



*Lelio Basso and Simone de Beauvoir at the Stockholm Session
of the Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal. Photo: John Duffett*

Lelio Basso

Ken Coates

In 2004, Ken Coates recalled his relationship with Lelio Basso, the Italian lawyer and activist, to mark the latter's centenary. The memoir was published in an Italian translation. It recalls the Vietnam International War Crimes Tribunal in the 1960s, and the subsequent tribunal on Repression in Latin America, which convened in the early 1970s, after Russell had died. The Basso Foundation took a central role in the Latin America Tribunal, and went on to establish the Permanent People's Tribunal, which continues to this day. The PPT's website records 48 sessions and judgments on diverse matters from 1979 to 2021. Currently, several tribunals invoke the tradition of the Vietnam Tribunal, including the Russell Tribunal on Kashmir, the Belmarsh Tribunal about Julian Assange, the People's Tribunal on Murders of Journalists in The Hague, the Arms Exports Tribunal in Hamburg, and the People's Tribunal on Police Killings in the United Kingdom.

I met Lelio Basso in the early sixties when he was recruiting helpers to produce the *International Socialist Journal*, which miraculously appeared in three languages for several years. Lelio came to London, where he invited me to join his team as joint English editor, with Jim Mortimer, who was later to rise high in the Labour Party, and who remains, after all these years, an active and dedicated Socialist.

From the beginning, I found myself discharging all the responsibilities for the English edition, organising the distribution, and the very modest advertising budget. I had very little experience as an editor, but I

Ken Coates edited *The Spokesman* for 40 years from its founding in 1970 until his death in 2010.

discharged the work more efficiently than the other tasks that fell on me, in which I had no experience whatever. Lelio wanted me to place an advertisement in *The Observer* newspaper, which was duly done. We received, if my memory serves me right, nine enquiries as a result, which I found a deeply disillusioning experience. Slowly, by dint of perseverance, we achieved a modest list of subscribers. There were one or two massive orders from Africa: but we soon discovered that the entrepreneurs who placed them had no appetite whatever for payment of their bills. How Lelio contended with the similar problems which arose in the distribution of the French language edition, I never discovered: but I hope that the presence of distinguished contributing editors from France and Belgium made the work of representing the journal easier to do effectively.

The journal made its impact, and I received many enquiries about it years after it had stopped appearing. Whatever else it did, it certainly contributed to my own education both in the range of contributions which were gathered internationally, and in the discussions which took place between the international editorial group which met regularly, either in Brussels or in Paris.

By 1965, when I was expelled from the Labour Party for my activities against the Vietnam war, it was interesting to see that involvement in the *International Socialist Journal* was listed among my offences, as proof-positive of my unsuitability for membership of the Party. That one of the journal's other editors subsequently became the Party's General Secretary provided its own wry commentary on the shifting moods of political fashion.

Although the Labour Party functionaries disapproved of my activities against the Vietnam War, their view was not universally supported, and I received an urgent invitation from Bertrand Russell to go and see him at his house in North Wales. He invited me to join the board of his new Peace Foundation, and I stayed with him from then until his death in 1970. Indeed, I have remained actively involved in the work of his Foundation ever since.

That was why Lelio Basso was invited to become a member of the first Bertrand Russell Tribunal on the war in Vietnam. Lelio had a unique set of qualifications for this role, because of his profound knowledge of jurisprudence, and his long political life. There were a number of highly competent legal people in the first Tribunal, but among them Lelio was outstanding.

The Vietnam Tribunal held its first session in Stockholm, and generated

some very compelling evidence. But behind the scenes, it gave rise to some feverish quarrels, not all of which can be ascribed to the angular behaviour of Russell's secretary, Ralph Schoenman. Ralph Schoenman deserves great credit for resolutely driving the Tribunal forward, and refusing to be daunted by the many impediments which were placed in its way. The largest of these was the decision by President de Gaulle to forbid the Tribunal the right to meet in France. Sartre had written a personal appeal to de Gaulle, and must have been very disappointed indeed when his approaches were disdained by the President. But Schoenman and Vladimir Dedijer, the Yugoslav diplomat and historian, acting from different ends of the political spectrum of the Tribunal, secured the necessary permission for it to meet in Stockholm. Schoenman subsequently made some highly undiplomatic remarks about the Swedish Prime Minister, which understandably enraged Dedijer. The tolerance of all the Tribunal's distinguished members was severely put to the test, and it was agreed that the organisation of the work would pass to the Secretariat which worked in Paris. So it was that an altogether less painful session was convened at Roskilde in Denmark, which allowed a number of American ex-servicemen to provide comprehensively damning testimony about the conduct of the war.

The Tribunal can be adjudged extremely successful, in spite of the difficulties encountered by the brave people who set out to organise it. Lelio Basso delivered the allocution summarising the second session in Denmark, referring back to a decree by the American President of the Tokyo Court which judged the Japanese war criminals shortly after the Second World War. He was able to draw on a large body of cogent scientific and technical evidence, and the opinions of distinguished legal authorities. In a profoundly emotional judgment, he referred to the abuse of the Convention of the Rights of Man and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This was to assume great importance in the second Tribunal, which nobody was anticipating at the end of the harrowing process which completed its work on the Vietnam War.

Shortly after the conclusion of the Vietnam enquiry, Bertrand Russell died in 1970. 1972 was the year of his Centenary. It was also the year when Lelio Basso responded to large numbers of complaints about torture and repression in Brazil, and made a proposal to the Russell Foundation that it should sponsor a new international Tribunal on this question. Originally it was planned that this Tribunal should be constituted along similar lines to that on Vietnam, and should sit in Caracas in 1973, holding two further sessions, one in North America and one in Western Europe. But as the

work of establishing the Tribunal went ahead, repression gathered momentum in Chile and elsewhere. The remit of the enquiry had to be widened to take in a number of other countries in Latin America where fierce oppression was spreading widely. In the end, the Tribunal was to meet in Rome and Brussels, and to complete a punishing schedule of work.

The initial members of the Tribunal were invited to join it by Edith Russell on the basis of an agreed appeal which was widely circulated. A large body of sponsors was mustered, to help with popularising the project, and raising funds for it. The Tribunal was constituted under the Presidency of Lelio Basso assisted by a number of Vice Presidents: Vladimir Dedijer, the Yugoslav historian, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the Colombian writer, Francois Rigaux, Professor of International Law at the Catholic University of Louvain, and Albert Sobul, the distinguished historian. Some members of the Vietnam Tribunal continued to serve with the investigation into Latin America: they included Laurent Schwartz, Basso himself and Dedijer.

Proceedings of the Tribunal were all published in a number of languages.

From this experience there developed the permanent institutions established by Lelio Basso himself: the Lelio and Lisli Basso Foundation, and the International Foundation for the Rights and Liberation of the Peoples, and, separately, the third and fourth Russell Tribunals which considered Civil Liberties in the Federal Republic of Germany, and the Rights of the Indigenous People of the Americas.

Today it has become more fashionable for Governments to sponsor this kind of enquiry, although not all of these have been conducted with the same sense of impartiality, and fidelity, to the principles of international law and justice as these early prototypes of human rights initiatives set up by entirely voluntary bodies, in answer to the imperatives of international solidarity.