate in moving towards a peaceful solution.... Harriman set forth the evidence: Khrushchev's suggestion of a summit meeting in his reply to Bertrand Russell ... the indications that afternoon that the nearest Soviet ships were slowing down and changing course. "This was not the behavior of a man who wanted war," Harriman said, "it was the behavior of a man begging our help to get off the hook ... we must give him an out ... if we can do this shrewdly we can downgrade the tough group in the Soviet Union which persuaded him to do all this. But if we deny him an out, then we will escalate this business into a nuclear war."[11]

Russell cabled Khrushchev again, thanking him for his public reply and then suggested as a possible compromise that Cuban missile bases be swapped for American bases in Turkey. Russell implied in *Unarmed Victory* that Khrushchev accepted his suggestion. Russell's cable dated the 26th of October stated:

> It seems to me that an initiative of another kind from you could electrify the world and make these and future talks far more likely to lead to the result that we desire. Could you make a unilateral gesture ... and then request the Americans to match it? The abandonment of the Warsaw Pact, for example, could be the basis for a request that the Americans make a similar gesture in Turkey and Iran, in West Germany and in Great Britain. (*Unarmed Victory*, pp. 59–60)

This cable caused more problems than it solved, for that morning, unknown to Russell, Alexsander Fomin, a counsellor at the Soviet Embassy, suggested that if the United States would remove its missiles in Florida under U.N. inspection, Chairman Khrushchev would propose never to introduce such offensive weapons into Cuba again. After conferring about the proposal, Secretary of State Dean Rusk transmitted the following message to Fomin, "The United States sees real possibilities for a negotiation, but time is short."[12] Two hours later Kennedy received a long letter from Khrushchev emphasizing the need for a compromise. That day V. A. Zorin, the Soviet ambassador, had advanced the same

[11] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 821.
[12] *Ibid.*

proposal to U Thant. Washington thought that Khrushchev's letter to Kennedy along with the Fomin proposal promised some hope for a settlement. But on the morning of the 27th prospects suddenly darkened. Tass had begun to broadcast a new Khrushchev letter containing, to everyone's consternation, an entirely different proposition from the one transmitted through Fomin and embodied in Khrushchev's letter of the night before. The Soviet Union now said it would remove its bases from Cuba and offer a non-aggression pledge to Turkey if the U.S. would remove its missiles from Turkey, and offer a non-aggression pledge to Cuba. When this proposal came from Khrushchev, the Americans were caught totally by surprise. Before the 27th, Khrushchev had only mentioned the swapping of Florida bases for Cuban missile bases.

In an interview with the *Daily Herald* on 27 October, Russell stated, "It looks, however, as if my cables have had some effect."[13] Khrushchev's letter to Kennedy, echoing Russell's words, seems to show that Khrushchev's use of this proposal must have arisen from his correspondence with Russell. Kennedy, however, found the idea totally unacceptable and the swap was promptly rejected.

Meanwhile Russell received a well-publicized reply from President Kennedy:

> I am in receipt of your telegram. We are currently discussing the matter in the United Nations. While your messages are critical of the United States, they make no mention of your concern for the introduction of secret Soviet missiles into Cuba. I think your attention might well be directed to the burglars rather than to those who caught the burglars. (*Unarmed Victory*, p. 54)

In *Unarmed Victory*, by way of comment on Kennedy's reply, Russell wrote the following:

> It is true that I had not expressed concern for the introduction of "secret Soviet missiles into Cuba." I could understand the hysteria that swept over the U.S. upon hearing of them, for the U.S. has heretofore had no powerful enemies upon its borders. But the presence of these missiles, even if they had really been secret and even had they been long-range, did not materially change the situation. Russia already possessed the power to blot out the U.S. if she wished to do so ... just as the U.S. possesses the power to blot out most of Russia.... As to President Kennedy's remark about burglars: it is singularly *mal à propos*. Nobody could accuse the Cubans of being burglars, since they have not left their own island. As for the Russians, they came at the invitation of the Cubans and were no more burglars than are the American forces in Britain and Western Europe. But in view of the repeated American threats of invasion of Cuba, the Americans were at least contemplating "burglary." (Pp. 54–5)

[13] "Why Russell?" *Daily Herald*, London, 27 Oct. 1962, p. 1.

In his *Autobiography* Russell had this to say about his telegram to Kennedy, "I will give my critics only one olive branch: I am sorry that I did not couch my telegram of October 23rd to President Kennedy more gently. Its directness made it unlikely to cut much ice, I agree."[14]

On October 28th, after having had very little positive effect on Kennedy, Russell sent another long cable to Khrushchev:

> The U.S. rejection of your proposals to trade Soviet installations in Cuba against NATO installations in Turkey is totally unjustifiable and is a sign of insane paranoia.... It seems to me, therefore, that you ought to dismantle Soviet installations in Cuba under the guarantee of inspection by UNO, demanding only, in return, that when UNO gives the necessary guarantee, the American blockade of Cuba should be lifted. I think it should be made evident to world public opinion that this action is only taken in response to a kind of blackmail which is neither sane nor morally justifiable.
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> I send this memorandum on the present situation in Cuba. I have not made it public, and I shall not do so unless it meets with your approval. It asks of you a sacrifice which you may find excessive and intolerable. (*Unarmed Victory*, pp. 62–3)

In *Unarmed Victory* Russell states what happened next. "Late that day, the 28th, we learned that Premier Khrushchev had offered to remove all missile bases in Cuba, to withdraw missiles and Soviet emmissaries from Cuba and to export no more missiles to Cuba. He had offered salvation to mankind. The relief was overwhelming" (p. 63). Russell lets the reader draw the conclusion that the crisis ended only after his cable to Khrushchev on the 28th. Or, as Ronald Clark, when discussing *Unarmed Victory*, so aptly puts it, "The overwhelming impression created is that the end of the crisis followed Russell's cable as effect follows cause...."[15]

Why did Khrushchev reply to Russell, a well-known critic of the Soviet Union? There were a number of other internationally renowned statesmen involved. "The great ones," Russell stated in 1964, "are stranded on pinnacles of public prestige and welcome an excuse to climb down. An approach from a philosopher, a man with no power, no axe to

[14] *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell: 1944–1969* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), p. 171.

[15] Ronald Clark *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 600.

grind, may afford them such an excuse."[16] Feinberg and Kasrils in their recent review of Russell's involvement in the Cuban missile crisis state:

> While many prominent individuals and peace organizations spoke out forcefully in favor of a negotiated settlement it is clear that Russell's unique status enabled him to play an important role in the crisis.... The fact that Russell's voice was heeded was due to his tireless efforts ever since 1945 to arouse humanity to the dangers of nuclear warfare. The number of people who came to rely on his judgement and activities during this crucial period was considerable.[17]

In 1957 Russell published an open letter to Khrushchev and Eisenhower asking them to forget past differences and to confer on nuclear disarmament. Khrushchev immediately responded; Eisenhower waited two months and then had his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, fashion a reply. Khrushchev then published a rebuttal of Dulles's arguments. Russell closed the debate with another open letter chiding them for their inability to forget past differences and focus on the real problems facing humanity. This debate, which occurred in the pages of the *New Statesman*[18], did not materially further the cause of peace, but it does show that at an early date Khrushchev was open to an approach for peace by Bertrand Russell.

In a private letter Khrushchev sent to Kennedy on 26 October 1962, he made the following reference to Russell:

> We welcome all forces which stand on positions of peace. Consequently, I expressed gratitude to Mr. Bertrand Russell, too, who manifests alarm and concern for the fate of the world, and I readily responded to the Appeal of the Acting Secretary of the United Nations, U Thant.[19]

U Thant, in his *View from the United Nations*, also attributes Khrushchev's change in stance, at least in part, to Russell:

> I am writing at some length on Bertrand Russell's activities regarding the crisis because I felt at the time, and still feel, that Khrushchev's positive reply to my first appeal of October 24 was, at least in part, due to Earl Russell's repeated pleadings to him, and to his congratulating him on "his courageous stand for sanity". (Pp. 171–2)

[16] Russell interviewed in BBC film, "The Life and Times of Bertrand Russell" (London, 1964).

[17] Barry Feinberg and Robert Kasrils, *Bertrand Russell's America: 1945–1970* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), p. 158.

[18] Reprinted as *The Vital Letters of Russell, Krushchev, Dulles* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1958).

[19] U Thant, *View from the U.N.: The Memoirs of U Thant* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978), p. 172.

In *Khrushchev Remembers*, Khrushchev wrote, "We could see that we had to reorient our position swiftly. 'Comrades,' I said, 'we have to look for a dignified way out of this conflict. At the same time, of course, we must make sure that we do not compromise Cuba.'"[20] Russell, a Nobel Prize winner, with the respect of millions of people over the world, gave Khrushchev that out as the only international figure publicly to hail Khrushchev as a "peacemaker". Not only did Russell do so, but he was openly critical of the United States on points to which Khrushchev wanted desperately to direct world attention. If Khrushchev were able to bring world attention to these points, he could step out of the situation gracefully, without losing face. Khrushchev was unsuccessful in persuading U Thant to be publicly critical of the United States, because of Thant's official position. Russell, however, in his letters of the 23rd, 26th, and especially the 28th (in which he wrote, "I think it should be made evident to world opinion"), was giving Khrushchev that important way out. Khrushchev saw this potential in Russell's cables and addressed his vital letter to Russell knowing the added attention it would receive. Khrushchev counted on Russell, with his great fame, to proclaim to the world the Soviet Union's noble "courageous stand for sanity," which in fact Russell tried to do through his press statements and later by publishing *Unarmed Victory*. This is the reason why Kennedy issued his well-publicized response to Russell's telegram. Kennedy would never have responded to Russell had Russell not been achieving world-wide attention for his views after Khrushchev's public reply.

Thus Russell acted as an intermediary in the crisis, allowing Khrushchev an out he otherwise might not have had. It would be difficult to determine what would have happened had Russell not intervened. As Averill Harriman said, "If we deny him an out, then we will escalate this business into a nuclear war." There appears to be ample evidence that Russell's involvement in the Cuban missile crisis was more important than Clark or other commentators have granted. For future biographers of Russell and historians of the missile crisis to ignore his undoubted influence would be a serious mistake in the accurate evaluation of events.

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[20] (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), p. 498.