

According to Bertrand Russell, "Hitler is an outcome of Rousseau; Roosevelt and Churchill of Locke." To what extent was he correct?

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Across centuries, the rise and fall of governments reveal recurring tensions in political ideology. Understanding these patterns not only helps explain past conflict but also sheds light on the political struggles we face today. One such attempt to explain these patterns comes from Bertrand Russell, who argued that “Hitler is an outcome of Rousseau; Roosevelt and Churchill of Locke.” Taken at face value, Russell’s claim appears specious. To meaningfully call one thing an “outcome” of another, there must be a traceable link of cause and effect, just as a scientific effect requires a demonstrable cause, or a literary work requires proven inspiration to claim influence. Without such a link, the leadership and the ideology may simply share surface similarities.

One way to establish cause and effect is if the leaders demonstrated engagement with or adoption of Locke or Rousseau’s ideas. Unfortunately, there is no clear evidence that Hitler, Roosevelt, or Churchill directly cited or referenced either philosopher. Neither *Mein Kampf* nor *Table Talk* offers any references to Rousseau (Hitler 1922). If anything, Hitler is most associated with Nietzsche, who rejected egalitarianism and had vastly contradictory ideas to Rousseau. Similarly, Roosevelt’s Fireside Chats and speeches, and Churchill’s key writings, show no historical evidence of these figures ever referencing these specific ideologies (Churchill 1938; Churchill 1940; Roosevelt 2023).

But history, unlike the natural sciences, must go beyond direct, obvious causal links. Where most natural sciences deal with present, observable phenomena, history by nature deals with the past (“Robert George Collingwood” 2020). The role of the historian is to understand that past in order to illuminate the future (Brogan 1972). And where most natural scientists construct experiments that generate empirical data to prove or refute their hypotheses, history must by nature be more speculative; the historian must delve into the internal thought processes of historical persons in order to reconstruct the forces that influenced their decisions (“Robert George Collingwood” 2020).

In answering the question being posed, the historian must therefore first ask: *can political ideologies exert a causal influence in either producing the leaders that emerged during World War II, or in shaping their specific choices and actions.*

This essay thus will begin first by exploring the extent that ideology has the power to shape historical outcomes. It finds that ideas like Rousseau's "general will" or Locke's "natural rights" do not remain frozen in time, they are selectively repurposed, distorted, or weaponized across different historical contexts. Power seeks justification, and philosophical ideas are powerful tools for legitimation; this is a core truth of political history.

But while political leaders will interpret and co-opt philosophical ideas for their own purpose in complex, non-linear, and contingent ways, Russell's broader point is that across history and into the present, political systems have consistently clustered around these two philosophical poles, oscillating between collective unity and individual liberty as they respond to the pressures of crisis and stability, with one path leading ultimately to totalitarianism. Dismissing Russell's claim and taking a myopic view of history is to miss his warning that critical inquiry into the Social Contract is not just a philosophical exercise, but a necessary discipline for shaping our future.

To properly explore the question of whether ideology can shape historical events and figures, we must first reject the extreme view that all of history is shaped by ideology. This view leads to teleology. (McDonough 2020) In the same way that a fanatical belief in fatalism can release a person from the responsibility of their choices, a view that "history is inevitable" would negate our current exploration. This is not a difficult leap; intuitively, even the most powerful ideology requires contingent conditions to take root - crises, charismatic leaders, or communication networks to propagate. Hitler would not have come into power if the Allies had the foresight to avoid the economic and political instability that would plague Germany after World War I. (Schwabe 2014)

Beyond avoiding the quandary of a teleological viewpoint, there are several problems with ascribing ideology as the key driver of historical outcomes.

First, political leaders are generally motivated not by ideology, but by their circumstances. Hitler was driven far more by a hunger for power than by Enlightenment

philosophy. Tapping into Germany's humiliation from the Treaty of Versailles, despair over hyperinflation and economic poverty of the Great Depression, and political paralysis from the instability and failed democratic experiment of the Weimar Republic, Hitler constructed a narrative of racial unity and exclusionary myth-making to exert authoritarian control.

On the other side of the war, both Roosevelt and Churchill, operating within the context of economic devastation, rise of fascism, and the existential threat of WWII, made decisions driven by necessity, more than principles (Farnham 1997; Heinrichs 1988). With the rising existential military threat of Hitler's Nazi Germany and its rapid territorial expansion, Roosevelt and Churchill's primary goal became national and allied survival. Fearing domestic sabotage and national disunity, in response, both leaders imposed laws that suppressed civil liberties, such as imposed press censorship, and internment of Japanese Americans (Lash 2021; Wallin 1974).

Second, political leaders rarely follow ideology blindly. Rather, they manipulate ideology to suit their ends. Hitler's appeal to the Volksgemeinschaft pervertedly twisted Rousseau's ideal of civic unity. Rousseau emphasized a collective, inclusive democracy where freedom emerges from direct participation (Rousseau 2017). Hitler distorted this into an exclusionary racial unity, reflecting not genuine Rousseauian ideas but a strategic ideological perversion. (Sherratt 2013; Nisbet 1943). The result is a political body constructed not by consent but by purification, enforced through law, propaganda, and, ultimately, genocide.

As for Roosevelt and Churchill, both leaders demonstrated extreme flexibility in expanding beyond liberal principles. Roosevelt's tenure, epitomized by the New Deal, is known for a wide expansion of government powers, clearly contradicting Locke's vision of a minimal state. Roosevelt attempted to expand the Supreme Court to install justices favorable to his policies (Charles 2000). Citing the threat of national security, Roosevelt framed the expansion of government power as necessary for the maintenance of the social contract (Preston 2025). Similarly, Churchill defended the empire as a civilizing force and opposed Indian self-governance, even during the height of Britain's promotion of liberal and democratic values (James 2013). Hitler, Churchill, and Roosevelt's leadership cannot be reduced to simple ideological outcomes of political philosophy, but rather reflect the flexible, contingent ways political leaders invoke and reshape ideas in response to historical necessity.

Third, a growing postmodern view rejects the ideology versus contingency argument entirely, pointing out that both concepts exist only within a narrative form (White 2014). A historian first selects the ideology or set of contingent events, and applies that filter onto how they view historical events; it exists only in retrospect. And so, increasingly, history philosophers reject single-cause explanations and instead emphasize how multiple, sometimes contradictory, factors shape human action.

If we accept, then, that history is invariably shaped by multiple forces - ideological, contingent, economic, demographic, identity, and more – we are then free to pursue to what extent ideological forces shaped these three leaders. To do so, a deeper reading is required of Russell’s opus *A History of Western Philosophy*, which he wrote between 1944-1945, and in which the quote appears (Russell 1945). More revealing is the preceding line:

Ever since [Rousseau’s] time, those who considered themselves reformers have been divided into two groups: those who followed him and those who followed Locke. Sometimes they cooperated, and many individuals saw no incompatibility. But gradually the incompatibility has become increasingly evident.

Russell is claiming that all who have aspired to shape political systems (“reformers”) have essentially arranged themselves behind either Lockean or Rousseauian principles. Moreover, Russell claims that over time, in practice, these ideologies *have proven incompatible*.

Interpreting Russell’s claim in his contemporaneous context reveals that his statement was never meant as a literal account of personal influence but as a symbolic framing of what he saw as an ideological battle. As a British philosopher and logician with a strong engagement with liberal political philosophy, he aimed to trace the roots of political ideologies to their philosophical origins (“Bertrand Russell” 2024). When it came to modern philosophy, Russell saw in Locke and Rousseau two distinct conceptions of the social contract leading to two different methods of governance. On the one hand, Rousseau’s view of the social contract saw the role of government as representing the general will, or agreement of the collective. Russell feared that any system based on collective will inevitably lead to centralized power, where a party or person can claim they “embody the will of the people.” This ideology ultimately facilitates totalitarianism and dictatorship, seen throughout history in Marxism, Communism, and Socialism (Nisbet 1943; Birzer 2020). Hitler, in Russell’s view, is just the 20th century

embodiment of Rousseau's ideas. On the other hand, Locke saw the role of government as protecting individual rights, namely property and defined natural rights. Russell believed that political systems built on Lockean principles would lead to democracy and a government with checks and balances, a belief surely influenced by The U.S. Constitution and England's parliament (Russell 1945; Sabine 1952; Faiella 2005). While there may have been contradictions or a stretch in ideology in Roosevelt's or Churchill's leadership, their actions mirror Lockean thought and their power was limited in the existing Lockean political system.

Russell's claim, when understood this way, is neither describing a literal chain of causation nor an empty symbolic gesture. Rather, it is a philosophical mapping of the ideological poles, collective unity and individual liberty, centralized power and limited government, that have been present for centuries. Russell's point was not that Rousseau caused Hitler, but that Rousseau's emphasis on collective unity, when radicalized, can legitimize centralized control. Likewise, Locke's ideas about liberty and property form the moral backbone of liberal democracies, even when sometimes compromised in practice.

Russell's analysis invites us to step back from immediate historical contingencies and examine how ideas about power, freedom, and governance echo across centuries, sometimes in forms the original thinkers could not have predicted.

Taken one step further, Russell's insight suggests that the story of political governance is one of recurring oscillation: periods where the collective will takes precedence, sometimes dangerously so, followed by moments of retrenchment toward individual liberty and constraint on state power. History does not progress in a straight line toward freedom or tyranny; rather, it moves in cycles of balance and imbalance between these two poles. Russell's analysis invites us to ask whether any political system can permanently resolve this tension—or whether the best we can do is remain aware of its constant reemergence.

30 years ago, the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Berlin Wall led thinkers like Francis Fukuyama to proclaim the "end of history," suggesting that liberal democracy, rooted in Lockean thought, had permanently triumphed (Fukuyama 2006, Fukuyama 2024). Yet the decades since have proven otherwise. Authoritarian and fascist regimes have reemerged, and even liberal democracies including the United States and the countries of Western Europe have faced waves of populism and political polarization, reviving fears of strongman rule cloaked in populist rhetoric. ("The Corrupting of Democracy" 2019; "January 6 Was Practice" 2021)

Seen in this light, Russell's claim is not just a historical interpretation but a philosophical warning. Rousseau's ideal of the general will, while inspiring democratic solidarity, can also be manipulated by autocrats seeking to suppress dissent in the name of unity. Locke's emphasis on individual rights and limited government remains a fragile safeguard, easily strained in times of fear. We study history to learn from the past and change the future. Russell's quote serves as a reminder that ideas about social contract, liberty, and collective shape how we understand power, justify control, and define the political communities we live in.

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