

This is Bertrand Russell's last manuscript. Untitled, it was annotated "1967" by Russell, at the age of 95, two or three years before he died. Ray Monk published it first in The Independent of London on the 25th anniversary of the Russell Archives. The essay's politics are uncannily prescient.

The time has come to review my life as a whole, and to ask whether it has served any useful purpose or has been wholly concerned in futility. Unfortunately, no answer is possible for anyone who does not know the future. Modern weapons make it practically certain that the next serious war will exterminate the human race. This is admitted by all competent authorities, and I shall not waste time in proving it. Any man who cares what the future may have in store therefore has to choose between nothingness and conciliation, not once, but throughout future ages until the sun grows cold.

Unfortunately, our politicians are not accustomed to such a choice. However hard they try, their minds inevitably slide back to the courtroom and the criminal world. If, out of kindness, the last man foresees the murder of the last man but one, the whole law-enforcement campaign imagines all the apparatus of police, Scotland Yard, judges and wigs ready to catch and punish him. But this is not how the scene will be. There will be first the death of nearly all the inhabitants of New York or London or Peking or Tokyo, then a gradual extension of deaths to the country, then famine due to failure of trade, and at last gasping, horrifying lonely death in the mountains, and then eternal silence.

If the Great Powers continue their present policies, some such end as this is inevitable. When two or more Powers disagree, what can they do? A can yield to B, or B can yield to A, or they can reach a compromise, or they can fight. If either yields, it is thought pusillanimous: either it loses caste, or, next time, it must fight; or it must secure an ally. Since the number of States is finite, this process must soon come to an end. We have seen all the steps in this development since the end of the Second War. Consider what happened in the Cuba crisis. Both sides were willing to fight, but at the last possible moment Khrushchev's nerve failed and he allowed the world to live till the next crisis. But it turned out that Russia would have preferred death, and Khrushchev fell.

Can we count on this always happening?

What is the present system?

When there is a quarrel, a conference is summoned, each side debates, they reach two compromises, one favoured by one side, the other by the other. If each contains disarmament clauses, each is aware that they may be infringed. Each considers the tiniest chance of infringement a greater misfortune than the end of the human race. And so nothing is done. The powers must learn that *peace is the paramount interest of everybody*. To cause this to be realized by governments should be the supreme aim.

What has been achieved towards this end, and what have I personally contributed?

Publicly, in the relations between states, very little, but still something. Russia has expressed willingness to transform NATO by joining it; but China is a new threat. The Vietnam war seems likely to end in negotiation. Generally, the powers (except the U.S.) show a reluctance to go to war. France is uncertain, but leaves room for hope. At any rate, the stark opposition of Communist and non-Communist is breaking down. If peace can be preserved for the next 10 years, it will be possible to hope.

What can private persons do meanwhile? They can agitate, by pointing out the effects of modern war and the danger of the extinction of Man. They can teach men not to hate peoples other than their own, or to cause themselves to be hated. They can value, and cause others to value, what Man has achieved in art and science. They can emphasize the superiority of co-operation to competition.

Finally, have I done anything to further such ends?

Something perhaps, but sadly little in view of the magnitude of the evil. Some few people in England and the U.S.A. I have encouraged in the expression of liberal views, or have terrified with the knowledge of what modern weapons can do. It is not much, but if everybody did as much this Earth would soon be a paradise. Consider for a moment what our planet is and what it might be. At present, for most, there is toil and hunger, constant danger, more hatred than love. There could be a happy world, where co-operation was more in evidence than competition, and monotonous work is done by machines, where what is lovely in nature is not destroyed to make room for hideous machines whose sole business is to kill, and where to promote joy is more respected than to produce mountains of corpses. Do not say this is impossible: it is not. It waits only for men to desire it more than the infliction of torture.

There is an artist imprisoned in each one of us. Let him loose to spread joy everywhere.