



The Role of Great Men in History

With Edgar Lustgarten and Lords Hailsham and Russell

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The Role of Great Men in History

With Edgar Lustgarten (chair) and Lords Hailsham and Russell

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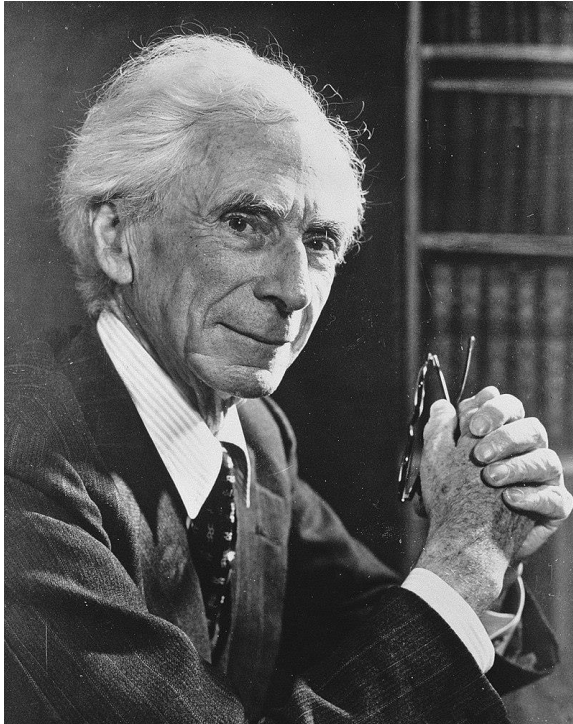
Edgar Lustgarten

EDGAR LUSTGARTEN In this edition of *London Forum*, Lord Hailsham and Bertrand Russell are joined by Isaiah Berlin, who is a Fellow of All Souls College at Oxford, a distinction once shared by Lord Hailsham. Mr Berlin has been University Lecturer in Philosophy, and during the war he worked at our Embassy in Washington, and later in Moscow. Today we're going to discuss the role of great men in history, and I should like to put before you

¹ With additions from a contemporary transcript (at the BBC Written Archives) of the lost BBC recording.

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as a text a sentence from *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* by Sir Winston Churchill, himself perhaps the greatest man of our age. Sir Winston talks of the way the Saxons nearly succumbed completely to the Danish attacks and says: 'That they did not was due – as almost every critical turn of historic fortune has been due – to the sudden apparition in an era of confusion and decay of one of the great figures of history.' I'm no professional historian, but it seems to me that in that sentence Churchill is stating clearly what his philosophy of history is. Russell, do you agree with me and, what's much more to the point, do you agree with Sir Winston?



Bertrand Russell, 1957 (National Archives, The Hague)

LORD RUSSELL I don't take the extreme view that he does; nor do I take the extreme opposite view. I think that sometimes, when

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a great man is called for by the situation, he arises, and sometimes he does not. There are quite a number of cases in history where a great man could have saved a desperate situation but no great man arose. I will instance the fall of the Roman Empire as a case in point.

LUSTGARTEN Berlin?



Berlin speaking at the BBC in 1959

ISAIAH BERLIN I agree with Lord Russell entirely. Since we live in an age when we're told that impersonal factors play greater parts in human events than individuals, it's rather important to emphasise that it is not always so. It is fairly plain that if, say, Lenin had been murdered before February of 1917, it is very unlikely the second Russian Revolution would have taken place; and in this way the fate of the world would have been very different. I agree about the Roman Empire too; I think there are a great many cases.

LUSTGARTEN I wonder whether we're doing this text of Sir Winston's justice. I think I ought to repeat it. What he said was that the fact that the Saxons didn't succumb to the Danish attacks was due, as almost every critical turn of historic fortune has been due,

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to the emergence of a great figure. It seems to me that what's been said so far is 'Sometimes no great figures appear, therefore no critical turn in historical fortunes.' Is that right, Hailsham?



Lord Hailsham

LORD HAILSHAM Well, I think that's exactly what Russell and Berlin have been saying. I must say – speaking as a layman – I'm most delighted and not a little surprised to find them saying it, because it seems to me that, if they're right, they are going against nearly all the great historical theorists of all times. Marxism is a very prevalent philosophy of history: they contradict that at every turn. Take somebody who's as different from Marx as chalk is from cheese, Professor Toynbee, Plato, Augustine – they all have the theory that history is patterned in some predetermined way; and it follows from that, if they're right, that great men play a comparatively subordinate part. Economic forces, the great historical movements, control the destiny of peoples, and not the individual men; and I must say it's delightful to hear these two great experts differ.

RUSSELL I should like to expand a little on this point. I do not think that great events are always in the hands of great men. I think

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the fall of the Roman Empire, to repeat, was a case in point. It was certainly a very great event in human history, and there were no great men either on the Roman side or on the side of the barbarians. They were not great, they were confused; and the whole thing was confused. Now I would agree that St Augustine was a great man. I think he did have a very profound influence upon the thoughts of people from his own day down till nearly our own day, and in that sense he was a great man. But he had no effect upon the course of events at all. He died while the Vandals were besieging Hippo, of which he was Bishop, and he had no effect upon politics at all.

LUSTGARTEN Berlin, I'm awfully anxious either to vindicate or to destroy this thesis of Sir Winston Churchill's. Let's put it into reverse to test it. If he said that almost every critical turn of historical fortune was due to the appearance of a great man, let's put it into reverse and say: Have there been many cases of critical turning in historical fortunes which have not been due to the appearance of a great man?

BERLIN Well now, I wish I were a better historian than I am, to be able to answer that. What has been regarded as the greatest turning in historical fortunes? Let's say, for example, the French Revolution. It is very difficult to discern in the French Revolution the work of any one great man, or even any collection of great men. The Russian Revolution started as nothing at all, as far as I can tell. It's exceedingly difficult to see who the great men were in, let us say, February of 1917; or even who the small men were in 1917, to whom this great turn of fortune could be directly attributed.

LUSTGARTEN Berlin, do you differ from Russell on this point? Because you made the point earlier that, if there had been no Lenin, the whole picture in Russia would have been different from 1917 onwards. Would you still say that?

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BERLIN Oh, I agree entirely with that, of course. If Lenin had not come upon the scene, things would have been totally different. Still, even the first revolution of 1917, which Lenin wasn't responsible for, was an immense overturn and seems to have sprung up from no personal roots at all.

HAILSHAM I think one could argue the case on the other side. The French Revolution, people would say, was due to the rise in France of a middle class able to challenge the aristocracy. Even the fall of the Roman Empire, I think people would say, was caused by the undue burden of the military machine going on century after century, resulting in high taxation. After all, there were a number of great men in the latter days of the Roman Empire. I suppose Stilicho and Belisarius were great men in their way, and had to some extent an influence on events, but they were overborne, so one would argue, by the pressure of events which were too much for them. The regime collapsed from its own weakness.

RUSSELL I don't agree with the expression 'pressure of events'. The Roman Empire collapsed, undoubtedly, through fiscal troubles, but those fiscal troubles would not have existed if there'd been a single great man capable of understanding finance, and there wasn't one. There were great men in that age, but they were Christian great men and they were occupied with Christian matters and couldn't be bothered with politics.

HAILSHAM Well, I certainly agree with you, Russell, in this. When you find an age in which the great men become preoccupied with metaphysical problems only, and forswear politics, you do get the one great man besieged in his little town of Bône in North Africa and unable to lift a finger to stay the tide of events. But I'm wondering whether the Marxist, if he were here, wouldn't say that all the crucial movements of history, the rise of the Roman Empire, even the rise of Alexander himself, weren't in fact due in part to the great economic development of mankind at the time, perhaps

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even the tactics of the armies, the institution of slavery and the need to supply the slave markets of the Middle East; and whether these factors didn't have as much to do with both the rise and fall of the Empire, as the smaller matters of finance and the preoccupation of Christian philosophers with questions of metaphysics.

LUSTGARTEN Russell, help me about this if you would. When I was a child – I'm just old enough for this – my history books always contained an endless account of kings and battles, and great men, and heroes and villains, and there were always pictures opposite. I always identified history, in my own mind, first, in the early stages, with people with waving plumes, and then later they would have bows and arrows, and finally they shot off things with gunpowder and so forth, but there was never anything but the isolated hero. Now do you think the reaction has gone too far with modern times – that you never have the isolated hero at all?

RUSSELL Yes, I think it's gone too far. But there's another point which hasn't yet been raised, and which I should like to raise. That is, that the man who has the most profound influence upon events is not the politician or general who appears on the stage of history, but the man who makes some new technical invention. Now the mariner's compass might quite easily have been invented at a much earlier stage than it was, and it was the mariner's compass that gave the West that control over the East which it just lately lost. The mariner's compass was enormously important: we don't know who invented it, but he was far more important than any of the politicians. I should say that by far the most important of all Greeks was Pythagoras, whose very existence is doubtful, but he apparently invented mathematics, and it was the invention of mathematics that was the chief contribution of the Greek civilisation.

HAILSHAM Is it more than a coincidence, Russell, that the existence of Pythagoras is doubtful? That nobody knows who invented the mariner's compass? May it not be the case that

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Pythagoras is a name we give to a number of relatively small men working together in an economic situation, and that the mariner's compass was evolved bit by bit by a number of quite ordinary skippers on the north coast of wherever it was – Europe, I suppose?

RUSSELL I don't think that's a feasible view. No. Certainly not in the case of mathematics, which I know more about than I do about the mariner's compass. But take, for instance, Plato's dialogue *Theaetetus*, where Theaetetus appears as a young man. If you don't read the history of mathematics, you may not realise that Theaetetus discovered the proof that there are exactly five regular solids and no more. Well, this was a thing of very great importance, which is at the basis of Plato's *Timaeus*, and has an enormous importance in the whole of history, not only of mathematics, but of philosophy.

BERLIN Yes, I would agree. I think we have perhaps confined ourselves a little too exclusively to men of action and not thinkers and inventors. But I think – Marxism having been mentioned, I suppose they ought to be given a fair run for their money, a short run. What would they say to this? They would say, 'Yes, indeed, great men are of course very essential, but they only invent their inventions at an appropriate moment of history, when the economic conditions call for it.' The great instance they always produce is the steam engine, which is always alleged to have been invented in Alexandria, but as the world wasn't ripe, it didn't produce any consequences. I don't know whether it was true that the steam engine was in fact invented ...

HAILSHAM They invented only rather a primitive steam engine which knew how to shut a door, rather like that thing which works by compressed air that you sometimes see on the doors of studios.

RUSSELL I don't think you can believe anything the Marxists say about that sort of matter. They have a thesis; and whoever has a

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thesis will falsify facts to suit it. I don't want to maintain either of these two theses: I think they're both wrong. But those who have a thesis – whether the one or the other – will speak untruthfully. And, to take Winston Churchill's remark about great men who resisted the Danes, after all there was no great man who resisted William the Conqueror, and why not?

LUSTGARTEN Well, this brings us to a rather topical point, Hailsham, doesn't it, because the Marxists, which I suppose applies primarily, and above all at the present time, in the Soviet Union, have been having a fine old discussion about the cult of personality in the past few months.

HAILSHAM Well that certainly is very much in the picture, isn't it? But it always struck me as something of a paradox that Marxism, which above all things is determinist, and believes that economic events should determine the whole course of human history, should have been so easily captured by the dream of this dictator Stalin, this father figure, at whom they're now so busy flinging mud. Now I myself, who believe in free will and in great men and other purely bourgeois concepts of that kind, was delighted to see that they saw the fallacy of it at long last. But I believe that Stalin was a great man, although a very bad one.

RUSSELL But look, Stalin and all the rest of them were not comparable, in importance to mankind, with the atomic physicists who discovered how to kill us all off. The physicists were far more important, far greater men if you judge by their importance. And the whole importance of the Soviet Union is due to inventions made by scientists.

LUSTGARTEN Berlin, are you supporting what I would call Russell's technological argument, that the great men are the technologists?

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BERLIN I don't know that I would really support that fully. I don't know how the rewards are to be divided. I should have thought that famed great men of action of the most brutal and violent kind have had at least as much effect as men like Lenin – in fact, as much even as the great discoverers – in the sense that men who can transform the lives of so many human beings, kill so many men and force so many men to alter their ideas so radically, probably have as great an effect on the history of mankind as even the most earth-shaking theoretical inventions and discoveries.

LUSTGARTEN Do you think it's possible that the situation is changing slightly as the world moves on, that the technologist is gradually acquiring the priority position as the great man?

HAILSHAM No, I think it always had the measure of truth that it has now. The alphabet for instance was invented only once by an unknown gentleman always given the mythical name of Cadmus. There's the system of arithmetic, which depends on the zero figure invented, I believe, originally by the Hindus, and transmitted to Europe by means of the Arabs. This was another great technological invention which revolutionised life. I'd like also to put in a word for the thinkers, for Plato and Aristotle and Augustine and Boethius. After all, it's only about once every two thousand years that one of those fellows is born, and the world goes on using the copper coinage which he's minted for their thoughts for about a millenium and a half before anyone else thinks of anything new to say.

RUSSELL I think it's quite true that people go on repeating these formulas. But what puzzles me is: Would it make any difference if they repeated somebody else's formulas? I can't see that it would.

LUSTGARTEN Berlin, I would like to put a question to you, because I know very well that the very phrase 'historical inevitability' is what is called 'in your comb'. Now if we take this

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pattern of history being influenced by events outside the influence of great men, how far does that impinge on the whole question of individual moral responsibility?

BERLIN That's a very different pattern, and not altogether relevant to what we were talking about before. But I should have thought that the extreme determinists, who really do believe that actions and volitions are conditioned by irrevocable factors, physical or otherwise, cannot really believe that accusations against men of being guilty of this or that, or praise of men for having done this or that, can be other than something purely aesthetic, something analogous to the cases where you congratulate someone for being handsome or ugly, which they can't help, or upon being stupid or intelligent, which they can't help, which is a very different sort of praise or blame from that which we give in moral matters.

HAILSHAM But that is a very old and very remarkable paradox. It is the determinists who on the whole have been the most vigorous exponents of free will. It was the Calvinists in the seventeenth century who held as a matter of faith and doctrine that everybody had his fate predetermined by some process of election before their birth. They were the great individualists of the seventeenth century, and of course great persecutors in one way; and we've got the Communists and the Marxists who believe the same now. It's absolutely foreign to their philosophy that there should be such a thing as praise or blame, because everything is determined; but does that stop them? Not a bit of it.

RUSSELL I agree with Hailsham. I think you have a paradox here. It's a paradox which somehow human nature doesn't seem able to cope with, and I try to just live with it comfortably, although I see that it's a paradox, and I can't quite get an intellectual reconciliation of the two points of view.

LUSTGARTEN Berlin?

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BERLIN Yes. I agree with you. I ask myself sometimes what it is that produces Hailsham's paradox, which I accept. I suppose that if you think that stars in their courses are fighting for you, and your victory is absolutely guaranteed, that gives such immense confidence to what you do, such contempt for danger, such complete absence of fear, such total disregard of both arguments produced against you and force employed against you, that that in itself produces the results.

HAILSHAM There's something fundamental in human nature which demands to be on the winning side. (BERLIN Yes. I'm afraid that's true.) You've got to believe in some enormous course of history which is on your side before you can really get going and lead your troops into battle. Either it's the family god or the tribal god or whatever it is, but there's got to be something outside and above yourself leading you on to certain victory before you really do your best.

LUSTGARTEN Well, I think I've allowed the philosophers a sufficient time in this discussion merely to philosophise. As chairman, I'm going to use the position that I have, perhaps quite unscrupulously, to try to drag it down to my level, which is in terms of personalities and nothing more or less. I started off by saying that Sir Winston Churchill was himself perhaps the greatest man of our age, which was a purely personal opinion of mine, and doesn't necessarily mean that I support Sir Winston Churchill in everything he's said or done – it just happens to be my opinion. Now, Russell, could we come down now, as I say, to this personal situation and talk about the great men that we may have known in our generation? Was I right in my generalisation for example?

RUSSELL What was your generalisation?

LUSTGARTEN Well, perhaps I shouldn't have called it a generalisation: my claim for Sir Winston Churchill that he was perhaps the greatest man of our time.

RUSSELL Well, I shouldn't quite say that. I mean, I have a very great admiration for him and I think him a very great man, but I don't think him as great a man as Einstein.

LUSTGARTEN Well, would you perhaps go a little further, because here we've got the two now slated, Winston Churchill and Einstein? Would you perhaps distinguish for us in generalisations – using the word correctly on this occasion, which I didn't on the last – why Einstein is greater than Churchill?

RUSSELL Because Einstein put into the world a new way of thinking about a very fundamental matter, which is the nature of space–time phenomena. It takes some time for that to reach the general public, but it will in time. After all, the things we take for granted, like the difference between mind and matter – that was once a philosopher's paradox; now it seems to us a commonplace. All this will ultimately reach the general public, and will alter their way of viewing the general world in the ordinary course of events.

LUSTGARTEN Well, in my cheap way I'm now balancing the credit of winning the Second World War with understanding space–time phenomena. What do you think, Berlin?

BERLIN Well now, far be from it me to decry Einstein, who was obviously one of the greatest geniuses of any time at all. I'm not sure that one oughtn't to introduce a distinction between men of genius, even men of very great genius, and great men. The great men, I think, are a romantic concept which was produced comparatively late in human thought, and it means, I think, men who've produced a really great impact on their fellow human beings during their lifetime. I don't know whether one would call Mozart a great man; there's no possible doubt that he was a marvellous genius. But I should have thought 'a great man' would, in some sense, as we use it, be reserved for human beings who had hypnotised other

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human beings in certain ways, and bound their spell upon them as human beings, whether for good or for evil.

RUSSELL I wouldn't admit the man who has a profound effect (although most people don't realise that it's he who's having the effect).

HAILSHAM I think it's awfully difficult, isn't it, to weigh up one great man against another? It's rather like trying to decide whether a man who wins a race is more or less efficient than somebody who makes a good speech. The characteristic of great men is that they specialise and, in order to co-equate them, you've got to equate them somehow in their specialist and wholly divergent greatnesses. I mean, for instance, I have had tea with Mr Gandhi, I also have had tea with Sir Winston Churchill. I should find it almost impossible to compare the two; they were utterly different; and they were both extraordinarily remarkable people to have tea with in many ways.

LUSTGARTEN I wasn't really seeking to place our great contemporaries in order of greatness, but merely to try to find out who you thought they were. Now, Russell, you named Einstein. Will you add anybody to that list?

RUSSELL There's Lenin. I think Lenin was a very great man indeed. I disapprove of what he did, but I think he was a great man: a very great man.

LUSTGARTEN Not for the same reasons as Einstein, obviously?

RUSSELL Oh no, quite different. But I should really think, if I had to set a criterion, my criterion would be: How different would the world be if this man had not existed?

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LUSTGARTEN Well then, just following that up for a moment, how different would the world have been if Hitler had not existed? Would you add Hitler to the list?

RUSSELL No, because he was a flash in the pan – he was a temporary phenomenon. He’s gone.

LUSTGARTEN Berlin, would you take Russell’s view about either Lenin or Hitler?

BERLIN I think I would disagree with him on Hitler. I think by that criterion Hitler has altered our world in a very profound and perhaps extremely deleterious way, but he has altered it. He has altered the history of Europe in a very profound and, I should have thought, decisive way. If that were the criterion, any large destructive individual will have to be included in the list.

LUSTGARTEN Hailsham?

HAILSHAM I’d like to put in a word for the unknown great man. Both of you apply, in one way or another, your criterion of greatness by examining the impact the candidate has on subsequent events. Now may it not be that the true criterion of greatness is the possession of some one characteristic in rather more than human degree? It may well be that the greatest man of our time is quite modestly existing, unknown to his fellow men, and will have no effect whatever on anybody who subsequently lives after him.

LUSTGARTEN Agree with that, Russell?

RUSSELL Well, that would require a different criterion of greatness from what I want to have. He might be a man whom, if I did know of him, I should profoundly admire. Yes. He might be. I might admire him more than anybody I do know of. That I should agree with.

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BERLIN I think it's really an empirical statement, that: that a great many great men, if one can say that, have in fact produced their impact through having certain characteristics exaggerated beyond normal human span. This is what is very depressing about a great many great men, that they are exaggerated and fanatical persons who lack a great many ordinary characteristics, but compensate this lack by these exaggerated aspects, exaggerated simplicity in vision, colossal blindness to a great many aspects of life, which enables them to ride roughshod over what other people would have seen as obstacles, but which they don't see at all.

HAILSHAM I think they do combine enormous faults with considerable virtues and talents at the same time. I think that is almost one of the criteria of greatness, the extraordinarily unbalanced and extreme degree with which they seem to pursue the particular light which comes upon them. But the other criterion which I put forward is originality. For centuries men go fumbling along with hoes and hand tools, and then somebody invents a machine, or else, in the military sphere, somebody invents the Macedonian phalanx, and the whole history of the world is altered. In religion, or science or philosophy, or poetry, somebody suddenly invents a new technique: where it comes from one doesn't know, but that I think is what constitutes greatness to me.

RUSSELL I should agree about the originality, but I don't think I should agree about the other characteristic.

LUSTGARTEN The unbalanced and extreme degree?

RUSSELL Yes, I don't agree about that. I think that Abraham Lincoln was undoubtedly a very great man, and I don't think he was unbalanced in any degree. I think one could say the same of Leonardo da Vinci. I don't think he was unbalanced at all, and he certainly was a very great man.

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LUSTGARTEN We are getting very close to agreement on criteria, except in one respect. Berlin, are you with us?

BERLIN Well, I wouldn't of course, agree. I don't say that all great men are unbalanced. I merely wish to say that certain forms of unbalance appear to help towards certain forms of greatness, but not originality, which Hailsham spoke of. What about Lenin, if he is a great man? It's very, very difficult for me to see where, if in any respect, he was original at all. Certainly not as a thinker. He was a childish thinker: very combative.

LUSTGARTEN Well, we certainly can't hope to solve, in a brief half-hour, all the problems which have been argued for centuries by philosophers and historians, but I hope that listeners will have found the views expressed provocative and stimulating. And I now close the discussion – not because, to quote Sir Winston's words, with which we started, 'I am a great figure of history making a sudden apparition in an era of confusion and decay', but just because, being the chairman of the discussion, it is my duty. Thank you all for listening.

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