

## Prevent the crime of silence

*Bertrand Russell*

*The first meeting of Members of the Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal, which took place in London on 13 November 1966, was addressed by Bertrand Russell. He was joined by Jean-Paul Sartre and the Italian jurist, Lelio Basso, among other notable men and women who were to give their time to hear the evidence presented to the Tribunal. The United States' war on Vietnam was to continue for several long years but, during the course of its sessions in Stockholm and Copenhagen (it was prevented from meeting in Paris), the Tribunal would make available eyewitness testimony of what was actually happening there.*

*In Rome in 1974, there followed a second Russell Tribunal, initiated by Lelio Basso, on Repression in Latin America. Russell had died in 1970, and it was his widow, Edith, who extended the initial invitations to those who agreed to serve in the investigations. After three sessions, a Permanent People's Tribunal was established, which continued its work in response to popular requests from many countries,*

*'There were many others who sought to emulate the Vietnam inquiries,' Ken Coates informed an international press conference in Brussels, in March 2009, which launched the Russell Tribunal on Palestine (see Spokesman 104). One such initiative, in more recent times, was the World Tribunal on Iraq, with a truly global range of participants, which held its final session in Istanbul in June 2005.*

*Now, the Russell Tribunal on Palestine will hold its second session in London from 20 to 22 November 2010. The London*

*Bertrand Russell founded The Spokesman. We reprint his 1966 address in anticipation of the London session of the Russell Tribunal on Palestine which meets in November 2010.*

*session will consider corporate complicity in Israel's violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law. It follows an initial session in Barcelona in March, which found European Union Member States in breach of international and internal European Union law with respect to the protection of human rights of Palestinians (see Spokesman 108).*

*We reprint Russell's address of 1966, which resonates still.*

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Allow me to express my appreciation to you for your willingness to participate in this Tribunal. It has been convened so that we may investigate and assess the character of the United States' war in Vietnam.

The Tribunal has no clear historical precedent. The Nuremberg Tribunal, although concerned with designated war crimes, was possible because the victorious allied Powers compelled the vanquished to present their leaders for trial. Inevitably, the Nuremberg trials, supported as they were by state power, contained a strong element of *realpolitik*. Despite these inhibiting factors, which call in question certain of the Nuremberg procedures, the Nuremberg Tribunal expressed the sense of outrage, which was virtually universal, at the crimes committed by the Nazis in Europe. Somehow, it was widely felt, there had to be criteria against which such actions could be judged, and according to which Nazi crimes could be condemned. Many felt it was morally necessary to record the full horror. It was hoped that a legal method could be devised, capable of coming to terms with the magnitude of Nazi crimes. These ill-defined but deeply felt sentiments surrounded the Nuremberg Tribunal.

Our own task is more difficult, but the same responsibility obtains. We do not represent any state power, nor can we compel the policy-makers responsible for crimes against the people of Vietnam to stand accused before us. We lack *force majeure*. The procedures of a trial are impossible to implement.

I believe that these apparent limitations are, in fact, virtues. We are free to conduct a solemn and historic investigation, uncompelled by reasons of state or other such obligations. Why is this war being fought in Vietnam? In whose interest is it being waged? We have, I am certain, an obligation to study these questions and to pronounce on them, after thorough investigation, for in doing so we can assist mankind in understanding why a small agrarian people have endured for more than twelve years the assault of the largest industrial power on earth, possessing the most developed and cruel military capacity.

I have prepared a paper, which I hope you will wish to read during your deliberations. It sets out a considerable number of reports from Western newspapers and such sources, giving an indication of the record of the United States in Vietnam. These reports should make it clear that we enter our inquiry with considerable *prima facie* evidence of crimes reported not by the victims but by media favourable to the policies responsible. I believe that we are justified in concluding that it is necessary to convene a solemn Tribunal, composed of men eminent not through their power, but through their intellectual and moral contribution to what we optimistically call 'human civilization'.

I feel certain that this Tribunal will perform an historic role if its investigation is exhaustive. We must record the truth in Vietnam. We must pass judgment on what we find to be the truth. We must warn of the consequences of this truth. We must, moreover, reject the view that only indifferent men are impartial men. We must repudiate the degenerate conception of individual intelligence, which confuses open minds with empty ones.

I hope that this Tribunal will select men who respect the truth and whose life's work bears witness to that respect. Such men will have feelings about the *prima facie* evidence of which I speak. No man unacquainted with this evidence through indifference has any claim to judge it.

I enjoin this Tribunal to select commissions for the purpose of dividing the areas of investigation and taking responsibility for their conduct, under the Tribunal's jurisdiction. I hope that teams of qualified investigators will be chosen to study in Vietnam the evidence of which we have witnessed only a small part. I should like to see the United States Government requested to present evidence in defence of its actions. The resistance of the National Liberation Front and of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam must also be assessed and placed in its true relation to the civilization we choose to uphold. We have about five months of work before us, before the full hearings, which have been planned for Paris.

As I reflect on this work, I cannot help thinking of the events of my life, because of the crimes I have seen and the hopes I have nurtured. I have lived through the Dreyfus Case and been party to the investigation of the crimes committed by King Leopold in the Congo. I can recall many wars. Much injustice has been recorded quietly during these decades. In my own experience I cannot discover a situation quite comparable. I cannot recall a people so tormented, yet so devoid of the failings of their tormentors. I do not know any other conflict in which the disparity in physical power was so vast. I have no memory of any people so enduring, or of any nation

with a spirit of resistance so unquenchable.

I will not conceal from you the profundity of my admiration and passion for the people of Vietnam. I cannot relinquish the duty to judge what has been done to them because I have such feelings. Our mandate is to uncover and tell all. My conviction is that no greater tribute can be provided than an offer of the truth, born of intense and unyielding inquiry.

May this Tribunal prevent the crime of silence.

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people of Palestine**

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**Bob Crow**  
General Secretary

**Alex Gordon**  
President