

Address on the 10th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising

by Bertrand Russell

One of Russell's most memorable addresses was delivered at a meeting, held 9 April 1953 in London, to mark the tenth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Although summarized in The Jewish Chronicle of 17 April 1953 (p. 5), the address has never before appeared in full. It was recorded at the time. The late Countess Russell kindly sent the Archives a cassette copy of the phonograph recording in her possession. It was Dr. S. Roth, Secretary of the British Section of the World Jewish Congress, who invited Russell to speak. In accepting, Russell wrote: "I am certainly glad to have an opportunity of associating myself with efforts to make the world aware of what Jews have suffered and are likely to suffer from wanton persecution" (15 March 1953).

The address is memorable for the intensity of feeling in Russell's statement that he would oppose cruelty as long as he lived. When Russell died, the World Jewish Congress said: "He had a passion for mankind in which nobility of heart and clarity of intellect was combined in one of the greatest humanitarians of all time. The Jewish people will always remember him with love and gratitude. We recall his memorable words at a meeting in London commemorating the martyrs and heroes of the Warsaw ghetto uprising: 'I assure you in heart and soul I am with you in all you stand for.' For us that is his epitaph" (The Times, 4 Feb. 1970).

The reference to the Soviet Government concerns the death of Stalin on 5 March 1953.—K. B.

I FIND MYSELF so moved by what I have already heard tonight that it is really quite difficult for me to muster my thoughts into coherent speech. I have not, perhaps, the same intimate right to mourn the martyrs of Warsaw. I suppose you will feel that I cannot feel it as you do, but I can assure you, with all my heart, that I feel the tragedy most profoundly, and moreover with a feeling from which you are free, and that is the feeling of shame: the feeling of shame that such things happened, and one did not prevent them. One cannot help feeling there should have been a moment, there should have been an act, which could have made things turn differently. And I never can rid myself of the feeling that everything horrible that happens in the world is, in some degree, my responsibility. One ought to have found something to say to mankind, something to do that would have prevented such a horror as you are here to mourn tonight.

I feel the tragedy of human life. It isn't only this or that. We here tonight are dealing with one of the most dreadful things that have happened in human history. But other dreadful things have happened; I am afraid other dreadful things will happen. Mankind have an extraordinary capacity for brutal cruelty. And I think it is the duty of every thinking person, not only, not *only* to feel indignant with cruelty and to wish to stop the perpetrators—that is, of course, essential—but there is something further which I have always felt one ought to be able to do, and that is to discover the roots of cruelty, the roots of persecution, the roots of barbarism in the human soul, what it is that makes people be like that when they might be decent human beings. And that is essentially a scientific problem. It is a problem in what makes people what they are. And I think it's important, and it's not easy, to view horror, and horrible occurrences, not *merely* and *solely* as something about which one feels indignation, but also as a manifestation of disease you may say, as something which it is the duty of a mental physician to cure, to make people not be like that so that they won't want to do that sort of thing. I believe that to be possible, and I believe that to be a duty of every humane person, so far as possible. I don't think punishment by any means is enough. Punishment may be necessary—I'm not denying it—but it doesn't of itself eliminate the sources of cruelty.

I'm old enough to have been already middle-aged when the First World War broke out. I remember the world before 1914. It was a better world than we've lived in since. And I don't think more and more wars are going to make it better. It may be impossible to avoid them, but I don't think they in themselves are going to produce the sort of world where there will not be persecution. I think persecution

comes out of a variety of causes: fear, and greed, and humiliation. There's no doubt that the Germans were worse after their defeat in the First World War than they were before it. The defeat didn't produce moral regeneration; it produced exactly the opposite. And it doesn't, in fact, do people any good, that sort of thing. It may be necessary—it is necessary—but it doesn't in itself produce the sort of world we wish to live in. Now, I believe it is possible for us. I feel a new hope these last weeks, because it looks now (I say it in trepidation for fear that one is mistaken), but it looks as if the Soviet Government, at last, were willing to enter into some kind of friendly relation with the West. And, if that were so, then we should be in a position really to march on towards a better world. It was a terrible thing when it seemed that the Soviet Government was going to turn to anti-Semitism, in addition to all its other faults. Now it seems that that is not so. It seems to have undergone a change of heart—I hope that is real. And I think we ought all to be infinitely ready to believe that it is real. We ought not to be too suspicious. Because if you're suspicious you dry up the source of some budding good impulse that may be there.

I think it's an extraordinary thing that mankind should have these impulses of cruelty. They don't do any good to the person who inflicts the cruelty. They do infinite harm to the victim. But in some sense they do even more harm to the man who inflicts the damage. He is more injured than one is by death or torture or anything. He is degraded from the level of a human being to the level of a brute beast. And I think any decent man would a thousand times rather suffer martyrdom than inflict it. I have not, of course, been in a position to do either, so perhaps you will say I've no right to talk. And I do feel that, especially in the company of those who have suffered persecution; I feel a certain humility; and that you will think that I am talking very easily, that it's very easy for one whose circumstances have always been fortunate, who has always been among the favoured of mankind—that it's very easy to talk in the sort of glib way that you may think I have been talking. But I think that isn't quite true. I have sought, for a long time past, to give every bit of power that I possess, in thought, in feeling, and work, to diminishing the sum of cruelty and persecution and wickedness in the world. And I can assure you with all my heart that that is nearer to my thoughts and wishes than anything else at all. It's a cause to which I have long felt dedicated. I wish I could have done more, but the powers of an individual are limited.

I am very glad indeed to be here tonight, and to be able to express

my most profound sympathy in what you stand for. You no doubt feel it is the sympathy of an outsider. So, of course, it is. But it is the sympathy of one who, everywhere and always, will stand up against any kind of persecution or cruelty. And I will say, at any moment, “No, this is not a thing I can tolerate.” I have said it against my own Government, I have said it against anybody, and I will go on saying it as long as I live. I do not think that one should tolerate oppression. I see it going on all over the world. I see it going on at this moment in South Africa, in another form. I dislike it in all the forms that it can take. And I think we must all try to stand for the rights of human beings, for the rights of man—human rights, human dignity—no matter whether the race, or the minority, for which we are fighting is one to which we belong, or one to which we do not belong. Everybody belongs to some minority, and we ought, I think, all to stand up for unjustly treated minorities, quite independently of whether we belong to them or whether we do not. And that has been a thing that I have endeavoured to make the rule of my life as far as ever I could. And I am only too thankful to be able to be here tonight, and to assure you that, heart and soul, I am with you in all that you stand for and all that you wish for.