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50 years after Russell: an interview with Tariq Ali

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Tor Krever*

You arrived in Britain from Pakistan in 1963 to study at Oxford and quickly became a central figure in the British anti-war movement. It was a letter to the Observer, though, in 1965, taking the paper to task for its support of US policy in Vietnam, which I believe first drew the attention of Bertrand Russell. He wrote to you congratulating you on your missive.

I got this letter from Bertrand Russell out of the blue. He was one of the great philosophers produced in this country. He came from an incredibly aristocratic family—Russell Square, you’ll find, is named after his family—but was a conscientious objector during the First World War and was a very radical figure who only became more radical as he grew older. Russell had set up a Peace Foundation, where all the money from his royalties accrued. And since he was a very successful author, and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, his books sold.

The idea for a Tribunal to investigate US crimes in Vietnam came from Russell’s personal secretary, Ralph Schoenman.

Yes, I think the idea came from Schoenman, who was an American citizen—very hard-line, hated what his country was doing to Vietnam, and happened to be a philosophy student who Russell liked because he was a maverick. His idea was to set up a War Crimes Tribunal modelled on the Nuremberg Tribunal. But none of us at the time thought it would take off.

To put it in perspective, you’ve got to understand it wasn’t just Russell. It’s known as the Russell Tribunal because Bertrand Russell was a global figure, but in fact there were two philosophers: Bertrand Russell from Britain and Jean-Paul Sartre from France. Sartre played not so much an organising role but a very important political, ideological, intellectual role in justifying the creation of a War Crimes Tribunal to try the world’s largest and most powerful country for war crimes. And it only took off because Russell and Sartre had enormous prestige, both certainly in Europe, and Russell in particular was very well known in the US as well.

I think both Russell and Sartre agreed on the other members of the Tribunal, and it was a very varied list.

You suggested at least one of the participants, Mahmud Ali Kasuri.

Yes, he was my suggestion, a brilliant lawyer in Pakistan who defended the poor free of charge, defended political prisoners without taking a penny. He was later involved in writing the constitution of the country in the early 70s. He looked a bit like Orson Welles, as the

* Assistant Professor, School of Law, University of Warwick and PhD Candidate, London School of Economics. Email: t.krever@warwick.ac.uk. Tariq Ali has been a leading figure of the international left since the 1960s and is a longstanding member of the editorial committee of *New Left Review*. This is an edited version of an interview which took place on 5 December 2017 as part of the ‘Fifty Years after Russell’ event at LSE. That event, marking the 50th anniversary of the Russell War Crimes Tribunal, was chaired by Gerry Simpson and also included interventions by Ayea C, ubukc, u and Jayan Nayar.

Playboy report on the War Crimes Tribunal noted, much to his consternation and his wife's anger.¹ Then there was Vladimir Dedijer, the great historian from Yugoslavia. There were people from all over the world; it was a truly international tribunal: David Dellinger from the American pacifist movement, Isaac Deutscher, Simone de Beauvoir.

What sort of publicity did the Tribunal attract as it began its preparatory work?

There was very little publicity. You have to remember that those were pre- Internet days, and we had very little publicity in the mainstream press and media. It was covered, but usually very critically. The aim had been to have it in France, but de Gaulle wouldn't permit it. Then we tried Britain, where Harold Wilson's Labour government said it too was not going to allow it. Germany was tried—there was an idea to have it in Nuremberg—but the Germans said please don't embarrass us, the US is our ally. Finally, Sweden agreed.

Wilson's decision was predictable given his government's support for the war, but de Gaulle was openly opposed to the war.

Yes, we were quite surprised by this. De Gaulle did oppose the war and actually quite strongly it has to be said. In France, *Le Monde* was completely opposed to the war—some of the best reports from Vietnam were published in *Le Monde*—and even *Le Figaro's* coverage was pretty strong compared to the British press.

In preparation for the Tribunal's hearings, you were asked by Russell and Schoenman to go to North Vietnam on a fact-finding mission.

We had to have teams of people going into Vietnam in order to bring back evidence, take photographs, talk to people, and see with our own eyes what was going on. Very few people went to North Vietnam in those days. 99 per cent of journalists covering the war did so from South Vietnam—from the American side basically. The North Vietnamese covered the war, and their footage was shown in China and Russia, but very rarely was it shown on Western networks. So Western coverage of the Vietnam war, I would say, was biased in favour of the US, but you occasionally had very good journalists who defied convention. I think it was Morley Safer on CBS in the US who made a report, which was shown on the BBC as well, in which he said 'I'm with a group of US marines, we're going into the jungle, and now I'm going to show you'—I can't remember the exact words—'how we fight for freedom and democracy'. And they blowtorched and burned houses with women and children in them because most of the guerrilla fighters were not there. Children were running out of these houses on fire. And Safer said 'this is how we are fighting for freedom and democracy'. This was shown on American television.² And it's because of those experiences that they've become very strict on what can be shown and not shown by journalists.

So we were sent to North Vietnam to bring back evidence. There was only one flight, organised by the International Control Commission.³ It was its plane, and before we boarded in Laos, we were made to sign a document saying that in the event that this plane crashes or we're blown up, our families have no right to claim any compensation. We said that's the least of our problems if we've been blown up, so we all signed happily. We were told that the people most likely to shoot down the plane were the Laotian guerrillas, the Pathet Lao, because they

¹ K Tynan, 'Open Letter to an American Liberal' 15(3) *Playboy* (1968) 83.

² Safer's report from the village of Cam Ne was heavily criticised by US military and political leaders.

³ The International Control Commission was established in 1954 to oversee the implementation of the Geneva Accords.

had been bombed so heavily by the Americans that they fired at anything they saw in the air.

We arrived in Hanoi at night under cover of darkness; during the day, the bombing was too severe. Just as the plane flew down the lights went on for a minute or two so the pilot could see the landing strip and as soon as we landed the lights went off again. The people who came to greet us came with kerosene lamps and candles, not even torches.

That's how we arrived. I remember on my team there was a French physician, Abraham Behar, an American, Carol Brightman, editor of *Viet-Report*, a US anti-war magazine, and another doctor, Gustavo Tolentino.

And the Scottish trade unionist . . .

And the great Scottish trade union leader Lawrence Daly, who had brought along a bottle of whisky to give to Ho Chi Minh, but by the time we got there Lawrence had consumed most of it.

*You compiled a report for the Tribunal recording what you saw and heard, much of it quite disturbing. For example, you wrote of your visit to Dinh Gina district: 'We travelled there during the night. . . . The next day was the most depressing day I spent in Vietnam. I saw bombed schools and hospitals. They had been direct hits. There could be no doubt whatsoever that this was deliberate. In the village of Hai Nan, a coastal village not far from the 7th Fleet, almost every house had been destroyed. . . . This was the story in almost every village I visited. These were no military targets, and the United States could not but be aware of this fact.'*⁴

The targeted bombing of civilians was very deliberate. Look, it happened during the Second World War as well. Dresden was bombed as punishment; Hiroshima and Nagasaki were nuked as punishment.

It was very depressing, this experience. The first week I was there, we were bombed almost every day. The bombs that were dropped were designed to harm and kill and maim civilians: they dropped bombs shaped like guavas which lay there in the ground until some child, thinking it was a ball or something, picked it up and then it exploded. They were designed for that purpose. So to see that, and to see it every day, and then to see the effects of chemical weapons that were used—napalm bombing, children without arms, children with their bodies burned, women burned, men burned—it was quite depressing. But I have to say something, which is an awful thing to say: after two weeks, it's horrific but you get used to it. It's awful, but it's like the Vietnamese would say to us: 'don't be too upset; you know, we live here and we're upset too, but life has to go on'. But there was no shortage of evidence.

*In your memoir, reflecting on this experience, you write that you were struck by the fact that the Vietnamese felt no animosity towards the American people themselves, only the US government.*⁵

Yes, this was the line of the North Vietnamese government: 'we don't blame the ordinary American people, we know many of them are opposed to this war; the Americans aren't our enemy, it's their government'. They always made a very fine distinction. And as the American anti-war movement grew and grew they were vindicated in this approach. I remember listening to tapes they had made, which they would play through the loudspeakers

⁴ T Ali, 'Report from Cambodia and North Vietnam', in P Limquenco & P Weiss (eds), *Prevent the Crime of Silence: Reports from the Sessions of the International War Crimes Tribunal founded by Bertrand Russell* (Allen Lane, 1971) 133, 135-36.

⁵ T Ali, *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties* (Verso, 2005).

where the American troops could hear them, and it was incredibly clever. They would make direct appeals to African-American soldiers, saying: ‘What are you doing here, killing us? You should see what’s happening in your own country. Have you forgotten the lynchings, have you forgotten the riots taking place, have you forgotten what was done to you?’ This had a big impact, one shouldn’t underestimate it. Amongst the marines who protested finally and joined the anti-war movement, African-American marines were probably in the majority.

It must have been a shock to return from North Vietnam to the UK.

I was there for six weeks travelling every day, and then I came back from this intensity into the sort of normality and calm of Europe. It’s like George Orwell wrote in *Homage to Catalonia*: he’d gone to fight against Franco, seen the worst things that can happen to you, and come back from this intense war to find that the milk is being delivered every day and once a week the *New Statesman* comes through your door. He said it’s very off putting to be so normal when such horrors are going on.

But that’s why the anti-war movement grew so rapidly. People weren’t prepared to take it. It’s the finest period, I think, in American history, in which such a huge anti-war movement developed in that country. It has no precedent in the imperial history of any other country. What the French did to the Algerians, both in Algeria and in France, is horrific. And there were people who protested. But there was no mass movement against the Algerian war or against France. Likewise in Britain: for hundreds of years there was an empire, and there were good people who said this is atrocious, but there was no mass movement.

When you came back from Vietnam you wrote up your report, and several months later you were flying to Stockholm for the first session of the Tribunal. You delivered your evidence, but there were also several North Vietnamese civilians who had come to testify. What was it like to hear and see them speak of their experiences?

At the Tribunal itself, the Vietnamese presentations were the most dramatic. In some of the footage you can see the faces of the judges as they see the people who have come from North Vietnam—Simone de Beauvoir’s face as she sees a child with a back completely burned. It’s not that people didn’t know these things were happening; they did. But actually to confront it, in front of you like that, shocked many of the people who were presiding over the Tribunal.

Look, the Tribunal was an attempt to shame the Western world: to make it see that the Geneva Conventions were being violated every single day. It was to show that from the Nuremberg Tribunal no lessons had been learned—it was as if Nuremberg was something very specific to the Germans alone and couldn’t apply to anyone else. And this angered people and was why the War Crimes Tribunal was a partial success, in my opinion.

The Americans were invited. We invited the Americans to send a spokesman to defend themselves, which they didn’t do. Their line was basically that these things were exaggerations, they didn’t happen. Of course, not so long after the War Crimes Tribunal, the My Lai massacre happened and every single newspaper in the world reported it. But even to this day people think there was only that one massacre. There were hundreds of massacres like that which happened. Hundreds.

Let me give you one simple but awful example. During the Iraq war, I was speaking at a literature festival in Chicago. There was a great deal of horror at the torture photographs that had come out from Abu Ghraib prison showing the sexual torture of prisoners. People were shocked. And of course it was awful, but it was nothing compared to what they did in Vietnam. An African-American ex-GI who had fought in Vietnam put his hand up in the audience and the chair called on him. He said ‘I fought in Vietnam and you people who are shocked by this—

and you're right to be shocked by it—let me tell you something I saw with my own eyes. Two Vietnamese prisoners were brought in before us, a team of marines. We wanted to find out where their platoon was so we could go and take them by surprise. We said to one of them “if you don't tell us you'll suffer a horrible fate”. The man didn't talk, so we disembowelled him in front of his fellow Vietnamese and said to the other “that's what's going to happen to you unless you tell us where your platoon is”. The other guy didn't talk. We just shot him dead'. People were stunned in this hall of about 700. He said ‘that's what we did, so don't think any of what's happening in Iraq is new’.

I've always been struck by a central tension at the heart of the Tribunal. On the one hand, it presented itself as a quasi-judicial institution: there were constant appeals and references to international law, it heard witnesses, it handed down a judgment framed in very legalistic terms—all the trappings of a formal legal proceeding. And yet, on the other hand, it was clearly not, nor did it ever have the pretence of being, such a proceeding. Sartre and Russell were very clear on this. As Russell put it in his opening statement to the second session of the Tribunal: ‘We are not judges. We are witnesses. Our task is to make Mankind bear witness to these terrible crimes and to unite humanity on the side of justice in Vietnam.’⁶ So much of the criticism of the Tribunal focused on its shortcomings as a judicial body—the Tribunal members were biased, and so on. But this, I always thought, missed the point. Of course we're biased, Russell happily acknowledged; how can you know anything about what's going on in Vietnam and not be biased?

This was not a Tribunal created by any state. It was a Tribunal essentially created by philosophers, lawyers and activists who were strongly opposed to the war. So there was no pretence that this was, if you like, an impartial Tribunal. It was a response to what the political culture in these societies was refusing to acknowledge: that huge crimes were being committed. So the legality of the Tribunal was from the beginning dubious. It was a sort of act of resistance to a war, but an act carried out through this particular form. The aim was to open the eyes of the world—to say look, here is the evidence we have brought: study it, see what you think, do something about it.

Now, to say, as some said, that we were biased, that both sides committed crimes—to compare two powers so unequal in every way, one having total control of the air, bombing day in day out, the other having nothing in the air—it's just a joke to say that there was equality. The Vietnamese certainly didn't kill prisoners. Even McCain, who was taken prisoner while I was in Hanoi: the restraint shown by the peasants who captured him—these were people who have been bombed constantly. But there was a discipline too: don't kill American pilots that you capture, they should be imprisoned.

Everyone was clear about this: we had no legal power, we had no legal standing. We were screaming. It was a scream of rage to the world: look, are you going to do something or not. And from that point of view I think it was a partial success. It had a huge impact in other parts of the world.

There was a lot of coverage of the Tribunal in the Third World. Although presumably readers and viewers there knew what was going on in Vietnam already.

Yes, but they did cover it. It was covered even in Latin American countries which were not at all progressive, largely because of the prestige of Russell and Sartre—to a certain extent they felt that they had to cover it. Similarly in Africa: the Tribunal was covered in Ghana, in

⁶ Quoted in N Chomsky, Foreword to Limqueco & Weiss (eds) (1971) 9, 9.

Tanzania, in quite a lot of countries in that part of the world. But in the Western world, and in particular in the United States, which was the country we were targeting to say wake up, there was very little. But the US was waking up—after My Lai the anti-war movement doubled—and I think the Tribunal helped to a certain extent.

Certainly no one denies now that the US committed war crimes. During the Reagan period, a huge attempt was made to cover up the war crimes again and to say that the war wasn't so bad. A lot of people from the far right in that administration were saying we didn't lose the war, it was just a setback. But they did lose the war: they were defeated militarily and politically by the Vietnamese and that is not a small thing.