

## ARTICLE INFORMATION

Atlantic Monthly

(August):266-274 1915

Russell, Bertrand

War and non-resistance

## WAR AND NON-RESISTANCE

BY BERTRAND RUSSELL

### I

THE principle that it is always wrong to employ force against another human being has been held in its extreme form by Quakers and by Tolstōi, but has been rejected by the great majority of mankind as inconsistent with the existence of civilized society. But I think that the occasions where forcible resistance is the best course are much fewer than is generally believed, and that some very great and important advances in civilization might be made if this were more widely recognized. The so-called 'right of self-defense,' in particular, seems to have only a very limited sphere of application, and to be often supported by arguments involving both mistakes as to political questions and a wrong conception of the best type of character.

No one who holds that human conduct ought to be such as to promote certain ends, no matter what ends may be selected, will expect any absolute hard-and-fast rules of conduct to which no possible exception can be found. Not to lie, not to steal, not to murder, are very good precepts for ordinary cases: it may be, in view of the likelihood of biased judgments, that most men will act better if they always follow these precepts unquestioningly than if they consider each case on its merits. Nevertheless, it is obvious that there are cases where lying and stealing are justifiable, and the same must be said of murder by those who hold that some wars are righteous. Tolstōi does

not judge conduct by its consequences: he considers actions inherently right or wrong. This makes it possible for him to say that no use of force is ever right. But if we judge conduct, as I think we ought, by its power of promoting what we consider a good life or a good society, we cannot expect such simplicity in our moral precepts, and we must expect all of them to be subject to exceptions. Whatever we may have to say must be regarded as in the nature of practical maxims, to be applied with common sense, not as logically universal rules to be tested by extreme cases.

Broadly speaking, I think the use of force is justifiable when it is ordered in accordance with law by a neutral authority, in the general interest and not primarily in the interest of one of the parties to the quarrel. On this ground, the use of force by the police is justifiable, provided (as is no doubt sometimes the case) that the authorities are employing the police in the general interest, not merely in the interest of the holders of power. In international affairs, if there were a council of the powers strong enough to restrain any aggressive nation without great difficulty, any army or navy employed in obedience to its orders might be regarded as a police force, and justified on the same grounds on which the police are justified. I think there is more hope of ultimately achieving universal peace by this method than by the adoption of non-resistance. But this has no bearing upon the question whether non-resistance would be a good policy, if any

nation could be induced to adopt it. So long as no council of the powers exists, there is no neutral authority to order resistance, and we have to consider the justification of repelling an attack when the nation attacked is the judge in its own cause.

The justification of non-resistance is more easily seen in the case of quarrels between individuals. If I encountered the traditional highwayman, and he demanded my money or my life, I should unhesitatingly give him my money, even if it were in my power to shoot him before he shot me. I should do this, not from cowardice or lack of spirit, but because I would rather part with money than have a man's blood on my conscience. And for the same reason, if I were compelled to engage in a duel, I would rather let my adversary shoot me than shoot him. In this I believe all humane people would agree. At the same time, if he were a worthless fellow, and I had just made an important mathematical discovery which I had not had time to record, it might be right to preserve my life at his expense. Arguments of this sort would justify civilized communities in defending themselves against savages. But conflicts between civilized nations are more like conflicts between rival metaphysicians, each considering his own system admirable and the other man's abominable, while to outsiders it is obvious that both are equally fantastic.

In private life, most situations can be met by the double principle of neither employing force nor obeying it. It is a familiar Platonic thesis that the man who inflicts injustice is more to be pitied than the man who suffers it. But such statements are read with a smile, as charming literary paradoxes, and are not taken as practical wisdom for the guidance of life. Yet the use of force to coerce another man's will, even in those rare cases in which it is

justifiable, produces a brutal and tyrannous state of mind, and is more destructive of inward peace than any misfortune that can be inflicted from without. The greatest good that can be achieved in this life is to have will and desire directed to universal ends, purged of the self-assertion which belongs to instinctive will. If a man has once known this good, he will not consider any private ends important enough to be fought for: he may be willing to enter upon a contest of force, but if so, it will be for some end outside his own life, since what is best in his own life cannot be taken from him by another. But although he will not dictate to others for his own ends, he will also not be turned aside from universal ends by others: he will be no more willing to obey than to command. He will preserve his own liberty as scrupulously as he respects the liberty of others.

Exactly similar considerations apply to the conduct of nations, but they are obscured by traditional phrases about 'honor,' 'patriotism,' 'sacred traditions,' or the 'protection of women and children.' It is assumed that a nation which does not oppose force with force must be actuated by cowardice, and must lose whatever is valuable in its civilization. Both these are illusions. To oppose force by passive non-obedience would require more courage, and would be far more likely to preserve the best elements of the national life. It would also do far more to discourage the use of force. This would be the way of practical wisdom, if men could be brought to believe it. But I fear men are too wedded to the belief that patriotism is a virtue, and too fond of proving their superiority to others in a contest of force. People who object to the doctrine that might is right always contend that it will be disproved by showing that might is on their own side. Yet that would be a dis-

proof only if their side were in the wrong, and their argument shows that they really believe the doctrine that they are pretending to combat. Those who genuinely disbelieve the doctrine will not attempt to disprove it by getting might on their side.

## II

Let us imagine that England were to disband its army and navy, after a generation of instruction in the principles of passive resistance as a better defense than war. Let us suppose that England at the same time publicly announced that no armed opposition would be offered to an invader, that all might come freely, but that no obedience would be yielded to any commands that a foreign authority might issue. What would happen in this case?

Suppose, to continue the argument, that the German government wished to take advantage of England's defenseless condition. It would be faced, at the outset, by the opposition of whatever was not utterly brutal in Germany, since no possible cloak could be found to hide the nakedness of aggression. All civilized countries, when they engage in war, find some decent excuse: they fight almost always either in self-defense or in defense of the weak. No such excuse could be found in this case. It could no longer be said, as the Germans now say, that England's naval preponderance keeps other nations in bondage, and threatens the very existence of any nation which depends on imported food. It could no longer be said that we were oppressing India, since India would be able to separate from the British Empire whenever it wished to do so. All the usual pretexts by which aggression is justified would be lacking. When America attacked Spain, it was to liberate the Cubans, against whom Spain was carrying on

a war. When England attacked the Transvaal, the then Poet Laureate, the *Times*, and Messrs. Werner, Beit & Co. and the other imperialist magnates who represented the ancient traditions of the British race, solemnly assured us that our intervention was necessary for the safety of English women in Johannesburg, and for the liberation of the natives from virtual slavery to the Boers. These pleas deceived many people who, though no doubt not unwilling to be deceived, would yet have shrunk from an aggression which could not be in any way disguised. And it was said that the Boers aimed at the conquest of the whole of South Africa: we were told that if ever England found itself entangled in a European war, Cape Colony would be overrun and its English colonists would be subjected to a tyranny. In any civilized country such arguments are always used in justifying even the most aggressive war.

If England had no army and no navy, the Germans would be hard put to it to find a pretext for invasion. All the liberal elements in Germany would oppose any such enterprise; so would all the other nations, unless Germany offered them a share of the plunder. But let us suppose all home opposition overcome, and a force dispatched to England to take possession of the country. Such a force, since it would meet with no military opposition, would not need to be large, and would not be in the state of mingled fear and ferocity which characterizes an invading army among a hostile population. There would be no difficulty in preserving military discipline, and no opportunity for the rape and rapine which have always been displayed by troops after victory in battle. There would be no glory to be won, not even enough to earn one iron cross. The Germans could not congratulate themselves upon their military prowess, or imagine that they

were displaying the stern self-abnegation believed to be shown by willingness to die in the fight. To the soldierly mind, the whole expedition would be ridiculous, causing disgust instead of pride. Perhaps a few impudent street-boys might have to have their ears boxed, but otherwise there would be nothing to lend dignity to the expedition.

However, we will suppose the invading army arrived in London, where they would evict the King from Buckingham Palace and the members from the House of Commons. A few able bureaucrats would be brought over from Berlin to consult with the civil servants in Whitehall as to the new laws by which the reign of Kultur was to be inaugurated. No difficulty would be expected in managing so tame a nation, and at first almost all the existing officials would be confirmed in their offices. For the management of a large modern state is a complicated matter, and it would be thought well to facilitate the transition by the help of men familiar with the existing machinery.

But at this point, if the nation showed as much courage as it has always shown in fighting, difficulties would begin. All the existing officials would refuse to coöperate with the Germans. Some of the more prominent would be imprisoned, perhaps even shot, in order to encourage the others. But if the others held firm, if they refused to recognize or transmit any order given by Germans, if they continued to carry out the decrees previously made by the English Parliament and the English government, the Germans would have to dismiss them all, even to the humblest postman, and call in German talent to fill the breach.

The dismissed officials could not all be imprisoned or shot; since no fighting would have occurred, such wholesale brutality would be out of the question. And it would be very difficult for the

Germans suddenly, and out of nothing, to create an administrative machine. Whatever edicts they might issue would be quietly ignored by the population. If they ordered that German should be the language taught in schools, the schoolmasters would go on as if no such order had been issued; if the schoolmasters were dismissed, the parents would no longer send the children to school. If they ordered that English young men should undergo military service, the young men would simply refuse; after shooting a few, the Germans would have to give up the attempt in despair. If they tried to raise revenue by customs duties at the ports, they would have to have German customs officers; this would lead to a strike of all the dock laborers, so that that way of raising revenue would become impossible. If they tried to take over the railways, there would be a strike of the railway servants. Whatever they touched would instantly become paralyzed, and it would soon be evident, even to them, that nothing was to be made out of England unless the population could be conciliated.

Such a method of dealing with invasion would, of course, require fortitude and discipline. But fortitude and discipline are required in war. For ages past, education has been largely directed to producing these qualities for the sake of war. They now exist so widely that in every civilized country almost every man is willing to die on the battlefield whenever his government thinks the moment suitable. The same courage and idealism which are now put into war could easily be directed by education into the channel of passive resistance. I do not know what losses England may suffer before the present war is ended, but if they amount to a million no one will be surprised. An immensely smaller number of losses, incurred in passive resistance, would

prove to any invading army that the task of subjecting England to alien domination was an impossible one. And this proof would be made once for all without dependence upon the doubtful accidents of war. In internal politics, in all democratic countries, the very method we have been considering is constantly practiced, with continually increasing success. Even in Russia, it was the general strike which secured the Constitution of 1905. For a generation, terrorists had uselessly copied the methods of militarists by bomb-throwing and assassination; they had achieved nothing except to afford the authorities an excuse for ruthless repression, — an excuse not only to the public, but also to their own consciences, since they appeared to themselves, as soldiers do, to be brave men facing death in the public service. After all the years of fruitless violence, it was the method of passive non-obedience which secured the momentary victory, afterwards lost through disunion and a return to violence. And in all the dealings of democratic governments with labor troubles or with irreconcilable minorities, it is this same power of passive resistance that comes into play. In a civilized, highly organized, highly political state, government is impossible without the consent of the governed. Any object for which a considerable body of men are prepared to starve and die can be achieved by political means, without need of resort to force. And if this is true of objects desired by a minority only, it is a thousand times truer of objects desired unanimously by the whole nation.

But it may be said that, even if the Germans could not actually take over the government of England, or rob us of internal self-government, they could do two things which would injure us vitally: they could take away our empire, and could levy a tribute by the

threat of depriving us of food-supplies.

The Germans could not take away the self-governing parts of our empire, since they would encounter there the same difficulties that would prevent them from governing England. They could take away those parts of our empire which we hold by force, and this would be a blow to our pride: the oppression of subject races is one of the chief sources of patriotic satisfaction, and one of the chief things for which Germany envies us. But it is not a source of pride to any rational or humane man. European rule over uncivilized races is in fact a very sordid affair. The best of the men whom it employs are those engaged in the attempt at government, who live in exile and usually die of fever. The rest grow rich selling rum to natives or making them work in mines. Meanwhile the natives degenerate: some die of drink, some of diseases caught from white men, some of consumption in the mines; and those who survive contract the vices of civilization without losing the vices of barbarism. It can be only a blessing to any nation to be deprived of this source of pride, which is a canker of corruption and immorality in the life of democratic communities.

That the Germans could levy tribute on England by threatening our food-supplies is obviously true. The ethics of such a demand would be exactly the same as that of the highwayman who demands 'your money or your life.' The same reasons which would lead a reasonable man to give his money rather than shoot or be shot, would also lead a reasonable nation to give tribute rather than resist by force of arms. The greatest sum that foreigners could theoretically exact would be the total economic rent of the land and natural resources of England. In fact, economic rent may be defined as what can be, and historically has been, extorted by



such means. The rent now paid to landowners in England is the outcome of the exactions made by William the Conqueror and his barons. The law courts are the outcome of those set up at that time, and the law which they administer, so far as land is concerned, represents simply the power of the sword. From inertia and lack of imagination, the English at the present day continue to pay the landowners a vast sum to which the latter have no right but that of conquest. The working classes, the shopkeepers, manufacturers, and merchants, the literary men, and the men of science — all the people who make England of any account in the world — have at the most an infinitesimal and accidental share in the rental of England. The men who have a share use their rents in luxury, political corruption, taking the lives of birds, and depopulating and enslaving the rural districts. This way of life is that which almost all English men and women consider the most admirable: those who are anywhere near achieving it struggle to attain it completely, and those who are more remote read serial stories about it as their ancestors would have read of the joys of Paradise.

It is this life of the idle rich which would be curtailed if the Germans exacted a tribute from England. Everything in England that is not positively harmful would be untouched: wages and other earned incomes could not be diminished without diminishing the productivity of English labor, and so lessening England's capacity for paying tribute! Our snobbish instincts, if the idle rich were abolished, might be driven, by want of other outlet, into the admiration of real merit. And if the Germans could effect this for us, they would well deserve their tribute.

It is very doubtful indeed whether the Germans would exact from us a larger tribute than we exact from our-

selves in resisting them. There is no knowing what this war will have cost England when it ends, but we shall probably not exaggerate if we place the cost at a thousand million pounds. This represents an annual payment of forty million pounds. All this, together with the annual expenditure on our army and navy, we might have paid to the Germans without being any poorer than we shall be when the war ends. This represents an incredibly larger tribute than we derive from India; yet the Germans assure us that we are full of commercial cunning, and that we govern India solely for our own profit. If they believe this, it is hardly to be supposed that the receipt of such a tribute would fail to satisfy them. Meanwhile we should have avoided the death of our young men, the moral degradation of almost our whole population, and the lowering of the standard of civilization slowly achieved through centuries which were peaceful in comparison with our present condition.

### III

But of course all that I have been saying is fantastic, degrading, and out of touch with reality. I have been assuming that men are to some extent guided by reason, that their actions are directed to ends such as 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' This is not the case. Death, slavery, and unhappiness (for others) are the chief ends pursued by states in their external relations. It is the preference of such ends to one's own happiness that constitutes patriotism, that shows a man to be free from materialism, and that raises him above the commercial, money-grubbing level of the mere shopkeeper. The Prussian feels himself noble because he is willing to be killed, provided men of other nations are killed at the same time. His nobility

and his freedom from commercialism consist in the fact that he desires the misery of others more than his own happiness. And there is a Prussian lurking in each of us, ready to make us regret any national advantage which is not purchased by injury to some other nation. It is this lurking Prussian in our instincts who assures us that a policy of non-resistance would be tame and cowardly, unworthy of a great and proud nation, a failure to perform our duty of chastising an exactly similar pride in other nations.

Pride has its place among virtues, in the lives of individuals as well as in the lives of nations. Pride, in so far as it is a virtue, is a determination not to be turned aside from the ends which a man thinks good, no matter what outside pressure may be brought to bear upon him. There is pride in Condorcet, sentenced to the guillotine, spending his last days in writing a book on human progress. There is pride in those who refuse to recant their religious convictions under persecution. Such pride is the noblest form of courage: it shows that self-determination of the will which is the essence of spiritual freedom. But such pride should have as its complement a just conception of what constitutes human welfare, and as its correlative a respect for the freedom of others as absolute as the determination to preserve freedom for ourselves. Exactly the same kind of pride is good in the life of a nation. If we think ill of war, while some other nation thinks well of it, let us show our national pride by living without war, whatever temptations the other nation may put in our way to live according to their ideals rather than according to our own.

The Germans, we are given to understand, hate us with a bitter hatred, and long to believe that we feel toward them as they feel toward us; for unrequited hatred is as bitter as unrequited

love. They have made it increasingly difficult not to gratify their desire; but in so far as we can keep our resistance free from bitterness we win a spiritual victory over what deserves to be combatted in the enemy, which is far more important than any victory to be won by guns and bayonets. But this kind of pride is not the kind which patriots exhort us to display. The pride that they admire is the kind that aims at thwarting others; it is the pride of power. Having found that the Germans desired Morocco and Mesopotamia, we were proud of the fact that we prevented them from acquiring either. Having found that the Boers desired independence, we were proud of the fact that we made them submit to our rule. This kind of pride consists merely in love of dominion. Dominion and power can be conclusively shown only by compelling others to forego what they desire. By a natural consequence, those in whom the love of power is strong are led to inflict pain and to use force against the perfectly legitimate desires of those whom they wish to subdue. In nations, this attitude is commended. Generally the heroes of a nation's history are not those who have benefited mankind, but those who have injured other nations. If we prided ourselves upon the good and not the harm that we have done, we should have put Shakespeare on the Nelson monument, and given Apsley House to Darwin. But the citizens whom every nation honors most are those who have killed the greatest number of foreigners.

It is this pride of power that makes us unwilling to yield to others in matters of no intrinsic importance. The Germans cherish a desire for African swamps, of which we have a superfluity. No one in England benefits by the possession of them, except a few financial magnates mostly of foreign origin. If we were reasonable, we should regard



the German desire as a curious whim, which we might gratify without any real national loss. Instead of that we regard the German desire as a crime, and our resistance to it as a virtue. We teach school-children to rejoice because so much of the map is painted red. In order that as much as possible may be painted red, we are willing to sacrifice those ideals of freedom in which we have led mankind, and if necessary to adopt all the worst features of the Prussian spirit. This is because we fear the external enemy, who kills the body, more than the internal enemy, who kills the soul. The soul of a nation, if it is a free soul, without slavishness and without tyranny, cannot be killed by any outward enemy. And if men would realize this, the panic fear which the nations feel, one toward another, would be expelled by a better pride than that of diplomatists and war-lords.

The armies and navies of the world are kept up by three causes: cowardice, love of dominion, and lust for blood.

It is cowardice that makes it difficult to meet invasion by the method of passive resistance. More courage and discipline are needed for the successful practice of this method than for facing death in the heat of battle. But I am persuaded that there is in England enough courage and enough capacity for discipline to make success in passive resistance possible if education and moral teaching were directed to that end instead of to warlike prowess. It is cowardice also that makes men prefer the old method of trying to be stronger than your adversary (in which only one party can succeed), rather than a new method requiring imagination, and a readjustment of traditional standards. Yet, if men could think outside the well-worn grooves, there are many plain facts which show the folly of conventional statesmanship. Why has Germany invaded France?

VOL. 116 - NO. 2

Because the French have an army. Why has England attacked Germany? Because the Germans have a navy. Yet people persist in thinking that the French army and the German navy contribute to national safety. Nothing could be more obvious than the facts; nothing could be more universal than men's blindness to them.

The second reason for keeping up the armies and navies of the world is love of dominion. The Germans, in the Morocco controversy, announced that nothing of importance was to happen anywhere without their being consulted. We regarded this as monstrous arrogance; but for two centuries we had advanced the same claim as a matter of course. The matters about which diplomatists raise a pother are usually of only microscopic importance to the welfare of ordinary citizens; they are matters involving national 'prestige,' that is to say, the power of the state to prevent other states from doing as they wish. This power is sometimes partly based on money, but in the main it rests on armies and navies. If our navy had been smaller, we should not have been able to defeat the German desire for an Atlantic port in Morocco. It would have done us no harm if the Germans had acquired Casablanca, but we enjoyed the thought that our fiat kept them out. The procuring of such pleasure is the second purpose served by armies and navies.

The third purpose of armaments — indeed their primary and original purpose, from which all others are derivative — is to satisfy the lust for blood. Fighting is an instinctive activity of males, both animal and human. Human males, being gregarious, naturally fight in packs. It has been found that the pack tends to be more successful against other packs when fighting within the pack is as far as possible prevented. For this purpose, the law and the

police have been instituted. But the shedding of human blood is still considered the most glorious thing a man can do, provided he does it in company with the rest of his pack. War, like marriage, is the legally permitted outlet for a certain instinct. But the instinct which leads to war, unlike the instinct which leads to marriage, so far from being necessary to the human race, is wholly harmful among civilized men. It is an instinct which easily becomes atrophied in a settled community; many men have hardly a trace of it. Unfortunately, as men grow older, their affections and their powers of thought decay. For this reason, and also because power stimulates the love of power, the men who have most influence in government are usually men whose passions and impulses are less civilized than those of the average citizen. These men — the great financiers, the politicians, and some editors of daily papers — use their position, their knowledge, and their power of disseminating misinformation to arouse and stimulate the latent instinct for bloodshed. When they have succeeded, they say that they are reluctantly forced into war by the pressure of public opinion. Their activities are exactly analogous to those of men who distribute indecent pictures or produce lascivious plays. They ought to be viewed in the same light; but because of the notion that a wish to kill foreigners is patriotic and virtuous, they are honored as men who have deserved well of their country. They provide an outlet for the impulse to homicide. To gratify this impulse is the third and ultimate purpose of armies and navies.

All these three motives for armaments, — cowardice, love of dominion, and lust for blood, — are no longer eradicable in civilized human nature. All are diminishing under the influence of modern social organization. All

might be reduced to a degree which would make them almost innocuous, if early education and current moral standards were directed to that end. Passive resistance, if it were adopted deliberately by the will of a whole nation, with the same measure of courage and discipline which is now displayed in war, might achieve a far more perfect protection for what is good in national life than armies and navies can ever achieve, without demanding the carnage and waste and welter of brutality involved in modern war.

But it is hardly to be expected that progress will come in this way, because the imaginative effort required is too great. It is much more likely that it will come, like the reign of law within the state, by the establishment of a central government of the world, able and willing to secure obedience by force, because the great majority of men will recognize that obedience is better than the present international anarchy.

A central government of this kind would command assent, not as a partisan, but as the representative of the interests of the whole. Very soon resistance to it would be seen to be hopeless and wars would cease. Force directed by a neutral authority is not open to the same abuse or likely to cause the same long-drawn conflicts as force exercised by quarreling nations, each of which is the judge in its own cause. Although I firmly believe that the adoption of passive instead of active resistance would be good if a nation could be convinced of its goodness, yet it is rather to the ultimate creation of a strong central authority that I should look for the ending of war. But war will end only after a great labor has been performed in altering men's moral ideals, directing them to the good of all mankind, and not only of the separate nations into which men happen to have been born.