

THE LEGACY OF THE RUSSELL TRIBUNAL

STEFAN ANDERSSON
STEFANKARLANDERSSON@LIVE.COM

Michael Uhl. *Vietnam Awakening: My Journey from Combat to the Citizens' Commission of Inquiry on U.S. War Crimes in Vietnam*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2007. Pp. vii, 255. ISBN: 978-0-7864-3074-1. US\$28.45.

In the introduction to *The Vietnam War on Campus* (2001), Marc Jason Gilbert writes:

... though critics of the anti-war movement on campus remain loath to admit it, at the forefront of the allegedly elitist, ignorant, draft-evading, placard-carrying (and perhaps card-carrying) campus protesters were soldier-turned-scholar members of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). These students knew the war as intimately as did any Pentagon pundit. They were also aware that other veterans had concluded that the limits on American foreign policymaking imposed by the demonstrations of their compatriots at home were undermining the war in which they had fought. They were, however, not only willing, but often eager to lead their fellow students in what they saw as an effort to save their nation's honor and to prevent the further loss of life in Southeast Asia. (P. xiii)

Michael Uhl is an example of such a student. His book was written to satisfy, in part, the requirements of a doctoral program at the graduate school of the Union Institute. It consists of two major parts, the first covering Uhl's background, growing up in a middle-class family on Long Island, and the

circumstances that led him to join the Counterintelligence Corps in Vietnam, and a second in which he chronicles through contiguous episodes his postwar years as a “front line activist in the anti-Vietnam War veterans’ movement” (p. 2).

In this review I will limit myself to Uhl’s experiences as a former GI and graduate student looking for ways to express his protests. This led him to Jeremy Rifkin, Tod Ensign¹ and the Citizens’ Commission of Inquiry into United States War Crimes in Indochina (CCI), which had been created by Bertrand Russell’s private secretary and head of the BRPF in New York, Ralph Schoenman, in November 1969 in connection with the news about the My Lai Massacre, which had taken place in March in 1968.

After the session of the IWCT in Stockholm in May 1967, Schoenman went to Bolivia to be present at the trial of Régis Debray. When he tried to join the second session in Roskilde in November, American secret diplomacy was one step ahead of him. After several failed attempts to get into Denmark, he had to return to the US.² This marked the beginning of the end of Schoenman’s relationship with the BRPF, the IWCT and Bertrand and Edith Russell.

Back in the office on Fifth Avenue, he continued to handle the BRPF correspondence. He succeeded in returning to the UK for a short time during the summer of 1968 and visited a surprised and concerned Russell in Wales, before he was deported. He returned to the New York BRPF office.

When the truth about the My Lai Massacre was revealed, Schoenman reacted immediately and started to organize the National Committee for a CCI and look for former GIs prepared to testify on war crimes, just as at the second session of the IWCT in Roskilde.³ In “Organizing Veterans through War Crimes Documentation”, Ensign writes:

While the Russell Tribunal hearings were known within the American peace movement, two more years passed before anyone began documenting U.S. war

¹ Tod Ensign died in May 2014. I visited him at the Citizen Soldiers’ office in New York in June 2012 and had two long, exciting sittings with him when he told me stories about Schoenman, the CCI, the failed cooperation with Jane Fonda, Mark Lane and the VVAW, Noam Chomsky, Richard Falk and much else, not all of it fit to print. He gave me a copy of *G.I. Guinea Pigs* (1980), which he wrote with Uhl; *America’s Military Today* (New Press, 2004); and the letterhead for the CCI, which contains much interesting information about staff, sponsors and the National Coordinating Committee. I regret I didn’t have a tape recorder with me.

² See SCHOENMAN, “How I Was Deported from Britain” (1969).

³ This was the first time in American military history that former GIs testified about war crimes during an ongoing conflict. Kenneth Tuck, Peter Martinsen and Donald Duncan gave testimony and answered questions. For different editions of the proceedings, see my “A Secondary Bibliography of the International War Crimes Tribunal” (2011).

crimes policies by gathering testimony from Vietnam veterans.

In November 1969, Jeremy Rifkin and I, both antiwar activists, responded to a public call from the Bertrand Russell foundation in New York to organize Citizens Commissions of Inquiry to document war crimes in Indochina. This proposal was stimulated by the disclosure that American troops had slaughtered almost four hundred Vietnamese civilians at My Lai (Son My) eighteen months earlier.⁴

Ensign and Rifkin met with Schoenman. They discussed the concept of “citizens’ commissions” and decided to work together. In a later version of the same article, published as “American War Crimes and Vietnam Veterans” in Robbins’ *Against the Vietnam War*, Ensign says that “Unfortunately for Jeremy and me, all the Bertrand Russell folks were offering us was the concept of the citizens’ commissions and their moral support” (p. 217).

The *New York Times* of 30 November 1969 reported in “Peace Group to Set Up Panels on Atrocity Charges” that Russell’s personal secretary was calling for a meeting in the Diplomat Hotel on 11 December to discuss the formation of a Commission of Inquiry: “Mr. Schoenman said that he could not allow Lt. Calley ‘to be used as a scapegoat’ in the Songmy case, saying that all the atrocities allegedly committed in Vietnam had been carried out ‘on orders from those higher up’” (sec. C3, p. 30).

At about the same time things were happening at Plas Penrhyn in Wales that eventually made Schoenman leave the CCI in the hands of Ensign, Rifkin, and Uhl (who got on board in spring 1970).

This is what seems to have happened. In the early summer of 1968 Schoenman saw a draft of Volume III of Russell’s *Autobiography*, became very upset and wrote a letter to Chris Farley and Ken Coates, the two other directors of the BRPF: “The truth is that every major political initiative that has borne the name of Bertrand Russell since 1960 has been my work in thought and deed.”⁵

It was not until late fall 1969 that Farley and Coates showed Schoenman’s letter of 29 June 1968 to Russell. This prompted Russell to officially disassociate himself from him, claiming that he had not been his secretary “for more than three years” (“Russell Disavows American Ex-Aide”, *New York Times*, 10 Dec. 1969). In a letter to Schoenman written 23 November, Russell said that “I confirm all that I said in my letter of 16 July [which has not been deposited in the Russell Archives], and should like to make it quite clear that neither my wife nor I wishes his or her name to be associated with your activities and that we give you no authority to use our names in any way.”⁶

Schoenman’s reaction was to rename the BRPF branch to The American

⁴ Available at: (http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Texts/Narrative/Ensign_War_Crimes.html).

⁵ The letter is quoted in RUSSELL’s “Private Memorandum” in CLARK, p. 651.

⁶ RA REC. ACQ. 1,343, Felton box 5.66.

Foundation for Social Justice before he decided to go on with something else in his life and left everything to Ensign, Rifkin and Uhl. In a short section, “Exit Ralph”, of his book Uhl says:

... Ralph’s decision to abandon his campaign around publicizing American war crimes in Vietnam was likewise hastened by the fallout from a brief notice that had appeared nearly three months earlier in the *New York Times*.... The story reported that Lord Bertrand Russell “had tried unsuccessfully to get from Mr. Schoenman an undertaking ‘that he will not use my name in any way whatsoever to suggest that I am associated with his activities or he with mine.’” Ralph’s disgrace, some say, resulted from the jealousy of rivals within Russell’s Peace Foundation who exploited Schoenman’s reputation as an overbearing egocentric to turn Lord Bertie against his former secretary. Whatever the truth, Ralph Schoenman, a ubiquitous presence on the American Left throughout the sixties, and a player of some importance in the anti-Vietnam War Movement, is a man who is unlikely to ever receive his due in the histories of these times. (P. 133)

Uhl tells how he joined the CCI and how they arranged hearings with former GIs to testify about war crimes. The only hearing arranged by Schoenman took place in Annapolis in the beginning of March 1970, where Peter Martinsen, who was one of the three GIs at Roskilde, testified together with Robert Bowie (Bob) Johnson, who had joined the ICC after Schoenman had contacted him. Uhl says that Martinsen “may have been the very first rank and file vet to denounce American war crimes publicly”(p. 132).

After much work by members of the CCI, the National Veterans Inquiry in Washington took place in the beginning of December 1970,⁷ when an active officer expressed his criticism of the Armed Forces’ high command. This was a first in American military history, and he would get in trouble for it.

After the hearings in Washington the CCI started to negotiate with people from VVAW and prepare for the Winter Soldier Investigation, which took place in Detroit early in February 1971.⁸ In *The Turning* (1999) Andrew Hunt relates how Barry (a.k.a. Jan Barry Crumb), who was an early member of VVAW, met Ensign and Rifkin and how they encouraged Crumb and the VVAW to assist the CCI. Hunt goes on to say that thanks to the tireless efforts of anti-war Vietnam veterans such as Uhl and Johnson, CCI had assembled a sizable list of men who had served in Vietnam and were willing to share accounts of

⁷ See JAMES SIMON KUNEN, *Standard Operating Procedure* (1971).

⁸ See *The Winter Soldier Investigation* (1972); MOSER, *The New Winter Soldiers* (1996); STACEWICZ, *Winter Soldiers* (1997); and NICOSIA, *Home to War* (2001). Nicosia says: “Of all the many accomplishments of VVAW over more than three decades, none demanded so much individual courage, none brought down so much condemnation, and none is likely to have such a lasting impact, as the Winter Soldier Investigation” (p. 73). See also KULIK, “*War Stories*” (2009).

atrocities. According to Uhl it was at such a meeting that Jane Fonda, who was then being closely advised by Mark Lane, first proposed the Winter Soldier Investigation (p. 153).

By August the two groups started to collaborate to prepare the Winter Soldiers Investigation. However the collaboration ended a few months before the event took place because of conflicts⁹ connected with Lane, who had the support of Fonda with the contacts and the money to bring the project into being. The CCI arranged the hearings at Annapolis and a dozen other cities in the US and held a press conference in Toronto on 4 March 1970.

Uhl has much more interesting to say about those other hearings arranged by the ICC and his experiences and reflections before he ends his story at the end of 1971.¹⁰ In April that year he had testified at the Dellums Committee Hearings on War Crimes in Vietnam, and he and Ensign, Rifkin and Johnson supplied an introduction to a book that was published a year later.¹¹

The Russell Tribunal was banned from the US, but thanks to Martinsen, Duncan (also present in Denmark), Uhl and other GIs prepared to testify about war crimes, Russell's message was kept alive. He got his revenge beyond the grave after being dead for just a month. The protests expressed by the Russell Tribunal had by then crossed the Atlantic Ocean and first influenced GIs to testify about war crimes. Then anti-war sentiments moved into the Armed Forces and through the underground press¹² and the coffeehouses

⁹ HUNT writes about the split on pp. 57–67, which is also discussed in NICOSIA and KULIK. Fonda did a lot for the anti-war movement with her show "F.T.A." (Fuck the Army). See MARY HERSHBERGER, *Jane Fonda's War* (2005), Ch. 2, "GI Jane: Winter Soldier and Free The Army".

¹⁰ In 1970, Uhl joined Ed Murphy in exposing the Phoenix Program, testified at the International Enquiry on US War Crimes in Stockholm, Sweden, and, in 1971, he was called to testify before a US Congressional subcommittee investigating the CIA's Phoenix assassination program in Vietnam. Also in 1971 he toured Australia and New Zealand as a representative of the US anti-Vietnam War movement. That same year he cofounded The Safe Return Amnesty Committee advocating for a universal amnesty on behalf of Vietnam-era military deserters. Safe Return was a predecessor of Citizen Soldier, which he also cofounded, and, until 1981, served as codirector, working on a wide range of campaigns advocating for GI and veteran rights. He co-authored the first book-length treatment on the health effects of chemical herbicides (Agent Orange) on U.S. veterans of the Vietnam War. He is a charter member of Veterans for Peace founded in Maine (1985), where he moved with his family in the mid-1980s. He serves on the board of directors of Veterans for Peace, and is editor of the organization's national newsletter. He has his own website. See <http://www.veteranscholar.com/> and from there go to <http://www.intheminfield.com/category/michael-uhl/>, where you'll find a very interesting article about President Obama's speech in 2012 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War.

¹¹ See *The Dellums Committee Hearings on War Crimes in Vietnam* (1972).

¹² Regarding the underground GI press and the Vietnam War, see OSTERTAG's *People's*

Russell's *Appeal to the American Conscience* and other writings would be read by both soldiers and officers and contribute to the military collapse and an end to the US war of aggression in Southeast Asia.¹³

Russell's cry for justice could not be silenced. His voice has been carried on by the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal—an international opinion tribunal founded in Bologna (Italy) in 1979 at the initiative of Senator Lelio Basso, who was an important member of the IWCT and participated in later Russell Tribunals, the latest of which is the Russell Tribunal on Palestine, which had its closing session in Brussels in March last year.¹⁴

Russell's annoying habit of speaking truth to power is carried on by Noam Chomsky, Daniel Ellsberg, Michael Moore and international law expert Richard Falk, not to mention gadflies like Julian Assange and Edward Snowden. Perhaps one can see Russell as the patron saint of all whistleblowers¹⁵ and hope that his wicked manners will be emulated by future public intellectuals equipped with the same zest for truth and justice that characterized Russell from an early age, when his grandmother gave him the biblical advice not to follow a crowd to do evil. The "crowd" was since identified by President Eisenhower as the "military-industrial complex", which can be expanded to include other powerful sectors of society like the Financial, the Governmental, the Religious, the Academic, and, not least, their dependence on and collusion with the Media to filter the truth, to form the MIFGRAM Complex, the power and effects of which make us all accomplices in crimes committed in the name of Mammon (Profit).¹⁶ That seems to be the most potent agent in

Movements, People's Press (2006), pp. 117–60. See also BARBARA L. TISCHLER's article, "Breaking Ranks" (1990), and Antiwar and Radical History Project—Pacific Northwest at http://depts.washington.edu/antiwar/gi_papers.shtml.

¹³ See ROBERT D. HEINL, "The Collapse of the Armed Forces" (1971), and GORDON S. LIVINGSTON, "Letter from a Vietnam Veteran" (1969).

¹⁴ See <http://www.russelltribunalonpalestine.com/en/>.

¹⁵ In her article on whistleblowing at <http://www.foodsafetymagazine.com/magazine-archive1/junejuly-2014/whistleblowing-food-safety-and-fraud/> Dr. Yasmine Motarjemi (my former spouse), inspired me to see that Russell also was a type of whistleblower as he fought to alert the public to the dangers of nuclear war, the injustice of the American war in Vietnam, etc.

¹⁶ In an email of 15 August 2014 to me, Chomsky wrote: "Couldn't agree with you more about Russell, in your final comments."

In his article "Letters from Prison—American Style: the Political Vision and Practice of Noam Chomsky" (1994), FALK compares Chomsky to different public intellectuals and writes: "There is a final comparison that might be the one that would strike many commentators as best of all—namely, Bertrand Russell. Indeed, Chomsky seemed implicitly attracted to such a comparison himself. In the course of delivering the first Russell Lectures at Cambridge University in 1971, under the title *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom*, CHOMSKY praises Russell for the qualities of mind and commitment that are so vividly evident in his own life.... But in both their cases,

a world where we, according to Russell, rather ought to be free and happy citizens of the Universe living the Good Life inspired by Love and guided by Knowledge and see life more like Spinoza did *sub specie aeternitatis!*¹⁷

WORKS CITED

- ANDERSSON, STEFAN. "A Secondary Bibliography of the International War Crimes Tribunal: London, Stockholm and Roskilde". *Russell* 31 (2011): 167–87.
- CHOMSKY, NOAM. *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1971.
- CLARK, RONALD W. *The Life of Bertrand Russell*. London: Cape/Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975.
- ENSIGN, TOD AND MICHAEL UHL. *G.I. Guinea Pigs: How the Pentagon Exposed Our Troops to Dangers Greater Than War: Agent Orange and Atomic Radiation*. (1980).
- FALK, RICHARD. "Letters from Prison—American Style: the Political Vision and Practice of Noam Chomsky". In *Noam Chomsky: Critical Assessments*. Ed. Carlos P. Otero. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. Vol. 3: 578–97.
- GILBERT, MARC JASON, ed. *The Vietnam War on Campus: Other Voices, More Distant Drums*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001.
- HEINL, ROBERT D. "The Collapse of the Armed Forces". *Armed Forces Journal*, 7 (June 1971).
- HERSHBERGER, MARY. *Jane Fonda's War: a Political Biography of an Antiwar Icon*. New York: New P., 2005, Chap. 2, "GI Jane: Winter Soldier and Free The Army".
- HUNT, ANDREW. *The Turning: a History of Vietnam Veterans against the War*. New York: New York U. P., 1999.
- KULIK, GARY. "War Stories": *False Atrocity Tales, Swift Boaters, and Winter Soldiers—What Really Happened in Vietnam*. Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2009.
- KUNEN, JAMES SIMON. *Standard Operating Procedure: Notes of a Draft-age American*. With the cooperation of the CCI on US War Crimes in Indochina. New York: Avon Books, 1971.
- LIVINGSTON, GORDON S. "Letter from a Vietnam Veteran". *Saturday Review* 20 (Sept. 1969): 22–3.
- MOSER, RICHARD. *The New Winter Soldiers: GI and Veteran Dissent during the Vietnam Era*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U. P., 1996.
- NICOSIA, GERALD. *Home to War: a History of the Vietnam Veterans' Movement*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2001.
- OSTERTAG, BOB. *People's Movements, People's Press: the Journalism of Social Justice Movements*. Boston: Beacon P., 2006.
- ROBBINS, M. S., ed. *Against the Vietnam War: Writings by Activists*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse U. P., 1999.
- RUSSELL, BERTRAND. "Private Memorandum on Ralph Schoenman" (1969). In CLARK.
- SCHOENMAN, RALPH. "How I Was Deported from Britain". *London Bulletin*, no. 8 (Feb.–Mar. 1969): 6–9.
- STACEWICZ, RICHARD. *Winter Soldiers: an Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans*

this domain of knowledge is not a pretext for political irresponsibility. Russell's pacifism during World War I and, even more so, his tribunal exposing US war crimes in Vietnam represent bearing witness to truth, an exemplification of moral intelligence. Chomsky is an unabashed admirer of Russell's initiative during the Vietnam War, and like Russell has lived a long productive life, and never wavered morally" (3: 581).

¹⁷ I want to thank Noam Chomsky for his comments and Erik and Gurli Hultengren's Foundation for Philosophy and a very generous friend for financial support.

Against the War. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1997.

TISCHLER, BARBARA L. "Breaking Ranks: GI Antiwar Newspapers and the Culture of Protest". *Vietnam Generation* 2, no. 1 (1990): 20-50.

UHL, MICHAEL, TOD ENSIGN, JEREMY RIFKIN AND BOB JOHNSON. *The Dellums*

Committee Hearings on War Crimes in Vietnam: an Inquiry into Command Responsibility in Southeast Asia. Ed., with an Introduction, by the CCI. New York: Vintage Books, 1972.

VVAW. *The Winter Soldier Investigation: an Inquiry into American War Crimes*. Boston: Beacon P., 1972.