

Bertrand Russell: Some Psychological Difficulties of Pacifism in Wartime (1935)

The most difficult period in which to keep one's head was the very beginning, before the battle of the Marne. The rapid advance of the Germans was terrifying; the newspapers, and still more private conversations, were full of apparently well-authenticated atrocity stories; the stream of Belgian refugees seemed to strengthen the case for defending Belgium. One by one, the people with whom one had been in the habit of agreeing politically went over to the side of the war, and as yet the exceptional people, who stood out, had not found each other. But the greatest difficulty was the purely psychological one of resisting mass suggestion, of which the force becomes terrific when the whole nation is in a state of violent collective excitement. As much effort was required to avoid sharing this excitement as would have been needed to stand out against the extreme of hunger or sexual passion, and there was the same feeling of going against instinct.

It must be remembered that we had not then the experience which we gradually acquired during the war. We did not know the wiles of herd-instinct, from which, in quiet times, we had been fairly free. We did not realise that it is stimulated by the cognate emotions of fear and rage and bloodlust, and we were not on the look-out for the whole system of irrational beliefs which war-fever, like every other strong passion, brings in its train. In the case of passions which our neighbours do not share, their arguments may make us see reason; but in war-time our neighbours encourage irrationality, and shrink in horror from the slightest attempt to throw doubt upon prevailing myths.

The great stimulant to herd-instinct is fear; in patriots, the instinct was stimulated by fear of the Germans, but in pacifists fear of the patriots produced a similar result. I can remember sitting in a bus and thinking: "These people would tear me to pieces if they knew what I think about the war." The feeling was uncomfortable, and led one to prefer the company of pacifists. Gradually a pacifist herd was formed.

When we were all together we felt warm and cosy, and forgot what an insignificant minority we were. We thought of other minorities that had become majorities. We did not know that one of us was to become Prime Minister, but if we had known we should have supposed that it would be a good thing when he did.

The pacifist herd was a curious one, composed of very diverse elements. There were those who, on religious grounds, considered all warfare wicked; there were many in the I.L.P. who came to the same conclusion without invoking the authority of the Bible; there were men who subsequently became Communists, who were cynical about capitalist wars but were quite willing to join in a proletarian revolution; and there were men in the Union of Democratic Control, who, without having definite opinions about wars in general, thought that our pre-war diplomacy had been at fault, and that the belief in the sole guilt of Germany was a dangerous falsehood. These different elements did not easily work together. The cynicism of communists-to-be was painful to Quakers, and Quaker gentleness towards the war-mongers was exasperating to those who attributed everything evil to the wickedness of capitalists. The Socialism of the I.L.P. repelled many Liberal pacifists, and those who condemned all war were impatient with those who confined their arguments to the particular war then in progress. And so the pacifist herd split into minor herds. In some men, the habit of standing out against the herd became so ingrained that they could not co-operate with anybody about anything.

The atmosphere was very inimical to intelligence. At first, I tried not to "lose, though full of pain, this intellectual being." I observed—or thought I observed—that, in the early months, most people were happier than in peace-time, because they enjoyed the excitement. This observation produced indignation among my pacifist friends, who believed that virtuous democracies had been tricked into war by wicked governments. Arguments as to the origins of the war were thought unimportant by those who were opposed to all war, and were brushed aside as irrelevant by the great bulk of the population, to whom victory was the only thing that mattered. For the sake of unanimity among pacifists, it became necessary for the different sections to suppress all but the broadest issues. We all had to avoid all subtlety, and practice a kind of artificial stupidity.

And gradually the hysteria of the outer world invaded the pacifist herd. I remember hearing a woman at a meeting state, with passion, that if her son were wounded in the war she would not lift a finger to nurse him. The logic was clear, since nursing was war-work; but her position was not calculated to recommend pacifism to waverers. Some pacifists, out of opposition to the patriots, made out such a good case for the German Government that they embarrassed German pacifists, who were trying to persuade *their* public that the faults were not all on *our* side. At intervals, the German Government made peace offers which were, as the Allies said, illusory, but which all pacifists (myself included) took more seriously than they deserved. Having, with great difficulty, disbelieved what was false in war propaganda, it was impossible to believe what happened to be true.

I remember one evening when I came away from a pacifist meeting with Ramsay MacDonald. He was depressed, and as we walked up Kingsway he said he was afraid of acquiring what he called the "minority mind." Some may think that he has since been only too successful in avoiding this danger, but it cannot be denied that it is a danger. It does not do to think that majorities must be wrong and minorities must be right.

In times of excitement, simple views find a hearing more readily than those that are sufficiently complex to have a chance of being true. Nine people out of ten, in England during the war, never got beyond the view that the Germans were wicked and the Allies were virtuous. (Crude moral categories, such as "virtuous" and "wicked," revived in people who, at most times, would have been ashamed to think in such terms). The easiest theory to maintain in opposition to the usual one was the Quaker view, that all men are good at heart, and that the way to bring out the good in them is to love them. Christ had taught that we ought to love our enemies, and few people cared to say straight out that He was mistaken. Those who genuinely held the Quaker view were respected, and the Government disliked having to send them to prison.

The class-war opinion, that capitalist wars are wicked but proletarian wars are laudable, could be preached with success to working-class audiences; it had the advantage of giving an outlet for hatred, of which many persecuted pacifists felt the need. Frequently, in meetings nomi-

nally opposed to all war, the threat of violent revolution was applauded to the echo. This view was, of course, the one of all others most hated by the authorities, but it was psychologically capable of being held by a majority.

The view which I took, and still take, was that, while some wars have been justified (for instance the American Civil War), the Great War was not justified, because it was about nothing impersonal and raised no important issue. This view required too much argument to be effective in such a violent time; it could be put forward in books, but not at meetings. It was also impossible to get a hearing for the view that a war cannot be justified by its causes, but only, if at all, by its effects. A "righteous" war was supposed to be one which had the correct diplomatic preliminaries, not one in which victory would bring some benefit to mankind. One of the most surprising things about the war, to me, was its power of producing intellectual degradation in previously intelligent people, and the way in which intellectual degradation always clothed itself in the language of a lofty but primitive morality.

To stand out against a war, when it comes, a man must have within himself some passion so strong and so indestructible that mass hysteria cannot touch it. The Christian war resister loves his enemies; the Communist war resister hates his government. Neither of these causes of resistance was available for me; what kept me from war fever was a desire for intellectual sobriety, for viewing matters involving passionate emotion as if they were elements in a formula of symbolic logic. I found it useful to think of nation x , nation y , and nation z , instead of England, France and Germany. But the effort was considerable, and hardly left me the mental energy to apply the same process when x was the British Government and y was the imprisoned pacifists. I still think, however, that intellectual sobriety is very desirable in war time, and I should wish all who, in anticipation, expect to stand out against the next war, to practise the habit of translating concretes into abstracts, so as to see whether their reasonings still seem convincing when the emotion has been taken out of them. In theory, we all know that this is essential to scientific thinking, but the war showed that it is more difficult than many people suppose.