

Prospects of Disarmament [1956]

THIS PAPER WAS first published in Russian as “Perspektivy razoruzhenya”, *Pravda*, Moscow, 29 March 1956, p. 4 (B&R C56.05). It appeared alongside a mildly critical riposte from Dimitri Skobel'tzyn, the distinguished Soviet physicist whose signature Russell had tried unsuccessfully to obtain for the Russell–Einstein manifesto. Both pieces were reprinted in English in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* under the general heading “A Dispute in Pravda on Disarmament” (8, no. 13 [9 May 1956]: 8–10) and before this introductory comment:

The editors of *Pravda* support the considerations expressed in Academician D. V. Skobel'tzyn's article.

Ending the arms race and implementing disarmament under effective international control can and must ensure the strengthening of peace and security for people.

At the Geneva Conference of foreign ministers both sides had held fast to disarmament positions staked out earlier in 1955 (see A33: 1–3). The possibility of meaningful negotiations had been revived, however, by a friendly exchange of diplomatic notes between Bulganin and Eisenhower early in 1956 and by public affirmations from both superpowers of the vital importance of the disarmament question. Russell had been asked for his contribution to the public debate on 6 March 1956 by K. Belyaev, a London representative of TASS, the Soviet news agency. He was soliciting Russell's views before the UN Disarmament Commission Subcommittee reconvened in London later the same month. Russell was “glad” of the opportunity to write for *Pravda* but was careful to ask that Belyaev “not make any omissions in the article without my concurrence” (8 March 1956). Russell's text does seem to have survived intact, at least as far as this can be ascertained from the translation back into English used by *The Current Digest*.

Skobel'tzyn's offering was a largely orthodox statement of Soviet policy on disarmament and the prohibition of nuclear weapons. The Soviet scientist was not completely at odds with Russell; he commended the latter's dedication to peace, as well as his practical recommendation (33: 41–3) for a cessation of nuclear weapons testing. He may not actually have endorsed the Russell–Einstein manifesto, but Russell believed that he was “sympathetic” (1955d; *Papers* 28: 325). Moreover, Skobel'tzyn had helped organize the UN Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic

Energy in Geneva in August 1955 and, according to Eric Burhop, had “definitely expressed his willingness to serve on the initiating committee” for Russell’s proposed gathering of scientists (to Russell, 20 Nov. 1955). He would later travel to Pugwash and sit on the Continuing Committee that was chosen by the conference delegates.

In his published reply to Paper 7, however, the Soviet scientist did dispute Russell’s “paradoxical thesis ... that an agreement to ban such (nuclear) weapons will make the use of them ‘more probable’ ...” (Skobeltzyn 1956, 9). Russell had repeated (33: 19–36) his standard refrain about the illusory character of any such paper prohibition. He now stood accused of proceeding “from the false premise that the existence of nuclear weapons in the West and the East ensures a balance of power and therefore blocks the use of atomic and hydrogen bombs”. Skobeltzyn continued:

Mr. Russell further refers to the complexity of an inspection system ensuring control over the fulfillment of an agreement to ban nuclear weapons. But can this really serve as grounds for refusing to solve a vitally important problem? Mr. Russell regards the fear of nuclear weapons as a reliable guarantee against war in general but immediately contradicts himself when he states that if war is unleashed the use of hydrogen bombs is inevitable. What is the way out of this vicious circle? (1956, 9)

The Soviet physicist’s answer was to quote the tentative call of the Russell–Einstein manifesto for “an agreement to renounce nuclear weapons as part of a general reduction of armaments” (1955e; *Papers* 28: 320), although this passage had only been added to make that document more palatable to Communist scientists—who had been expected by Russell to toe the Soviet line on disarmament that is recapitulated here by Skobeltzyn.

The copy-text is the typescript carbon dated 10 March 1956. At the same archival location (RAI 220.022080) there is also a later typescript carbon and a dictated manuscript in Edith Russell’s hand.

THE QUESTION OF disarmament has been the subject of very prolonged deliberations and so far, although there has sometimes seemed reason for hope, no decisions have been reached. Perhaps on this occasion the optimists may prove better prophets than they have in the past. There are powerful reasons for desiring an agreement on disarmament. There is, first, the crushing burden of expenditure on weapons which everyone must hope will never be used. There is, next, the general atmosphere of fear created by the knowledge of the deadly character of these weapons. And what is perhaps more important than anything else, there is the knowledge on both sides that an immense and perhaps decisive advantage is to be gained by a surprise attack in the style of Pearl Harbor. This makes each side suspicious of the other and creates an almost insuperable obstacle to the promotion of genuinely friendly relations. For these reasons a successful issue from the negotiations is ardently to be desired. 10

I think, however, that there are certain dangers which are perhaps not sufficiently realized. What is of supreme importance to mankind is that nuclear bombs should not be *used*, and it seems at first sight to follow that they ought to be prohibited. I am, however, not at all sure that an agreed prohibition would not increase the likelihood of their being used. At present neither side dare embark upon global war because both sides possess means of annihilating each other. It is this uneasy balance which is preventing the employment of nuclear weapons. If both sides agreed to prohibit their use without destroying existing stocks, neither side would feel that the other could be trusted to observe the agreement. If the agreement went further and prescribed the destruction of all nuclear bombs, fresh difficulties would arise. In the first place there would be need of very elaborate inspection if each side was to believe that the other was really carrying out the agreed destruction. In the second place, if this difficulty were overcome, there would be a general belief that war would no longer involve total catastrophe and war would therefore become more likely than it is at present. In the third place, if war did break out, each side would feel released from previous agreements and would set to work with all speed to manufacture as many H-bombs as possible. For these reasons, the prohibition of H-bombs by itself, if unaccompanied by a general détente, does not seem to me as desirable as it does to many people. 20 30

There is a consideration which has hitherto prevented agreements on disarmament, and that is that such agreements will not be acceptable to both sides unless they give no net advantage to either. So long as tension remains as great as it is at present, neither side will willingly surrender any advantage that it believes itself to possess. There is, however, one comparatively minor matter as to which I think agreement would be possible; and that is the prohibition of further tests. At present, the U.S., the U.K., 40

and the U.S.S.R. are all planning further tests. I cannot see that there will be any net gain to either side in an agreement to abandon these dangerous experiments. And such an agreement does not involve any of the difficulties about inspection which are involved in larger proposals, since a serious nuclear explosion cannot be concealed.

Save in this one matter of test explosions, I do not think that disarmament can be successful except as part of a general diplomatic détente which should involve an attempt to settle, by means of a congress, all the main questions in dispute between East and West. No genuine détente is likely while these questions remain outstanding, since each side will fear that, if it proclaims pacific intentions, the other side will use these intentions to gain an advantage somewhere by methods short of war. It is of the first importance to allay mutual suspicions, and this will require amendment on both sides. Meanwhile, if the disarmament commission reaches agreement, that will be an important first step, but it will not be more than a first step.

What I should like to see is an examination of all the matters in dispute between East and West by a conference in which Communist and anti-Communist Powers should have equal representation and in which representatives of neutral Powers would hold the balance. I should like to see suggestions made by a majority vote in such a congress on all the major causes of friction, and I should wish to see world opinion mobilized in support of the suggestions of such a congress. Since Neutrals would hold the balance, it may be assumed that the proposals achieving majority support would be agreeable sometimes to one side, sometimes to the other, but not preponderantly to either. If it is agreed, as I think it is tacitly though not explicitly, that a global war is impossible, some machinery other than war becomes imperative if disputes are not to be prolonged indefinitely, and I cannot see any better way of reaching a balanced agreement than such a conference as I have suggested. Within the framework of the settlements that it could suggest, disarmament would no longer face the obstacles which have hitherto baffled the statesmen of East and West.

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- 33: 1–3 **question of disarmament ... no decisions** Disarmament talks conducted under UN auspices had been ritualistic occasions, with each side jockeying for propaganda points rather than adopting serious negotiating stands. This paltry record of achievement had been recounted by French negotiator Jules Moch (1955, Chaps. 12–15) in a book reviewed by Russell in March 1955 (51 in *Papers* 28). Two months later, however, the impasse was broken by the Soviet Union's unexpected acceptance of recent Franco-British military manpower proposals, along with the Western insistence that these troop reductions be achieved *before* any measures of nuclear disarmament. The Soviet plan also addressed another Western concern by making provision for inspection controls at strategically sensitive ports, airfields and railway stations. Unsettled by this appearance of flexibility, the United States did not respond directly to the Soviet concessions but countered them (at the Geneva Conference of heads of state in July) with the so-called “open skies” plan. This called for each superpower to allow unfettered aerial reconnaissance over its military installations in order to minimize the risk of their being targeted by a surprise nuclear attack. The scheme promised still more rigorous inspection but no actual disarmament.
- 33: 4 **on this occasion** As Russell wrote Paper 7, the UN Disarmament Commis-

sion Subcommittee was about to reconvene in London. At the first meeting of this session (19 March 1956) the French and British delegation presented a revised version of a plan first tabled in June 1954. According to Britain's negotiator, this was "designed as a synthesis of all the realizable aspects of the former Western and Soviet proposals" (Nutting 1959, 22) and to deflect Soviet complaints that the Western approach involved too much inspection and not enough disarmament. No progress was made in the negotiations which followed, however. Discussion of the less ambitious schemes of conventional armament reductions put forward by the Soviets and Americans also foundered, and this latest round of talks wound down inconclusively on 4 May 1956.

- 33: 11–12 **surprise attack in the style of Pearl Harbor** Both superpowers were anxious about the destruction or blunting of their retaliatory potential by a preemptive enemy strike, and they were refining early warning, dispersal and "counterforce" targeting plans to meet such a threat. Although the United States was aware that its forward bases in Europe were already exposed, the most deep-seated American fears were projected a few years ahead, in anticipation of the Soviet Union enhancing its long-range aviation and missile-delivery capabilities. To this end, in March 1954, the president of MIT, James R. Killian, had been commissioned by the National Security Council to evaluate the future vulnerability of the United States to a surprise attack. Neither the immediate nor long-term forecasts of the Killian Report were completely reassuring. As for the Soviet Union, its forces remained far less capable of delivering a preemptive nuclear strike than the United States, but at least Soviet strategic doctrine had been liberated from the old Stalinist shibboleth—a perverse response to the near disaster of 1941—that surprise was a mere transitory factor in modern warfare. By February 1955 a Red Army general could write with official approval that, in the nuclear age, "surprise is one of the decisive conditions for the attainment of success not only in battles and operations but also in the war as a whole" (quoted in Freedman 1989, 146).
- 33: 43–34: 1 **U.S., the U.K., and the U.S.S.R. are all planning further tests** On 22 February 1956 the United States gave notice of Operation "Redwing" at its Pacific proving grounds of Bikini and Eniwetok. Seventeen devices in all would be tested between 5 May and 21 July including (on 20 May) the first airdrop of a hydrogen bomb. Britain, meanwhile, was preparing to detonate two atomic bombs on the Monte Bello Islands off the coast of Western Australia in the "Mosaic" trials of 15 May 1956. The Soviet Union carried out two series of tests in March 1956, although these operations were conducted secretly and revealed to the West (by the United States) only after Russell had completed this paper.
- 34: 4–5 **a serious nuclear explosion cannot be concealed** After Sir Anthony Eden's public denial "that all hydrogen and atomic explosions can be known" (United Kingdom 1955a, 196), Russell had complained to Eric Burhop that the Prime Minister was dishonestly "confounding (large-scale) nuclear tests with

tests of tactical atomic weapons” (9 Dec. 1955). Russell does seem to have thought that less powerful test-explosions could be carried out surreptitiously. Burhop, however, corrected him on this point: “Contrary to what Eden stated, even an explosion of the ‘Hiroshima’ type of atomic bomb can be detected from afar” (30 Jan. 1956). Acoustic-listening, air-sampling and seismic techniques were already sophisticated enough by the mid-1950s to make low-yield atmospheric tests virtually impossible to disguise. But neither Russell nor Burhop seems yet to have considered the possibility of concealment by underground testing (the first such successful explosion, by the United States, did not occur until September 1957). The limitations of seismology (a science very much in its infancy in the 1950s) partly explain the exclusion of underground testing from the Partial Test-Ban Treaty signed in 1963, although proponents of a comprehensive agreement argued that this technical problem could be minimized by a properly empowered international inspectorate.

- 34: I4 **disarmament commission** A UN Disarmament Commission had been created in October 1950 from the merger of its Atomic Energy and Conventional Armaments Commissions. The United States had wanted to counter Soviet claims that Western rearmament alone was responsible for international tension and to ensure that any talks focused on Soviet preponderance in conventional weapons as well as American nuclear superiority. Although Communist countries at first opposed this institutional change, they were represented on the twelve-power committee which reported in favour of the merger in November 1951. Owing to continuing deadlock over the sequence and scope of the proposed disarmament measures, however, in November 1953 the UN General Assembly recommended that substantive negotiating powers be delegated to a five-nation subcommittee representing Britain, France, the United States, Canada and the Soviet Union. This body was probably the “disarmament commission” that Russell had in mind.

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The typescript carbon ("CT") is foliated 1, 2–3 and measures 203 × 254 mm. In addition to the one substantive emendation in ink that is recorded below, CT shows the insertion of several commas. A second typescript carbon incorporated these emendations to CT but does not substantively differ from the earlier version. CT has been collated with the four-leaf dictated manuscript ("MSe") written and emended in pencil in Edith Russell's hand.

- 33: 4 prove MSe] *after deleted* have better justification
 33: 13 promotion MSe] *above deleted* creation
 33: 14 from MSe] *inserted above deleted* of
 33: 36 desirable MSe] *above deleted* important
 33: 43 U.S., the U.K. MSe] *replaced* United States, the United Kingdom
 34: 2 abandon] abandoned CT, MSe
 34: 6 Save MSe] *above deleted* Except
 34: 11 pacific CT] *replaced* specific
 34: 32 statesmen] Statesmen CT, MSe