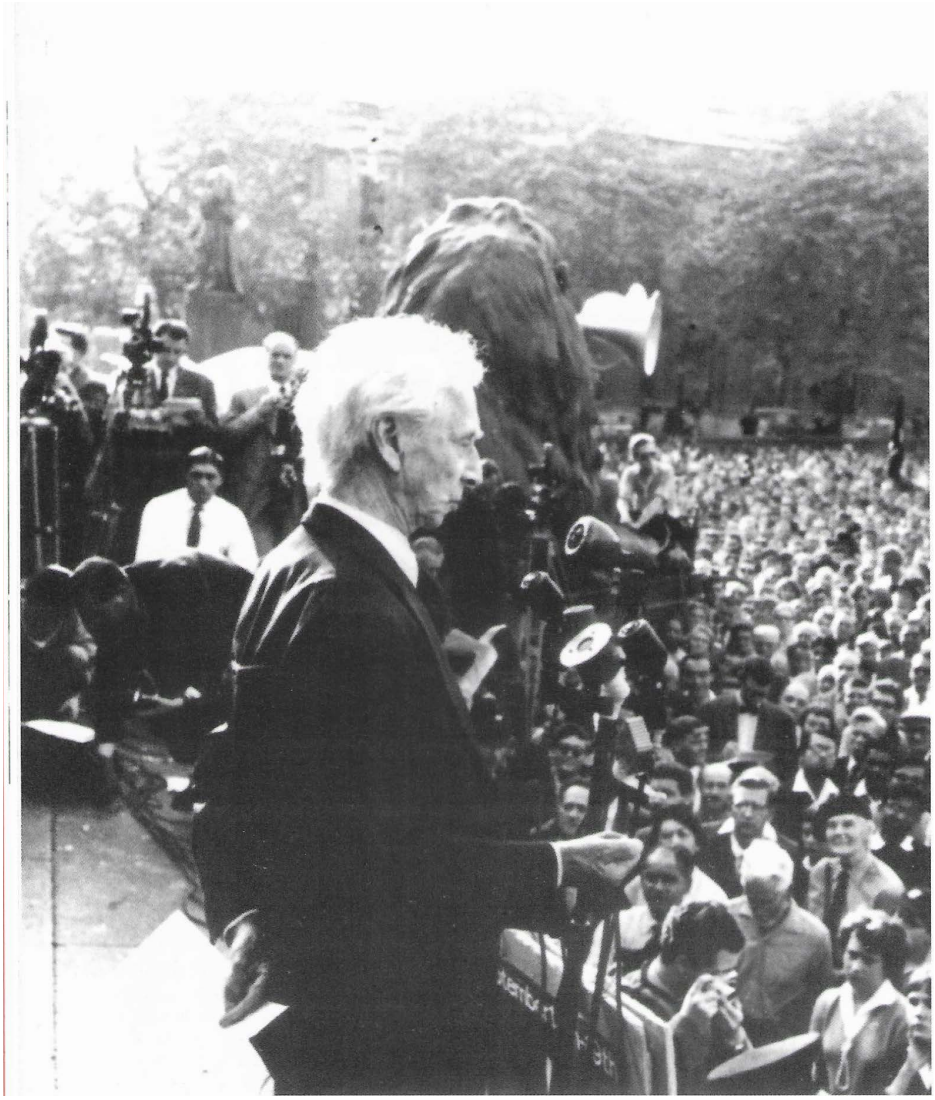
Bertrand Russell's Role in the Cuban Missile Crisis

Victoria Martin

'An attack on the United States with 10,000 megatons would lead to the death of essentially all of the American people and to the destruction of the nation.' 'In 1960 President Kennedy mentioned 30,000 megatons as the size of the world's stockpile of nuclear weapons.'[1]

In the autumn of 1962 the world came close to seeing these frightening statistics become reality when the two great superpowers of the Cold War, turned a dispute over the government of Cuba into a dangerous game of 'chicken', with neither side willing to back down and lose face. However, the crisis was resolved and many people attributed at least some of this to the peace making efforts of the 90-year-old Bertrand Russell.

Russell was well respected by many eminent people and on his ninetieth birthday, 'tributes poured in: telegrams from Khrushchev, Tito, Nkrumah, Nehru and U Thant.'[2] He had previously been known for his work in mathematics and philosophy but later became well-known for his Liberal views and political opinions. Most people saw him as an aristocratic intellectual but when he began his campaign for Nuclear Disarmament his rebellious side shone through, much as it had done in the First World War, when he had gone to prison for his anti-war views. He was also seen in a less complimentary light by many on the right wing, and conversely by some on the left. The right wing saw him as a Communist because of his respect for Khrushchev, despite his earlier criticisms of Bolshevism. In the West at this time views tended to be divided and simplified into Capitalist or Communist. So, although Russell had repeatedly tried to explain that, in this particular circumstance only, was his sympathy with the Soviets, he was still seen as



(previous page) Bertrand Russell, Edith Russell, and Ralph Schoenman leading the Hiroshima Vigil march from the Cenotaph to Hyde Park, 1961.

(left) Bertrand Russell speaking at an anti-nuclear demonstration organised by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), in Trafalgar Square on September 20th, 1959.
Both pictures reproduced courtesy of the Bertrand Russell archives, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Ont., Canada.

'nothing but a tool of the far left' by the American press. On the other hand, many of the New Left were equally distrustful of Russell because of his previous anti-Bolshevik views, expressed in his book *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism,* and comments such as 'the Bolsheviks had destroyed all beauty'.[3] In the oversimplified view of 'us against them' Russell fitted in with neither side and so was viewed with suspicion from both left and right.

As a member of a scientific Pressure group called Pugwash, and as ex-president of CND and leader of the Committee of 100, he had already devoted considerable time and energy to the fight for disarmament. One of the main successes of the peace movement was the Aldermaston marches, which had up to 60,000 participants at their height in the early 1960s. Russell not only lent the weight of his name, as a well-respected philosopher and a member of the House of Lords, he also took a very active role in the campaign. On 6th August 1961, the anniversary of the Hiroshima bomb, Russell was arrested at the age of 89 for inciting the public to civil disobedience and was sentenced to a week's imprisonment. This outraged the public and made the government look ridiculous, much to the satisfaction of Russell. Ray Monk's description of Russell as 'a white-haired prophet sitting with a resolute expression on his face among a vast throng of young, idealistic followers', describes well the way that many campaigners saw Russell.[4] He was an icon for youth: a role model of dignified but determined protest.

This was not always the case, however, as he grew steadily more hysterical in his accusations, and petty in his dealings with people. An example of this is his much-quoted statement that Kennedy and Macmillan were 'much more wicked than Hitler'[5] which, whilst intended for shock value rather than as an actual viewpoint, did little to help the cause. Russell tended to keep people round him who would flatter his ego, particularly during his later years and this may have led to him feeling that his political role was greater than it in fact was. He spent an increasing amount of time with people like Schoenman, who credited him with a far greater influence in world affairs than was actually the case and far less time with some of his older friends, who were not afraid to tell him honestly what they thought. This led to his attitudes growing steadily more extreme, particularly towards America. There was also an increased sense of urgency in his speeches and actions and Russell seemed desperate to do something to save the world from self-destruction, even if it meant being denounced as a hysterical and senile fool. To many people, this hysterical attitude in his later years was detrimental to the movement and diminishes the importance of his role in the Cuban missile crisis. During

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the thirteen-day-long events in October 1962, however there seemed little groups like CND could do, with no time to organise marches and protests they could only stand back and watch along with the rest of the world. Russell, on the other hand, felt that 'there are things which a private individual can do which are more difficult for a Minister or an organisation,'[6] and therefore set about trying to act as peacemaker.

Even before the start of the Missile crisis, Russell had been trying to warn the public of the danger likely to erupt in Cuba but the press had refused to print his outcries. This was perhaps due to their shrill tone, intended to shock, and their lack of support for such statements as 'YOU ARE ABOUT TO DIE... because rich Americans dislike the government that Cubans prefer, and have used their wealth to spread lies about it.'[7] Russell turned to the Cuban Embassy to print this leaflet, fuelling a few people's suspicions that he was in the pay of the Cuban government. What little the press did print of Russell's statements 'was being totally distorted', according to Russell. Despite the lack of publicity for his actions, Russell continued to bombard the Heads of State with telegrams and letters. To Khrushchev his messages were sympathetic, urging him not to 'be provoked by the unjustifiable action of the United States'. To Kennedy his messages were harsh and critical, telling him that 'civilised man condemns it' and begging him to 'end this madness'.[8]

Then Khrushchev sent a letter to Russell, which was to prove a turning point in the crisis. Suddenly, the press was immensely interested in Russell, and reporters gathered at his home in Wales. As Russell wryly notes, 'they suddenly discovered I had been rather concerned about the crisis in Cuba'. The letter, printed in the press before Russell himself received it, contained a suggestion of a 'top-level meeting' and was written in a generally conciliatory tone, which led Russell to believe it to be 'the first indication of sanity on the part of the possible belligerents'.[9] Russell was not the only one to see this as a crucial letter and the Americans were quick to pick up on it, as a signal of Khrushchev wishing to back out of the brinkmanship he and Kennedy were heading for, as can be seen in this excerpt from a telegram:

> I had a talk this evening with Averell Harriman. He made the following points:
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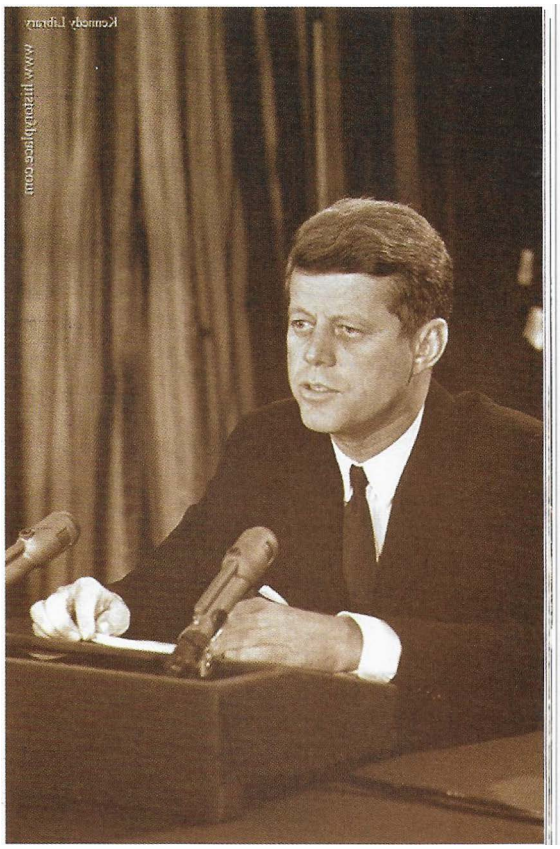
> 1 Khrushchev, he said, is sending us desperate signals to get us to help him off the hook.
>
> 2 The signals are (1) the instructions to the Soviet ships to change their course; (2) the message to Bertrand Russell... If we act shrewdly and speedily, we can bail Khrushchev out and discredit the tough guys round him...
>
> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.
> October 24, 1962. [10]

The Americans clearly viewed this letter as important but, as Monk points out, 'Khrushchev would have found some other opportunity to make this clear.'[11] The letter seems very much aimed at the world in general, rather than at Russell in particular. This is shown when Khrushchev says, 'what is needed now is...the efforts of all states, all peoples and all segments of society.' He is appealing to the world, not just to Russell. The fact that he published the letter before Russell had even seen it suggests he was just a convenient message carrier. On the other hand, Khrushchev does say he 'expressed gratitude to Mr Bertrand Russell'. U Thant, the United Nations Secretary General, also expressed his gratitude and, according to Caroline Moorehead, 'wrote in his memoirs that Khrushchev's conciliatory behaviour was, to some extent, due to "Earl Russell's repeated pleadings to him, and congratulating him on this courageous stand for sanity".'[12]

Historians have differed in the extent to which they credit Russell with involvement in the crisis. At one end is the view of B. Feinberg and R. Kasrils that 'the number of people who came to rely on his judgement and activities during this crucial period was considerable'. They attribute this to Russell's 'tireless efforts ever since 1945 to arouse humanity to the dangers of nuclear warfare'. At the other end of the spectrum is the view held by Ronald Clark that 'there is no evidence to suggest that Russell's intervention affected the course of events', or the view of Alan Ryan who believes 'one cannot help but sympathize with Kennedy's retort that Russell's "attention might well be directed at the burglars rather than to those who have caught the burglars".' Caroline Moorehead suggests that this difference of opinion is because 'it has become fashionable to deny Russell any influence at all'.[13] This view seems reasonably well supported because a lot of praise was given to Russell immediately after the crisis but, as events faded in people's minds, so too did Russell's involvement.



After reviewing aerial photos indicating the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba, the President speaks to the nation on TV, October 22, 1962, and reports "unmistakable evidence...of offensive missile sites now in preparation...to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere...It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba...as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union."
U.S. National Archives / The History Place

Sites of Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962
John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

The level of public interest in Russell's role shows that many people did believe he had a role to play, although they differ vastly in exactly what this role was. On the one hand 'telegrams and letters poured in, bringing praise from people convinced that Russell had done something to save them from a nuclear war.' On the other hand, 'attacks on him in the American press... rose to new heights of vituperation.'[14] The public seemed divided over his role in the crisis but, whether saviour or agitator, the fact that there was argument over the nature of his involvement shows that at least they agreed that he had played a part.

Immediately after the crisis Russell was seen as a hero. A procession was held for him at his home in Wales that was led by 'a little boy holding a banner aloft that proclaimed, "Thanks to Bert, We're still unhurt".' His family also encouraged him to believe that his role was important; 'Lucy, like many of those close to him, shared and bolstered Russell's exaggerated sense of the part he had played in the negotiations.' Schoenman also credited Russell with more importance than he actually had which, despite Russell claiming to see through it, contributed to what Ray Monk describes as 'the notoriously large ego' of Russell.

Monk even goes so far as to suggest that Russell's vanity may have been partly to blame for his one-sided approach to the Cuban crisis, when he says 'by the Cuban Ambassador and the Russian premier he was treated as an important and influential spokesman of world opinion; by Kennedy, on the other hand, he was treated as an irrelevance; and by Harold Macmillan he was snubbed altogether.'[15] This implies that Russell may have treated Khrushchev with more respect because he flattered him and made him feel important. Russell always defended his favouring of the Soviets by saying that he would always support the less bellicose side but, as Monk points out, the Cubans were themselves bellicose in this situation. Castro taunted Kennedy with the fact that they could now defend themselves against an American invasion, but Russell seemed conveniently to ignore this.

Russell himself seemed to change his mind about the extent of his role. Clark claims that 'he himself later said "I do not consider that I have altered the course of history by one hair's breadth" whereas in *Unarmed Victory,* Russell says 'many people sent letters to the heads of state involved. I had the good luck to be answered, and at considerable length', which suggests he felt his role was an influential one. It seems that at the time Russell was happy to revel in the glory, and with so many people flattering his ego by thanking him for saving the world, it is hardly surprising that he did not rush to deny it. Historians are not agreed as to what Russell felt his role was. Ray Monk believes that 'despite protestations to the contrary, Russell clearly believed that his telegrams and statements had played an important part in averting catastrophe', and Caroline Moorehead said, 'Russell honestly did believe that... his standing on the world stage was such that its leaders would listen'. Alan Ryan, however, believes that 'Russell knew his role in the episode was almost accidental'.[16]

To try to define someone's role in an event is a difficult task

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John F. Kennedy meets with Nikita Khruchchev in Vienna, May, 1961.
John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

because there are so many factors involved, both long term and short term. It seems impossible to say to what extent Russell influenced events because we will never know what went on in the heads of the leaders of the world at this time. Russell may well have been a political pawn and a message-carrier, used as a go-between, or he may have genuinely influenced their decisions. In the long term, Russell's role was one of political activist, trying to warn the world of its dangerous and foolish race towards self-destruction. In the short term, his role was more confusing because, whilst being against nuclear arms, he actually defended Cuba's right to own them during the crisis. These two viewpoints may seem incongruous but Russell maintained that, in this situation, the main objective was to stop the crisis escalating. Whether or not Russell played a decisive role, we will probably never know for certain but it is clear that at the very least he 'may have reminded someone that civilization is no small thing'.[17]

John Kennedy meeting with Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna, June, 1961.
National Park Service

FURTHER READING

For more detailed information about Russell's life, Russell's four autobiographical volumes, *My Philosophical Development* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959) and *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell* (3 vols, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967, 1968, 1969).

Other sources of biographical information include Ronald Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: J. Cape, 1975), A.D. Irvine (ed.), *Bertrand Russell: Critical Assessments,* Vol. 1, (London: Routledge, 1998), and Ray Monk, *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude* (London: J. Cape, 1996).

www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~bertrand/index.html

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4. Ray Monk, *Bertrand Russell, the Ghost of Madness,* pp.405,415
5. *Autobiography,* Vol 111, p.144.
6. Bertrand Russell, *Unarmed Victory,* p.10
7. Leaflet printed by the Cuban Embassy, reproduced in *Unarmed victory,* p.32
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12. Letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy. From the USA State Archives 1961-63, vol_XI 76-100 Briefing Papers & Memo series. www.state.gov/www/about-state/history/volume_vi/exchanges.html; *Unarmed Victory,* p.37; Caroline Moorehead, pp. 516-17.
13. B. Feinberg & R. Kasrils, *Bertrand Russell's America,* p.158; R. Clark, *Bertrand Russell and his World,* p.1 10; A.Ryan, *Bertrand Russell: a political life,* p.201: Moorehead, p.517.
14. Moorehead, p.517.
15. Monk, pp.449, 437,448.
16. Monk, p.44; Moorehead, p.514; Ryan, p.202.
17. *Daily Mail,* nd., quoted Moorehead, p.516.

Victoria Martin is a Sixth Former at Rednock School in Gloucestershire, studying History, Mathematics, Further Mathematics and Physics for A level. She hopes to go on to Hertford College, Oxford, in October to read PPE. This article arose from her A level studies. Her interest in Bertrand Russell was originally inspired by her own interest in mathematics.