

## INSPIRED BY BERTRAND RUSSELL'S PASSION FOR JUSTICE

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Erik Eriksson. *Jag såg kärleken och döden* [I Saw Love and Death]. Falun, Sweden: Ordupplaget, 2008. Pp. 271 + 24 pp. of photos. With 30-min. DVD, "Vietnam 1972–73". 163 kronor. ISBN 978-91-85785-20-9.

When Bertrand Russell wrote the Prologue—"What I Have Lived For" (dated 25 July 1956)—to his planned *Autobiography*, he did not know that he had almost fourteen more years of hard work ahead of him, which I would maintain was governed by a fourth passion that had inspired him from an early age: his passion for justice, which thrives on and summarizes the three he mentions: the longing for love, the search for knowledge and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind.

Russell's legacy rests on great accomplishments in at least four areas: logic and the foundations of mathematics, philosophy, literature, and political activism—particularly the last: his passionate efforts to inform the world about what the United States was doing in Vietnam and Southeast Asia in general. The us had been involved in the region since President Truman decided that it was politically more important to give in to French claims on the governance of Vietnam than to defend the right of each nation to be governed by its own people.

Russell wanted to give the victims of French and American imperialism a voice in order to "*Prevent the Crime of Silence*", which was the title of the book published by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation in 1971 containing documentation from the International War Crimes Tribunal on American war crimes in Indochina. The tribunal had taken place in Stockholm and Roskilde four years earlier.<sup>1</sup>

"The Russell Tribunal", or "the Russell–Sartre Tribunal" as the French preferred to call it, was from an international law perspective a unique event that fulfilled some of the intentions of the planned International Criminal Court, the realization of which was hampered by the burgeoning Cold War. In 1948 the UN

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<sup>1</sup> See my "Secondary Bibliography of the International War Crimes Tribunal: London, Stockholm and Roskilde", *Russell* 31 (2011): 167–87.

had added “genocide” as a crime, but there was still no legal definition of “aggression”, as is the case to this day.

Regardless of its lack of formal power, the IWCT’s important message was of a moral character. At the second session (20 Nov.–1 Dec. 1967) in Roskilde, half an hour south of the Danish capital, three former US GIs testified for the first time publicly about their own and other soldiers’ crimes. When the My Lai massacre was revealed in fall 1969, Russell’s former private secretary, Ralph Schoenman, was quoted in the *New York Times*<sup>2</sup> as saying that the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation of America was creating a citizens’ commission of inquiry (the “CCI”) into US war crimes in Indochina. Tod Ensign and Jeremy Rifkin read the notice and got involved in finding more veterans to testify at public hearings. Schoenman soon went on to other things while Ensign and Rifkin were joined by Vietnam War veteran Michael Uhl (who has written a book about it to be reviewed in a forthcoming issue of *Russell*). The CCI held its first inquiry in February 1970 in Annapolis, Maryland. It was followed by inquiries in Springfield, Massachusetts; Richmond, Virginia; New York City; Buffalo; Boston; Minneapolis; Los Angeles; and Portland, Oregon. Ensign and Uhl worked together until the early ’80s. Ensign co-founded Citizen Soldier in 1969 to advocate on behalf of GIs and veterans.<sup>3</sup>

The IWCT also inspired the establishment of the Permanent Peoples’ Tribunals, the latest of which, “The Russell Tribunal on Palestine”, will have its fourth and last session in *New York*, in October, which, of course, in “the best of possible worlds”, would have been *the* place for the Russell Tribunal to have met in April 1967 in connection with the demonstration organized by the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, which attracted more people than any earlier demonstrations.<sup>4</sup> Russell recorded a message for it that ended: “The American people should be told their Government is waging an aggressive and imperialist war NOW. This is the task of the American movement as it is the challenge to our War Crimes Tribunal. This Spring the people of America should be mobilized to stop the destruction of Vietnam. Let us join in a clear struggle to the end NOW.”<sup>5</sup>

This and much more (Pugwash, CND, Committee of 100, work on behalf of political prisoners) could be advanced as evidence for Bertrand Russell’s impor-

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<sup>2</sup> “Peace Group to Set Up Panels on Atrocity Charges”, *New York Times*, 30 Nov. 1969, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://citizen-soldier.org/>. (Visited 15 June 2012.)

<sup>4</sup> Melvin Small, *Antiwarriors: the Vietnam War and the Battle for America’s Hearts and Minds* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2002), Chap. 4.

<sup>5</sup> “Recorded Message for Spring Mobilization”, large-print typescript for tape-recording, RA2 220.148669. The complete text, which has several references to the upcoming Tribunal, is printed in this issue of *Russell*, pp. 80–2.

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tance as a political activist, and this part of his legacy is probably the one that will be remembered most by future generations of the general public.

It is in this context that Erik Eriksson's book about his part in the Swedish Support Committee for the IWCT, and his subsequent visits to Vietnam as a journalist, photographer, reporter and producer of documentaries and TV programmes about the American War in Indochina, becomes of relevance for those interested in the protest movements of the '60s in general and the antiwar movement in particular, of which the Russell Tribunal was an outstanding event, which for the first time had former soldiers testify about their own and others' war crimes.

Bertrand Russell had a special relationship to Sweden that manifested itself in many ways. Starting with a translation of *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916) within two years of its publication, all of Russell's later popular writings were promptly translated and read by many liberal, leftist and progressive workers and intellectuals. Russell's general sceptical philosophy and radical political views fell on good earth not only in Sweden but in all of the Nordic countries.

From the end of the Second World War Russell's philosophical and political views had a strong influence on Swedish academic, intellectual and political thinking. His *Problems of Philosophy* (poorly translated in 1922), *History of Western Philosophy, Human Knowledge: Its Scopes and Limits* and *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* soon became required reading for undergraduates and advanced students of theoretical and practical philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

The Swedes also showed their appreciation of Russell's literary accomplishments by awarding him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950. More than fifteen years later Sweden allowed Russell to present his case against US aggression in Indochina, when no other country had the independence and guts to do so.

In the Swedish edition of the proceedings of the IWCT there is attached a "Word of thanks",<sup>7</sup> which was translated as "Afterword" and included in *Prevent the Crime of Silence*:

The Tribunal would not have taken place in May 1967 without the courageous support of Stellan Arvidson [a Social Democratic MP] and the Swedish Tribunal committee. We wish to extend our warm thanks to writers, intellectuals, workers, trade unions, actors, artists and scholars—not only for their financial support, but also for the solidarity they have shown; to volunteers from the following organizations: the United FNL Groups, Clarté, the Socialist Union and Young Philosophers for their generous participation; to Joachim Israel, Björner Torsson, John Takman, Christer Hogstedt, Hans Göran Franck,

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<sup>6</sup> For more information, see my review, "Russell's Influence in Sweden", *Russell* 5 (1985): 169–74.

<sup>7</sup> *Russelltribunalen: Från sessionerna i Stockholm och Roskilde. International War Crimes Tribunal*, ed. Peter Limqueco and Peter Weiss (Stockholm: PAN/Nordstedt, 1968), p. 268.

Gunilla Palmstierna-Weiss and Erik Eriksson... We have also received help from Arlette Elkaim, Russell Stetler Jr., Ulf Oldberg and Patricia Howard.<sup>8</sup>

How the Bertrand Russell International War Crimes Tribunal on American war crimes in Vietnam ended up having its first session in Stockholm in the beginning of May 1967 is an interesting story full of intrigues and coincidences.

The launching of the *rwct* took place in London between 13 and 15 November with an appearance by Russell on the 16th making an official statement about the aims and objectives of the tribunal.<sup>9</sup> Peter Limqueco of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, but living in Sweden, had been delegated to Stockholm, where a Support Committee was founded on 10 November 1966.

Ralph Schoenman and other members of the *BRPF* had been in contact with people in Sweden before the idea of a war crimes tribunal came up. After that they started to look for individuals who might support the Russell Tribunal. Erik Eriksson, who earlier had been a schoolteacher for some years but at the time was studying history at the University of Stockholm, became an active foot-soldier in the army of the Swedish Support Committee.

Swedish students, artists, intellectuals, musicians, etc., and their leftist union sympathizers had at this point created one of the most outspokenly critical organizations against the US war of aggression in Indochina outside the United States (and Japan): the United *NLF* Groups was not interested in peace alone, but in the total defeat and withdrawal of all foreign troops in Indochina.

The Social Democratic government led by an aging and America-friendly Prime Minister, Tage Erlander, supported an organization that just wanted peace. That was too tame for the justice-hungry students, teachers, artists, etc.; and a majority of the protesters joined the United *NLF* Groups when local groups got together and started a more centralized organization.

On 25 November 1966, Russell sent an inquiring letter to the governments in London, Paris, Geneva and Stockholm regarding the issuing of visas for certain Vietnamese witnesses and asking for an “agreement in principle” to this effect. Erlander did not answer until 9 December and politely “urged” Russell “not to choose Sweden as a site for such meeting”.<sup>10</sup>

That’s all he said! The Support Committee was warned by the Swedish Foreign Minister Torsten Nilsson in the beginning of April 1967 that he had

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<sup>8</sup> *Prevent the Crime of Silence: Reports from the Sessions of the International War Crimes Tribunal Founded by Bertrand Russell*, London, Stockholm, Roskilde, ed. Peter Limqueco and Peter Weiss with additional material ed. Ken Coates and a foreword by Noam Chomsky (London: Allen Lane the Penguin P., 1971), “Afterword from the Editors of the Swedish Edition”, pp. 373–4.

<sup>9</sup> *Auto.* 3: 216.

<sup>10</sup> Cable from Erlander to Russell, 9 Dec. 1966, RA2 320.181721.

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heard from members of the French government that President de Gaulle planned, at the last moment, to refuse the Tribunal permission to meet in Paris.<sup>11</sup> At a special meeting of the Support Committee on 24/25 April plans for all necessary arrangements to meet in Sweden that were within their power were outlined. The meeting lasted the whole night, and was followed by a press release that was published the same day. Next day (the 26th) was the official IWCT press conference.<sup>12</sup>

In an e-mail to me the 75-year-old Erik Eriksson gave me an updated account:

The extraordinary board meeting held in April was prompted by de Gaulle's refusal. It was Russell Stetler who came to Stockholm and to our special meeting. He was a young American, I believe, who worked for the Russell Foundation. It was he who brought Bertrand Russell's question to us.

It was John Takman who called C. H. Hermansson [leader of the Communist Party and a great supporter of the IWCT] regarding The People's House, as far as I can remember. And it was I who was asked to call Olof Palme [then Minister of Education, later P.M.]. First his wife answered and said that Olof was not home. Then I called again later and got his answer. If Joachim Israel<sup>13</sup> also called Palme later that night I do not know, maybe they knew each other.

I have never met Bertrand Russell. I had not even read him, and have to this day not read him as a philosopher, only parts of what he wrote about Vietnam. I was one of the translators of the little publication with Russell's articles on Vietnam, which was released in Sweden with the title *Battle for Peace*.<sup>14</sup>

I studied history at the University of Stockholm, when I was drawn into the Vietnam issue, and I became a member of a student group called the *Young Philosophers*, because most people read philosophy. The students had read Russell, but I and some other members of the group were not philosophers.

I wanted to be a journalist and there I was. I wrote a lot about Vietnam all those years, and did a lot of film from 1972 when I started working for Swedish Television. I reported for TV from Vietnam and worked, at times, for American television, CBS and NBC. But I have not saved everything I wrote, as a reporter I wrote thousands of articles

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<sup>11</sup> See Fredrik Lindblad, "The International War Crimes Tribunal. Stockholmssessionen 2–10 maj 1967. Förberedelser, mottagande och genomförande i Sverige" (BA honours thesis, Linköping U., 1994), pp. 39, 54.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Joachim Israel, professor of sociology at University of Lund, 1971–87, some of whose books are translated into Danish, German and English, was the other member of the Swedish Support Committee who has written about the Stockholm session. See his "Russelltribunalen", *Kulturtidningen Hjärnstorm*, nos. 31–2 (1988): 78–81, and Per-Olof Olofson's obituary, "In Memory of Joachim Israel", *International Review of Sociology* 11 (2001): 277–9.

<sup>14</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Strid för Freden: Tal & Artiklar 1964–66* (Stockholm: Bo Cavefors Bok förlag, 1967). It was published in March, in time for the Tribunal sessions on 2–10 May.

over the years, most of it flows by.

Vietnam was an important time and a great thing, but I only have a few items left. But most of what I have written and filmed about Vietnam came after the Tribunal. 1967, I had just discovered the Vietnam issue. During the Tribunal months, I was one of the young activists who managed to work around the clock. The decisions were taken by the older members; high-level contacts were taken from them. (3 May 2012)

The Social Democratic government could not interfere with the issuing of visas, which was a matter for existing Swedish law and regulations (Eriksson, pp. 35–7). Palme indicated that the Support Committee should go ahead and submit applications for visas to the relevant government department. When Russell then congratulated Erlander “on firmly upholding freedom of speech in Sweden” (26 April 1967, RA2 320.181727), this was misplaced. It was Swedish law that deserved congratulation. Whatever Palme told Eriksson, the fact is that Erlander and his colleagues had no jurisdiction over applications for visas for the five North Vietnamese concerned which reached “The Foreign/Immigrant Department/Commission” on 28 April. This department had seven members, four of which voted for granting visa and three against. This was an important battle, but not really crucial, because the Vietnamese could testify in Prague, if need be.

As for the meeting place (*Folkets Hus*), that was in private hands. The Stockholm sessions were announced as private meetings, and a police presence was not required. Only accredited journalists and ticket-holding members of the public were permitted to attend. But considering the graphic impact of the injured witnesses, with their healed but very visible phosphorus and napalm burns, their presence was of great importance.<sup>15</sup>

Eriksson’s e-mail summarizes well what he writes about his work for the Russell Tribunal in his book, which comes with 30 excellent photographs and a 30-minute DVD of some of his film footage as a reporter in Vietnam. He was one of the first Western journalists in Hanoi.

After the tribunal Eriksson continued to work as a writer, filmmaker, editor, producer, etc., and kept supplying the Swedes with well-informed articles and programmes about American foreign policy and particularly about their aggression in Vietnam, and many other relevant subjects.

In the beginning of the ’80s he turned to successful creative writing. He now lives in Grisslehamn, a small village (249 inhabitants in 2010) located on the coast by the Sea of Åland just north of Stockholm. He has published several novels about the history of a family from this area. I have only read one, which is about how the Swedish government allowed German ships to pass through Swedish waters on their way to and from their allies in Finland. This was still

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<sup>15</sup> See Staffan Lamm’s prize-winning documentary, with footage of the adult and child victims, in the DVD *Russelltribunalen* (Stockholm: Front Film AB, 2003).

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unknown to most Swedes when Eriksson's book was published. Hopefully the books will all be translated into English one day.

I thank Eriksson for answering my telephone calls and e-mails and supplying me with a lot of interesting material relevant to the IWCT on American war crimes.

It is about time that the American people lived up to its promises from 1973 to compensate the people of Vietnam for their unjust suffering, which so bothered a lot of people all over the world, because some, governed by a passion for Justice, cared enough to make it known and prevent another crime of silence.

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