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A reprint of
chapter 12 from
**WHICH WAY
TO PEACE?**
by
Bertrand Russell

IN order that *Which Way to Peace?* may be assured the widest possible circulation, we have taken the unusual course of arranging this special printing of one of its important chapters for free distribution.

It is earnestly hoped that a reading of this chapter will arouse an interest in the whole book. The list of contents printed overleaf indicates the width of its scope and the importance of its implications.

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WHICH WAY TO PEACE?

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Individual Pacifism



IN THE FOLLOWING CHAPTER I SHALL CONSIDER what can be done by an individual who accepts the views as to national policy which we have now arrived at. Assuming that you wish your own country to disarm even if no other great country does so, and to renounce war though the rest of the world remains warlike, what can you do personally towards bringing about some approximation to this policy? Clearly it is worth while to make great efforts. When a man's income is jeopardised, he makes great exertions to save it; a war will almost certainly deprive you of your income, whether earned or unearned. If one of your children has a dangerous illness, you take great pains and spend anything that you can afford in order that a cure may be effected; war will be a very dangerous illness of all your children at once. When a disaster

occurs, such as an explosion in a colliery, people's sympathies are aroused, and steps are taken to mitigate the sufferings of the widows and orphans ; but a great war will be comparable to hundreds of thousands of such disasters. Hospitals are kept up by voluntary contributions, but much larger contributions are made, in the form of income tax, to preparations for inflicting on a vast scale just such sufferings as hospitals exist to prevent. Europe spends vast sums on educating children, and other vast sums on preparations to kill them. If you have any care for your own interests, any sympathy with others, or any desire for the preservation of civilised society, you will do what you can to prevent war.

But can the individual do anything ? you may ask. The forces against which you have to contend are organised and colossal ; the holders of power are remote, and work largely in secret ; governments elected to do some one definite thing proceed at once to do the exact contrary. The consequence is a widespread feeling of despairing impotence. Every canvasser knows the voter who says : Why should I vote for either party, since each is sure to betray its followers ?

Overwhelming popular feeling can, however, overcome all the inertia of politicians. The anti-slavery movement was a case in point. In the

accounts of the Congress of Vienna, it is astonishing to find cynical old Tories such as Castlereagh compelled to insist on abolition of the Slave Trade, and even, to the amazement of the other cynics with whom they were negotiating, prepared to offer other nations substantial material advantages in return for co-operation in this purely idealistic purpose. The movement was victorious and the Slave Trade ceased.

There is at present in England an overwhelming popular feeling in favour of peace, and there is no reason why this feeling should be impotent. It has suffered hitherto from a mistaken policy, namely, the policy of collective security. But this policy has broken down, and something more drastic is obviously needed. It must be a policy so simple that every man and woman can understand it, and that no set of politicians can pretend to carry it out when they are secretly defeating it. And it must be a policy which goes direct to the goal. The purpose is peace, and the way to achieve it is to say : *We will not fight.*

The first step towards overcoming the sense of individual impotence is combination. Organisations pledged to complete pacifism exist ; their membership is rapidly growing, and an isolated individual who joins them will find himself no longer isolated.

He will realise that he need not be a passive victim, but can, in union with others, exert an influence which may change the policy of his country and transform the history of the world.

The man who believes that no good can come of war should not only try to prevent his country from fighting, but should himself refuse to fight even when his Government calls upon him to do so. Some might deny this. They might say : If war came, I should regret it, but I should still wish to play a citizen's part, and should refuse to stand aside while others were suffering in my defence. In the present chapter, I shall consider the arguments in favour of this view, and give my reasons for disagreeing with it.

Various arguments may be adduced in favour of the view that, however disastrous war may be, every citizen should be willing to fight when war has broken out. In the first place, since there will certainly be conscription, it will be impossible to refuse to fight without breaking the law, and it may be argued that the law should always be obeyed, even when it is bad. It must, I think, be admitted that respect for the law is a very important element in civilised life, and that it is a grave matter to diminish it. But it is clear that obedience to law, like every other principle derived from arguments

of general utility, must have its limits. I know well that this is a dangerous doctrine, and that the claim to set up one's own individual judgment in defiance of legally constituted authority leads logically to anarchy. At the same time, almost all great advances have involved illegality. The early Christians broke the law ; Galileo broke the law ; the French revolutionaries broke the law ; early trade unionists broke the law. The instances are so numerous and so important that no one can maintain an absolute principle of obedience to constituted authority. Perhaps it will be said that it may sometimes be justifiable to break the law when it is held that the form of government should be changed, for example, when believers in democracy rebel against an absolute monarch, or—shall we add ?—when believers in Fascism rebel against a democracy ; but that when the form of government is approved there can be no justification for illegal resistance. I do not myself accept this view : if I had been Galileo, I would have proclaimed my discoveries whatever government had forbidden me to do so. But in any case it is not applicable to the war resister. If he holds, as I do, that the ultimate cure for war is an international government, he is not bound, according to the above principle, to obey a national government in such a matter as

war, which involves its external relations. I do not think, however, that any general principles can settle this question. We must weigh the evils of war against the evil of disobedience to law, and decide on which side the balance lies.

A few words about the conscientious objectors in the last war may help to clear up the problem. It must be admitted that they were few, that they had no influence on the course of events, and that they failed very completely to win support in public opinion. They were few, partly because mass suggestion is hard to resist, and partly because most people found prison with obloquy more unpleasant than the trenches with glory. They failed to affect public opinion because they were thought to be shirkers : in spite of all evidence to the contrary, facing death at the front was thought to require more courage than facing disgrace in prison. It is true that, after the war had been over for some years, public opinion in Labour circles changed ; former conscientious objectors were elected to Parliament, and some even became members of the Government. But while the war lasted the general view was that the Government treated conscientious objectors far too leniently.

Can it be said that they achieved anything ? In the first place, such of them as did not change their

opinions were qualified to form the nucleus of a future and larger organisation of war resisters. This may prove very important. Apart from that, I can only report what I felt myself. The war, it seemed to me, was folly, and every bit of energy that could be diverted from the business of killing was so much to the good. This was a reason, not only for oneself refusing to kill, but also for providing as much innocent work as possible. Policemen, who might otherwise have been drafted into the Army, were kept busy making inaccurate reports of pacifist speeches for the benefit of Scotland Yard ; prison officials were kept from the front by the need of guarding conscientious objectors ; lawyers and lawyers' clerks were occupied with their misdeeds. In one way or another, quite a number of people were prevented from engaging in the official business of killing each other.

War resistance in the next war is likely to be a very different matter. We may assume that there will be conscription from the first, not only for military duties, or only for men, but for all work demanded by the needs of the war, and for all adults, both male and female. We may also assume that, unless the war resisters are very numerous, they will not again escape the death penalty. In the last war, Parliament, in enacting conscription, was led to suppose that war resisters were

not being made liable to the death penalty. This was false, and a number were condemned to death, but reprieved by the personal intervention of Mr. Asquith, then still Prime Minister.¹ It was a near thing, and they are not likely to have such luck next time. I think no man should now pledge himself to refuse war service unless he is confident that he will have the courage to let himself be shot as a traitor. Those who refuse civilian war work will, of course, not be treated so harshly, at least if they are women. But if they are not in prison they are likely to suffer severely from mob violence.

Is it worth while to incur all this? Various reasons may be urged to prove that it is not.

It must, I think, be admitted that, when once war has broken out, war resistance will have almost no effect upon the course of events, unless it is much more widespread than at present seems likely to the authorities. If, as we have seen reason to

¹ Under the Military Service Acts of 1916, a man was not liable to any penalty for mere refusal to join the Army, but he was taken by force to barracks, and, if he then disobeyed military orders, he was court-martialled like any other soldier. Disobedience in face of the enemy is punishable with death, and therefore some of those conscientious objectors who had been taken to France were sentenced to be shot, but the sentence was not carried out owing to the Prime Minister's intervention.

suppose, the essential fighting is in the air, it will not depend upon vast masses of men. It will probably end before new recruits can be employed. Refusal of war work, therefore, it may be said, though it will anger the Government, is not likely to do much more.

To this argument the only answer is that, when once war has begun, *no* course of action by individuals does any good, except to demand peace; and even that will be made almost impossible by preventing meetings, dissolving pacifist organisations, and so on. The important thing that individuals can do is to influence government policy, and to undertake war resistance is the most effective way in which a pacifist can exert influence.

The problems we are considering do not, of course, arise for those who, on religious grounds, believe that all participation in war is wicked. For them it is not necessary to weigh pros and cons, since they enjoy a certainty which I envy them, but cannot share. I am very glad that such men exist; what pacifism owes, more especially, to the Society of Friends, is immeasurable. But although I may arrive at the same practical conclusion, I cannot reach it by so short a road. What is right and what is wrong depends, as I believe, upon the consequences of actions, in so far as they can be

foreseen ; I cannot say simply "War is wicked", but only "Modern war is practically certain to have worse consequences than even the most unjust peace". And if I am to argue in favour of war resistance, I must try to show that it is likely to do good.

Against war resistance organised in advance, it may be urged that, if it becomes common in any one country, it is a source of military weakness, and therefore makes that country more likely to be attacked. No doubt in certain circumstances military weakness on one side may precipitate a war. It will be remembered that, in July 1914, Sir Edward (afterwards Lord) Carson and F. E. Smith (afterwards Lord Birkenhead) were engaged in promoting mutiny in the British Army and in buying arms from Germany for purposes of high treason ; and it was said that this circumstance encouraged the Kaiser in thinking the moment a good one for war. But all such arguments rest upon the naive assumption that the whole responsibility for a war is on one side. In fact, wars occur when what are considered vital interests are at stake, and each side thinks it can win. Whatever weakens one side diminishes its will to war as much as it increases that on the other side ; on the balance, therefore, it has no more tendency towards

war than towards peace. The fallacy is just the same as is involved in the contention that we shall make peace more secure by increasing our armaments.

What is virtually the same argument may be presented in a slightly different form. Pacifism, it may be said, is likely to be commonest in the best countries, and therefore to increase the relative power of the worst. Countries in which there is a dictatorship do not allow pacifist propaganda, and make short work of such few war resisters as have the courage of their convictions. We, who pride ourselves on our freedom, are misusing it—so it may be said—by a propaganda which, if successful, will put us at the mercy of more ruthless governments. The answer to this argument has been given in previous chapters. A great modern war, even if we are victorious, is almost certain to involve loss of those liberties which we shall be supposed to be defending, and to introduce, through terror and disorder, a military tyranny probably worse than the worst now existing, since the war which will have produced it will be worse than the late war. After the next war, the only men capable of building up anything good will probably be those who, through profound pacifist conviction, have escaped the contagion of war hysteria. The more numerous

such men are in any one country, the more hope there is that it may, in time, again build up some tolerable civilization.

The argument that the spread of pacifism in the more liberal countries should be opposed, because it may lead to the victory of aggressive reactionaries, suffers from the fallacy of all arguments for war in defence of liberal ideals : it assumes that, if we are victorious, we shall secure the objects for which we shall have fought. But war is as destructive of ideals as it is of life and property. The important thing is not to "win", but to diminish the extent and duration of the war by every possible means. Every person who refuses to take part is so much to the good. And if pacifism on either side could make the war shorter, that would be a greater service to mankind than the victory of even the most righteous cause.

In favour of the refusal to take part in war, for those who accept the argument of previous chapters, the reasons are overwhelming.

To the ordinary man or woman, it seems a hopeless task to influence the policy of the Government. The drift towards war is observed in a mood of despairing apathy, but is thought to be as inescapable as bad weather. Recently when I was in a cinema, a bomber was being shown in a news film,

and the voice of the commentator said : "If we must be bombed, and it seems we must, we may as well be bombed by an up-to-date machine". No one showed either pain or pleasure. Patriotic emotion was absent, but so, apparently, was the instinct of self-preservation. This apathy can only be cured if each individual who does not wish his children gassed, his city laid in ruins, his country devastated, and the civilisation of Western Europe wiped out, can be shown something definite to do about it. There is one very simple and very definite thing to be done : to join the body of men and women pledged to abstain from fighting and from war work, and to support whatever efforts they may collectively make to keep their country out of war. Such an action by one man or one woman will not have much effect, it is true ; but if it were taken by a million men and women, it would begin to influence policy, and if it were taken by several millions it would become an irresistible argument for the preservation of peace. War is an act of the organised community, and the organised community can prevent it. I believe that, if once the paralysing sense of impotence were removed, the desire for peace in Great Britain would soon express itself in such a form that no government could go against it. But to express the desire

for peace effectively, it is essential to show that, whatever the nominal issue, you will oppose any and every war that the folly of governments may be tempted to provoke. Nothing less drastic can be expected to stand firm against the excitement which the approach of war invariably produces.

The policy of unconditional resistance to war has the merit that, being simple and uncompromising, it can be held with fervour. If you are content to dislike war, while admitting that it may at any moment become unavoidable, you are compelled, in each crisis, to weigh pros and cons ; you will be informed of all the pros by every kind of public propaganda, while the cons will be concealed except from those who have some means of obtaining inside knowledge. If you are not persuaded, on any given occasion, that war is worth while, you will have to argue as to the particular issues, and, though you will probably be right, you will be unable to ascertain the facts which would prove you to be so, whereas your opponent will have been supplied by his newspaper with masses of "facts" to establish the case for war. In this way the great majority of the Labour Party were induced to take up a warlike attitude about Abyssinia ; they thought they were acting in defence of "collective security", but what was really at stake was British imperial interests.

Foreign policy, especially British foreign policy, is very complex, and only a few people know all the relevant facts. It is easy for those few to present an issue in such a way as to secure the support of public opinion, even when they would get almost no support if all the facts were set forth impartially. If the friends of peace are to be politically effective, they must be unwilling to listen to arguments tending to show that this war is unlike all other wars, that all the guilt is on the other side, or that the millennium will come if our side is victorious. These things have always been said at the outbreak of a war, and have always been false. They will be said next time, and will still be false ; but censorship and propaganda will make it difficult to prove their falsehood at the moment. The only wise course, therefore, is to be prepared in advance by an absolute renunciation of war.

No suggested alternative gives the individual much chance of acting so as to make war less likely. The only way in which a person who has no exceptional advantages can be politically effective is by joining an organisation intended to further objects which he thinks important. If you vote at a general election, you do something to give effect to the policy of the party for which you vote ; but you cannot do much for peace in this way. Elections

are rare, and war may come any day. All three parties favour war in certain circumstances. Even if the party you support is successful, its policy in office is likely to be very different from that which it professed during the election ; of this the present Government has given a notable example in connection with Abyssinia. Moreover new issues arise, as to which nothing has been said when the Government secured the support of the country. For all these reasons the vote does not, in itself, give the ordinary citizen any effective control over foreign policy, unless he can secure the victory of some very simple and very radical policy, to be carried into effect by men who are known to be strongly in favour of it. If—to take a hypothesis—a new party, pledged to the gradual abolition of our armed forces, were to secure a majority, those who had voted for it would have some reason to hope that their vote would prove effective.

At this point, however, we come up against what I must admit to be a grave difficulty. No one can suppose that the Army, Navy and Air Force would quietly permit themselves to be disbanded. If the absolute pacifists could secure a parliamentary majority, one must expect, if they were unwise enough to be sudden and uncompromising, that a militarist *coup d'état* would dethrone Parliament.

If the pacifists wished to achieve their national objects quickly, therefore, they would have to begin with a civil war ; and if they were victorious, there would be not much left of their pacifism at the end. Moreover, it is scarcely likely that they would be victorious. Pacifism, by its very nature, cannot win by force, but must rely upon persuasion, and must persuade much more than a bare majority before it can carry its full policy into effect.

It follows from these considerations that pacifism, so far as the near future is concerned, must be individual, and must not expect to capture the State. It cannot capture the State except by such an overwhelming change in public opinion that a military dictatorship would be not politically feasible. In the meantime, pacifists must have their own principles, but must not expect to force them upon the more bellicose elements in the community. What they can expect to achieve meantime, in the political sphere, is to make public opinion more sceptical of the value of war and armaments, to stimulate resistance to increases in the armed forces, and to make it clear that, in the event of war, the Government will have to face a large amount of passive resistance. The effect might be sufficient to lead to the preservation of neutrality, and would almost certainly promote a more peaceable policy than

would be adopted if public opinion were bellicose.

Resistance to armaments is an important element in any policy designed to preserve peace, but is illogical so long as it is held that there are wars which ought to be fought. It is not compatible, for example, with upholding the Covenant of the League. This is an important merit of the complete pacifist position. Armaments use up public money which might be spent in useful ways, and create vested interests in the armament industry which make improvements in the international atmosphere more difficult, and sometimes, by intrigue, actually cause the failure of disarmament conferences. Nevertheless, so long as war is contemplated, armaments are necessary. Only the complete pacifist can oppose them without inconsistency.

The movement in favour of war resistance is not to be viewed primarily as political, but rather as a matter of personal conviction, like religion. It may spread fast enough to keep Great Britain neutral in the next war ; if it does, we may hope, without excessive optimism, that it will afterwards, when the next war has given its terrible object-lesson, spread to the whole civilised world. It may, on the other hand, end in failure. The pacifist will have a double portion of suffering in the next war : enemy bombs

will not spare him, and he will be an outcast among his own people. It may be that pacifists in considerable numbers will suffer the death penalty ; it is practically certain that, unless they are very numerous, a large proportion of them will be in prison throughout the war. But they will know that they are doing nothing to increase the horror. Those who support war, as it has become, support deadly attacks upon defenceless civilians, not in the hope of thereby saving the lives of civilians at home, but merely in order to keep the score even. To be free from responsibility for this vast atrocity is worth much in the way of obloquy and persecution. And if we believe, as most of us do, that somehow civilisation will revive, it is a source of strength to be able to believe that we have found the way that must be taken. The forces for war are immensely powerful, and to overcome them something more than politics will be needed. The world will need a widespread change of individual outlook, which cannot be achieved by any difficult, complicated, or partial policy, but only by a resolute belief, as strong as the passions that make for war, and appealing to feelings as deeply rooted in human nature.

The view that the situation is hopeless, and that Western civilisation is inexorably doomed to

self-destruction, is one which I cannot accept. On the contrary, I believe that if the friends of peace in Great Britain act boldly and energetically and quickly, they may save their own country from the Great Disaster ; and that the same is true of every other country where there is still a measure of personal liberty. But I do not think that this result can now be achieved by the ordinary traditional methods of politics ; for that the time is gone by. What is needed now is action by individuals, in unison, inspired by reason and passion intimately combined. The best passions to which, in the past, those who waged defensive war were able to appeal—love of home, the desire to protect one's children, the wish to preserve, for civilisation, the work of one's country and whatever has been good in the national traditions—all these, to those who have understood modern war, can no longer be invoked to sanctify even the most righteous conflict ; they can be invoked only in favour of peace. The defence of what we value may be difficult, it may have become in part impossible, but in so far as it is possible it is possible only through peace. Of the things that make life tolerable to a lover of peace, none are likely to survive on either side in a great war between technically efficient States. A brutalised and much diminished population, mad with

hunger and fear, and kept from anarchy only by a military tyranny more extreme than any yet known ; the disappearance of the arts and sciences, except as subsidiary to war ; the extinction of affection and trust and all voluntary co-operation ; the sudden descent into an ancient world of superstition and terror—these are the effects to be expected, on the victorious side as on that of the vanquished. If I am right in this—and the reasons which I have set forth, on the basis of official and expert pronouncements, are overwhelming—the duty of every friend of mankind, of every man who cares for any aspect of civilised life, of every patriot, and of every parent who desires the survival of his children, is simple and clear :

TO ABSTAIN FROM FIGHTING, AND FROM ALL VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION IN WAR BETWEEN CIVILISED STATES ; TO USE EVERY EFFORT TO PERSUADE OTHERS TO DO LIKEWISE ; TO BRING ALL POSSIBLE INFLUENCE TO BEAR TO PREVENT THE PARTICIPATION OF HIS COUNTRY IN WAR ; AND, WITHIN THE LIMITS OF HIS CAPACITY, TO AIM AT SIMILAR RESULTS IN OTHER COUNTRIES ALSO.

The argument by which this conclusion has been reached has appealed only to common sense and common humanity, not to any abstract ethical principle; nor do I trouble to examine whether so drastic a policy is desirable at all times. I am concerned with the present time and the present prospect of disaster. To secure permanent peace will require great changes, economic as well as political, and the time for that will come if the present peril can be averted. But at this dangerous moment only an immediate policy can hope to succeed.

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