

On Isolationism [1935]

THIS PAPER WAS the first of twenty-seven written for the *Sunday Referee* in the period covered by the present volume. Between February 1933 and July 1938 Russell published some sixty-three articles in this newspaper, which was owned by Isidore Ostrer, president of Gaumont Pictures. Little is known of Russell's five-year association with this publication, which was absorbed by the *Sunday Chronicle* in June 1939. Although Russell seems to have been in regular contact with R. J. Minney, managing editor of the *Sunday Referee* from 1935 (Minney to Russell, 4 May 1952), the only extant publishing correspondence is a receipt for two payments of £10 10s. for two earlier submissions similar in length to the present article. A record of Russell's earnings for 1936–37 among Dora Russell's legal papers (RA REC. ACQ. 1,487) confirms that this amount was his standard fee from the newspaper. If the *Sunday Referee* endeavoured to provide an "independent" alternative to the "official" voice of Labour as heard in the *Daily Herald*—which was part-owned and editorially controlled by the Trades Union Congress—such aspirations were hamstrung by the weekly pictorial's poor circulation outside London and its endorsement of the National Government ahead of the November 1935 general election (see Stannage 1980, 203).

Although Russell's writings for the *Sunday Referee* touched on a broad range of topics, discussion of British foreign policy and international politics came to pre-dominate. Paper 1 appeared on 14 April 1935 under the somewhat misleading title "Let Us Stand by the League", p. 12 (B&R C35.13), for it is anything but a ringing endorsement of the League of Nations. Even though Russell was not wholeheartedly in favour of an isolationist course for Britain, he did state that the case against continental military commitments would grow stronger as the likelihood of war increased. His hesitancy can be attributed as a reaction to the fervent neutralism of the right-wing press barons Lords Rothermere and Beaverbrook (see A5: 3–4). Their newspapers were perhaps foremost among the "Powerful forces ... urging this policy upon the Government" (5: 3–4). Yet they also wanted measures of re-armament and imperial defence to which Russell was unequivocally opposed. He considered these policies incompatible with a genuine commitment to neutrality, regarding the British Empire as so extensive that it could only be safeguarded in concert with other powers—as the Foreign Office had implicitly acknowledged as long ago as 1904 by negotiating the Anglo-French Entente (5: 11–12).

Instead, Russell argues here for a principled but robust internationalism, which he would later (with increasing difficulty) try to distinguish from both the isolationism of the Tory-Imperialist Right and collective security as conceived by the Labour Party and other supporters of the League (see **89d**, **95**):

It is fairly evident that wars can only be prevented by making it practically certain that the aggressor in any war will be defeated. To make this certain, it is necessary that Powers not directly involved in a dispute should pledge themselves to come to the support of the victim of aggression. (6: 3–7)

Russell understood only too well the formidable obstacles to war prevention by such means. Such a security system needed an inclusive and effective international authority that, unlike the League of Nations, was tainted neither by association with the Treaty of Versailles nor past failures to deter aggression. The diplomatic reality, however, was of a Europe on the brink of division, once again, into rival armed camps. Confronted by such polarization, Britain must opt for “neutrality but not aloofness” (6: 22). The country must keep its distance from any alliance formations, Russell contended, but be prepared to act in concert against a proven aggressor. Although he would see Mussolini’s Abyssinian ambitions in precisely this light (38: 5–7), he would not favour the joint action proposed for such circumstances in Paper 1. As that crisis deepened later in the year, he would insist that Britain maintain a strict neutrality. By December 1936 Russell had turned completely against the possibility of British intervention on any terms and, much like the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*, was asking the National Government to avoid all “Continental entanglements” (481: 27–8).

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SHOULD GREAT BRITAIN pay no attention to the squabbles of the Continental Powers, but announce a complete neutrality except in the event of actual aggression against British territory? Powerful forces are urging this policy upon the Government, and trying to persuade it not to fulfil the obligations undertaken by the League Covenant and Locarno. Others, on the contrary, urge that, not content with these obligations, we should undertake new ones. Both sides can bring weighty arguments to bear, and it is not altogether easy to see where the truth lies.

Isolation was the policy urged by Cobden, and was, on the whole, the dominant practice in England from the end of the Crimean War to the conclusion of the Anglo-French Entente in 1904, when it was abandoned from fear of the German Navy. The system of Ententes which preceded the War was nominally superseded by the Treaty of Versailles, which substituted, for separate alliances, a general obligation to come to the assistance of any member of the League of Nations if attacked by another Power. In practice, however, the association of the League Covenant with the Treaty of Versailles turned out to have been a fatal mistake. The League was committed to the status quo as established by that Treaty, and was therefore obliged to support territorial and other arrangements which Germany rightly resented as unjust. The maintenance of peace was allowed by the victors, who controlled the League, to become synonymous with the perpetuation of injustice. It is not to be wondered at that Germany, in consequence, became warlike and hostile to the League. Germany's neighbours naturally feel the need of defending themselves, lest they should suffer at Germany's hands something like what they inflicted upon her. Fearing that the League of Nations might be as unwilling to act as it was in the case of Japan, France and Italy are trying to rebuild the system of alliances by means of which they secured victory in 1918. For us, in these circumstances, three policies are possible: to join France and Italy, to attempt to act through the League, and to remain rigidly aloof. What is to be said for and against the third of these policies?

If war on the Continent is regarded as inevitable, the argument for isolationism is very strong. It would be much better for us, and no worse for the rest of the world, if we remained neutral in the next war. It might be said that, if we did so, the winners would become so strong that, after an interval for recuperation, they would be able to conquer us. But I doubt if the winners of the next war will escape such serious damage as will make them, at the end, much weaker than we shall be if we remain neutral; and in any case war is too serious a matter to be undertaken on account of such a doubtful calculation of distant probabilities. I think, therefore, that the isolationists would be right if we were sure that another war is bound to occur.

The weak point in their case is that their policy does nothing to make wars less probable. It is generally conceded that some means must be found of preventing large wars if civilization is to survive. It is fairly evident that wars can only be prevented by making it practically certain that the aggressor in any war will be defeated. To make this certain, it is necessary that Powers not directly involved in a dispute should pledge themselves to come to the support of the victim of aggression. To particularize: if it is known that, whenever war breaks out in Europe, the group of Powers which can prove that it was not the aggressor (according to a previously agreed definition) will have the armed support of Great Britain, it becomes very unlikely that aggression will occur, since it is almost certain to be unsuccessful. At any rate, such a policy, if persisted in, is capable of preventing war sooner or later, which cannot be said either of isolationism or of separate alliances. If we wash our hands of Continental disputes, whichever group considers itself the stronger has no motive for abstaining from war. If we definitely join either group, we thereby make that group the stronger, and are therefore liable to be forced into a war in support of Powers which would be virtually the aggressors. "To be dragged into a war for Servia", said Sir Edward Grey in July 1914, "would be detestable"; but in August 1914 we were dragged in, and saved our faces by saying that it was a war for Belgium.

British policy should, therefore, aim at neutrality but not aloofness, and we should make it clear that, for the present, we are equally friends to both sides. Nevertheless, on the ground that the preservation of peace among the Great Powers is a matter of interest to the whole world, we should announce, clearly and emphatically, that, if war breaks out, and either side can be shown to be the aggressor, we shall support the other side with our whole strength. We should, of course, invite the co-operation of other neutrals, but should pursue what we regard as the right policy even if the other neutrals held aloof. This is only to say that we should attempt to live up to the principles which inspired the League of Nations. It seems clear that the British Government, on the whole, desires to support this policy, but the isolationists are strong enough to produce timidity, and may be able to prevent such unequivocal declarations as would alone give the right policy a good chance of success in preventing war. A similar uncertainty in 1914, when Germany expected us to remain neutral, was disastrous. There are many ominous resemblances to the situation which existed in the period immediately preceding the last war; let us hope that doubt as to our policy will not long remain one of these. Only bold and constructive statesmanship can divert the world from proceeding further along the road to ruin, and it is from Great Britain, rather than from any other Power, that such statesmanship must come.

1 On Isolationism

- 5: 3–4 **Powerful forces are urging this policy upon the Government** Russell was probably thinking of the Conservative newspaper proprietors Lords Beaverbrook and Rothermere, whose pronounced anti-League bias had spurred the League of Nations Union into promoting the Peace Ballot (see Introduction, xxxi). A few days before the appearance of Paper 1, a leader in Beaverbrook's flagship newspaper, the *Daily Express*, had asserted that "Britain will have the respect of every one if she refuses to enter into the squabbles of the continent, and keeps peace for her own people" (8 April 1935, p. 12). Similarly, two days prior to this, Rothermere's *Daily Mail* had declared that Britain's representatives at the upcoming Stresa conference (see A5: 27–8) must forcefully remind their French and Italian counterparts that "in no circumstances whatever would the British people allow themselves to be taxed or conscripted for such objects as the independence of Austria, the defence of Czechoslovakia, or the wars of Moscow" (10 April 1935, p. 14).
- 5: 5 **obligations undertaken by the League Covenant** Article sixteen of the covenant committed the League to punish any act of war by a member state with the "severance of all trade or financial relations ... and the prevention of all financial, commercial or personal intercourse between the nationals of the covenant-breaking State and the nationals of any other State, whether a Member of the League or not" (quoted in Walters 1952, 51). The same article authorized the League of Nations Council to recommend that member states use military force to punish a breach of the covenant.
- 5: 5–6 **and Locarno** The 1925 Locarno Pact comprised a series of treaties by which Britain, France, Germany, Belgium and Italy upheld the demilitarization of the Rhineland and guaranteed Germany's borders with France and Belgium. Germany's eastern borders were not covered by any such guarantees, although this omission in Locarno was partially offset by the mutual defence pacts that France had already struck with Poland (1921) and Czechoslovakia (1924). Russell was unenthusiastic and would have preferred implementation of the minority Labour Government's abortive Geneva Protocol, which envisioned a system of international arbitration and wholesale measures of disarmament.

- 5: 6–7 **Others ... urge that ... we should undertake new ones.** Russell is presumably referring to the drift of left-wing opinion towards support for the kind of collective peace system about which he would subsequently write so contemptuously. Yet many of the new enthusiasts for collective security inside the League of Nations Union and the Labour Party did *not* yet accept that the policy entailed the sort of commitments that Russell was urging Britain to avoid. Collective security was regarded instead rather fancifully “as an alternative to war ... which by mobilizing the overwhelming strength of the law-abiding nations would eliminate the need for large national armies” (Birn 1974, 132). At the same time, a more forthright approach to diplomacy and defence *was* being espoused, for example, by the New Commonwealth Society, a break-away movement from the LNU.
- 5: 9–11 **Isolation ... Cobden ... Crimean War ... Anglo-French Entente** The Radical champion of free trade Richard Cobden (1804–1865) regarded isolationism as a corollary of the unfettered exchange of goods across national borders—which he believed would promote peace as well as prosperity. Profoundly hostile to the interventionist bent of mid-Victorian foreign policy—as exemplified by the decision to fight Russia in the Crimea in alliance with France—Cobden attributed such belligerency to the persistence of aristocratic political influence. The Crimean War (1854–1856), though, was indeed the only occasion in the second half of the nineteenth-century when Britain intervened militarily in concert with another European power. The first breach of the diplomacy of isolation—which was undergirded by British maritime supremacy—came with the striking of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902, a regional agreement directed primarily at the containment of Russian expansionism in the Far East. The Anglo-French Entente, which followed two years later, was even more limited in scope—restricted to the resolution of outstanding colonial differences over Egypt and Morocco—but it became an essential prop of the “system of Ententes” so despised by Russell.
- 5: 12 **fear of the German Navy** Through a series of naval laws in 1898, 1900 and 1907, Germany mounted a serious challenge to Britain’s strategy of maintaining a navy as large as that of the next two biggest navies combined and started a naval rivalry that dominated Anglo-German relations before 1914. So alarmed was the Royal Navy’s senior hierarchy that the First Sea Lord, Sir John Fisher, even advocated a preemptive strike to destroy the German fleet before it became too powerful. Responding to intense pressure from the Conservative opposition, a Liberal Government committed to the retrenchment of defence spending nevertheless embarked upon an accelerated programme of Dreadnought battleship construction in order to maintain the Royal Navy’s superiority over the German fleet.
- 5: 12 **system of Ententes** Russell’s dissenting mistrust of alliance diplomacy was still deeply ingrained in the 1930s and surfaces repeatedly in the present volume. The striking of an agreement between Britain and Russia in August 1907

completed the “system of Ententes” that had been taking shape since Germany and Austria had signed their Dual Alliance in 1879. As with its Anglo-French counterpart, the Anglo-Russian Entente was a limited agreement, explicitly concerned only with the demarcation of spheres of influence in Persia and frontier guarantees for Afghanistan. Yet both ententes were transformed into broader, although still informal, understandings of mutual defence obligations. Ranged against the powers of the Triple Entente were those of the Triple Alliance: Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy.

- 5: 21 **the victors, who controlled the League** Russell had hoped that delegates to the League of Nations would be elected, not appointed, and he disapproved of the veto power conferred on the permanent members of the League Council—Britain, France, Italy and Japan—i.e. “the victors, who controlled the League”. The League’s most obvious flaw in Russell’s eyes was the deliberate exclusion of defeated Germany and revolutionary Russia, together with the self-imposed exile of the United States, which never joined because the Senate refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles.
- 5: 26–7 **League of Nations ... unwilling to act ... case of Japan** After Japanese forces occupied most of the Chinese province of Manchuria and established the puppet republic of Manchukuo in February 1932, a League commission headed by Britain’s Lord Lytton was dispatched to the Far East to investigate. The Lytton Commission’s report of October 1932 denounced Japanese actions and was backed by a special nineteen-member committee of the League of Nations. Although League delegates approved this special committee’s call for a Japanese withdrawal from Manchuria, neither armed intervention nor economic sanctions were imposed in retaliation. The upshot of the crisis was that an indignant Japan withdrew from the League in March 1933.
- 5: 27–8 **France and Italy ... system of alliances** After Hitler publicly renounced the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles and reintroduced military conscription in March 1935, France, Italy and Britain tentatively explored the possibility of establishing a common front against Nazi Germany that completely bypassed the machinery of the League of Nations. A tripartite conference was convened from 11 to 14 April 1935 in the Italian town of Stresa. All three powers declared their commitment to upholding Austrian independence and the Locarno Pact, as well as to opposing any further attempts by Germany unilaterally to defy the Treaty of Versailles. This seemingly impressive display of unity and purpose by the former wartime allies was deceptive, however, as the vaunted Stresa Front was rapidly exposed as illusory (see H5).
- 6: 18–19 **“To be dragged ... Grey ... detestable”** United Kingdom 1914, 1. Russell also used this quotation in *Which Way to Peace?*, where he again made the point that it was the tangle of alliance agreements that had “dragged” Britain into war in August 1914, “because Serbia was allied with Russia, Russia with France, and France with England” (1936, 58). British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey (1862–1933, Viscount Grey of Fallodon, 1916) had made this re-

mark to the German Ambassador in London, Prince Lichnowsky, on 20 July 1914. Grey was trying to discourage Germany from provoking a general war by giving a free hand to Austria-Hungary to punish Serbia for the assassination in Sarajevo of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

- 6: 20–1 **August 1914 ... dragged in ... for Belgium** In a pivotal Commons speech on 3 August 1914 (United Kingdom 1914a), Grey had condemned Germany's invasion of Belgium and stressed Britain's obligations under the Treaty of London—by which Belgian neutrality had been guaranteed in 1839. In so doing, the Foreign Secretary swayed much parliamentary and public opinion towards support for a policy of intervention. The next day, Britain warned Germany that war would be declared unless German troops were immediately withdrawn from Belgium. This ultimatum was ignored, so Britain went to war on the pretext of upholding German neutrality. In his parliamentary statement, however, Grey had also emphasized that Britain was honour-bound to assist its Entente partner, France, and that the national interest would be severely damaged if the country failed to do so, touching on what Russell believed were the real reasons for British intervention. “France, not Belgium, was for us the decisive factor” (Russell 1915; *Papers* 13: 218), he wrote in his critique of the secret diplomacy by which Grey, he argued, had contributed so much to the outbreak of war. See also A20: 41–21: 9.
- 6: 36–7 **A similar uncertainty in 1914 ... remain neutral** With Britain's intentions remaining unclear throughout the July Crisis—much to the chagrin of France and Russia—Germany repeatedly tried to obtain assurances of British neutrality. To one such overture, emanating from the German Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg, on 29 July, Sir Edward Grey responded unequivocally that the British Government “cannot for a moment entertain the Chancellor's proposal” (United Kingdom 1914, 55). But the policy of intervention favoured by the Foreign Secretary commanded little support from his Cabinet colleagues until Germany's mobilization against France was proceeding on 2 August, and as late as 4 August German officials in Berlin were hopeful that Britain would stay out of the conflict.

1 On Isolationism

The manuscript ("CT") is written and emended in ink on six leaves that are foliated 1, 2–6 and measure 203 × 254 mm. A different title was imposed on the published version in *The Sunday Referee* ("SR"), a collation of which with CT revealed two other instances of substantive variation. Neither of these readings from SR (see T5: 36–7, T6: 36–40) has been deemed authorial, although they *may* have been introduced as emendations on a missing typescript.

title On Isolationism CT] Let Us Stand by
the League SR

5: 6 , on the contrary, CT] *inserted*

5: 21 , who controlled the League, CT]
inserted

5: 36–7 But I doubt CT] I doubt, however,
SR

6: 36–40 war. ... Only CT] war. ¶Only SR

6: 38 which existed CT] *inserted*