

Must hate and death return?

Bertrand Russell

Russell's Autobiography, completed in the 1960s, is widely recognised as one of the high points of the genre. These excerpts are from the final chapter, simply called 'The Foundation'.

Writing in his Autobiography, Bertrand Russell said of forming the Peace Foundation in 1963:

This should be not just for this or that purpose. It should be for any purpose that would forward the struggle against war and the armaments race, and against the unrest and injustices suffered by oppressed individuals and peoples that in very large part caused these. Such an organisation could grow to meet the widely differing demands. It could, also, reorientate itself as circumstances changed. A good part of my time, therefore, in 1963, was taken up with discussing plans for the formation of such an organisation ...

Unfortunately, I fell very ill at the beginning of September when we had decided to make our plans public, but by the end of the month, on September 29, 1963, we were able to release them. After I had made a vehement statement, we gave the press men the leaflet that my colleagues had prepared about each Foundation. That concerning the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation gave a list of the then sponsors, and a letter that U Thant had written for the purpose on the outside. I had talked to him about our plans among other things and written to him about them. He had been warmly sympathetic, but explained that he could not be a sponsor because of his position as Secretary-General of the United Nations. He offered, however, to write the carefully worded but encouraging letter which we printed [see below] ...

Less than two months after the Foundation was established I, in common with the rest of the world, was shocked by the news of the murder of President Kennedy. Perhaps I was less surprised by

this vicious attack than many people were because for a number of years I had been writing about the growing acceptance of unbridled violence in the world and particularly in the United States. Some of my articles on this subject were published, but some were too outspoken for the editors of the publications that had commissioned them.

As I read the press reports in regard to the President's assassination and, later, the purported evidence against Oswald and his shooting by Ruby, it seemed to me that there had been an appalling miscarriage of justice and that probably something very nasty was being covered up. When in June, 1963, I met Mark Lane, the New York lawyer who, originally, had been looking into the affair on behalf of Oswald's mother, my suspicions were confirmed by the facts which he had already gathered. Everyone connected with the Foundation agreed with my point of view, and we did everything that we could, individually and together, to help Mark Lane and to spread the knowledge of his findings. It was quite clear from the hushing-up methods employed and the facts that were denied or passed over that very important issues were at stake. I was greatly impressed, not only by the energy and astuteness with which Mark Lane pursued the relevant facts, but by the scrupulous objectivity with which he presented them, never inferring or implying meanings not inherent in the facts themselves.

We thought it better if the Foundation itself were not involved in supporting those who were ferreting out the facts of the matter and propagating knowledge of them. We therefore started an autonomous committee with the unsatisfactory name of 'The British Who Killed Kennedy? Committee'. We got together a fair number of sponsors and even a secretary, but not without difficulty, since many people thought the affair none of our British business. A few understood what skulduggery on the part of American Authorities might portend, not only for the inhabitants of the United States, but for the rest of the world as well. Those few had a hard time. We were well and truly vilified. A threatening telephone call from the United States Embassy was received by one of our number. Committees similar to ours were set up in some other countries and some of their officers received similar warnings. Finally, the Foundation had to take our Committee under its wing, and its members toiled both night and day in consequence of this extra work. By August, when I wrote an article called '16 Questions on the Assassination', meetings were being held, and other statements and articles were being issued. Feeling ran high. Mark Lane himself travelled about this country as well as about others, including his own, recounting the facts that he was unearthing which refuted the official and generally accepted pronouncements concerning the matter. I was sent

the Warren Commission's Report before it was published in September, 1965, and at once said, to the apparent annoyance of many people, what I thought of it. Word went about that I was talking through my hat and had not even read the report, and could not have done so. In point of fact, Lane had sent me an early copy which I had read and had time to consider. Now that the Warren Commission Report has been examined minutely and it is 'respectable' to criticise it, many people agree with me and have blandly forgotten both their and my earlier attitudes. At the time, they were too timid to listen to or to follow the facts as they appeared, accepting blindly the official view of them. They did all that they could to frustrate our efforts to make them known.

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Occasionally I have been invited by the North Vietnamese to give my opinion about various developments in the [Vietnam] war. They asked my advice as to the desirability of permitting Mr Harrison Salisbury, Assistant Managing Editor of the *New York Times*, to visit Hanoi as a journalist. Mr Salisbury had previously attacked me in his introduction to the Warren Commission's Report, in which he wrote of the Commission's 'exhaustive examination of every particle of evidence it could discover'. These comments were soon seen to be ridiculous, but I suspected that he would have great difficulty in ignoring the evidence of widespread bombardment of civilians in North Vietnam. I recommended that his visit was a risk worth taking, and was pleased to read, some weeks later, his reports from Hanoi, which caused consternation in Washington and probably lost him a Pulitzer Prize.

I have been, of course, in close touch with the two representatives of North Vietnam who are in London and with the North Vietnamese Chargé d'Affaires in Paris. I have corresponded with various members of the South Vietnam National Liberation Front and with members of the United States armed forces as well as with American civilians, both those who support and those who oppose the war. There is no lack of information if one wishes to have it. But there is great difficulty in making it known to the general public and in persuading people to pay attention to it. It is not pleasant reading or hearing.

The more I and my colleagues studied the situation, the more persuaded we became that the United States' attitude on Vietnam was wholly indefensible and that the war was being conducted with unprecedented cruelty by means of new methods of torture. We concluded, after careful examination of the great body of facts that we had amassed, that the war must be ended quickly and that the only way to end it was to support the North Vietnamese and the Liberation Front unequivocally. Moreover, we

feared that so long as the war continued it would be used by America as an excuse for escalation which was likely to end in a general conflagration. We set up the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, which brought together those groups which saw the Vietnam war as flagrant aggression by the world's mightiest nation against a small peasant people. Supporters of the Campaign held that justice demanded that they support the Vietnamese entirely. I delivered the opening address to the founding of the Solidarity Campaign in June, 1966, and this was later published in my book on Vietnam. The Campaign sent speakers all over the country, together with the Foundation's photographic exhibition on the war, and formed a nucleus of support in Britain for the International War Crimes Tribunal.

The Tribunal, of which my Vietnam book told, caught the imagination of a wide public the world over. For four years I had been searching for some effective means to help make known to the world the unbelievable cruelty of the United States in its unjust attempt to subjugate South Vietnam. At the time of the Korean War I had been unable to believe in the allegations brought by Professor Joseph Needham and others charging the Americans with having used that war as a proving-ground for new biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction. I owe Professor Needham and the others my sincere apologies for thinking these charges too extreme. By 1963, I had become convinced of the justice of these allegations since it was clear that similar ones must be brought against the United States in Vietnam. Early in that year, I wrote to the *New York Times* describing American conduct in Vietnam as barbarism 'reminiscent of warfare as practised by the Germans in Eastern Europe and the Japanese in South-East Asia.' At the time this seemed too strong for the *New York Times*, which first attacked me editorially, then cut my reply and finally denied me any access to its letters columns. I tried other publications and determined to find out more about what was at that time a 'secret war'. The more I discovered, the more appalling American intentions and practice appeared. I learned not only of barbaric practices, but also of the most cynical and ruthless suppression of a small nation's desire for independence. The destruction of the Geneva Agreements, the support of a dictatorship, the establishment of a police state, and the destruction of all its opponents were intolerable crimes. The following year I started sending observers regularly to Indo-China, but their reports were continually overtaken by the enlargement of the war. The pretexts for the 'escalation', particularly the attack upon North Vietnam, reminded me of nothing less than those offered a quarter of a century earlier for Hitler's adventures in Europe. It became clear to me that the combination of aggression, experimental weapons, indiscriminate

warfare and concentration camp programmes required a more thorough and formal investigation than I was able to manage.

In the summer of 1966, after extensive study and planning, I wrote to a number of people around the world, inviting them to join an International War Crimes Tribunal. The response heartened me, and soon I had received about eighteen acceptances. I was especially pleased to be joined by Jean-Paul Sartre, for despite our differences on philosophical questions I much admired his courage. Vladimir Dedijer, the Yugoslav writer, had visited me earlier in Wales, and through his wide knowledge of both the Western and Communist worlds proved a valuable ally. I also came to rely heavily on Isaac Deutscher, the essayist and political writer, whom I had not seen for ten years. Whenever there were too many requests for television and other interviews about the Tribunal, I could rely on Deutscher in London to meet the press and give an informed and convincing assessment of world affairs and of our own work. I invited all the members to London for preliminary discussions in November, 1966, and opened the proceedings with a speech (see *Spokesman 110*). It seemed to me essential that what was happening in Vietnam should be examined with scrupulous care, and I had invited only people whose integrity was beyond question. The meeting was highly successful, and we arranged to hold the public sessions of the Tribunal over many weeks in the following year, after first sending a series of international teams to Indo-China on behalf of the Tribunal itself.

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The essential unity of American military, economic and Cold War policies was increasingly revealed by the sordidness and cruelty of the Vietnam war. For people in the West, this was most difficult to admit, and again I experienced the silence or opposition of those who had come to accept my views of the previous decade. In the third world, however, our support was very considerable. Cruelty has not gone wholly unchallenged.

My views on the future are best expressed by Shelley in the following poem:

*O cease! must hate and death return?
Cease! must men kill and die?
Cease! drain not to its dregs the urn
Of bitter prophecy.
The world is weary of the past,
O might it die or rest at last!*

Final stanza of 'Hellas' (478. 1096-1101)