

US War Crimes in Indochina in the 1960s: Truth as Casualty

A Response to Carol Brightman and Carl Ogelsby on the Sixties

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In an article entitled “Carol Brightman on the 1960s” (Truth-Dig, January 3, 2008), Ms. Brightman reviews three books, including Ravens In the Storm: A Personal History of the 1960’s Anti-War Movement by Carl Oglesby.

(See http://www.truthdig.com/arts_culture/print/20080103_carol_brightman_on_the_1960s)

The article is replete with falsehoods and disinformation concerning the work of the International Tribunal on U.S. War Crimes in Indochina, of which I was Secretary-General, and of my role within it.

Ms. Brightman’s errors, large and small, embellish the pattern of distortion in Mr. Oglesby’s book. The most egregious of these fabrications concerns the views of Jean-Paul Sartre, Executive President of the Tribunal and of other Tribunal members on the question of genocide.

Ms. Brightman’s claims regarding her own role are instructive, not merely for their petty misrepresentations but for what she conceals. She writes, “Early in 1967, I had gone on the second of the tribunal’s two fact-finding teams to North Vietnam, the only American and only woman.”

In fact, not two but six investigative teams were sent to Cambodia and North Vietnam, with supplemental investigative work carried out in the liberated zones of South Vietnam. Ms. Brightman was not the sole American on the second team, but one of three.

She omits to mention that members of these teams had been briefed about the sensitivity of our work, notably in countries under agonizingly massive and continuous attack by overwhelming U.S. air and ground assault.

Each potential participant had been vetted for their qualifications to examine evidence pertaining to the issues at hand and, in particular, for responsible discretion with respect to U.S. intelligence efforts to obtain information about Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian logistics on the ground.

Visas for members of these teams were arranged with the authorities in these countries based upon such assurances. To our dismay, when we boarded the plane in Paris for Phnom Penh, accompanying Ms. Brightman was a man unknown to us who carried an ABC television camera.

Ms. Brightman stated that this was her boyfriend, whom she had invited to join our investigative team and participate in its work. We explained that this was not possible, that he was unknown to us, had not been placed on the team and had not been approved for visas by the governments of Cambodia and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. We advised her that he would not be admitted to Phnom Penh unless he had a visa arranged by ABC and that, regardless, he would have no part in our work.

On arrival, he gained entry by representing falsely that he was a late inclusion in our investigative team. He shared quarters with Ms. Brightman, who attempted daily to insinuate him in our work.

This was refused by the team collectively. Members of the investigative team met to decide how to deal with this situation. The abiding sentiment was to remove Ms. Brightman from the team and exclude her from its work; there were concerns that we were in the presence of a provocation intended to discredit the team itself.

It was agreed that I would consult the Cambodian and Vietnamese authorities and describe the situation fully. We learned that Ms. Brightman's friend had attempted to interview officials and individuals, presenting himself as "Bertrand Russell's representative."

He was asked by the Cambodian authorities to leave. He showed up in Saigon where he conducted interviews with U.S. soldiers, later shown on U.S. television. These were interviews sympathetic to U.S. policy.

The Vietnamese representatives in Phnom Penh alerted Hanoi to the situation and it was agreed that to avoid a public dispute deployed by U.S. media to undermine the work of the Tribunal, Ms. Brightman would continue with us to Hanoi, but that she would not be allowed access to any sensitive zone or area.

In her article, Ms. Brightman, describes "drinking and swapping stories" at the Metropole Hotel in Hanoi. "Schoenman, it was said, had stood up at a dinner with North Vietnamese leaders and rebuked them for thinking of peace. He raised his glass in a victory salute; no one responded."

The story is risible. I had been meeting with Ho Chi Minh, Pham Van Dong and party and governmental figures over a period of four years to discuss how most effectively to wage resistance to the U.S. war internationally, including our preparations for the Tribunal that had been ongoing since 1963.

I was chair at the time of the Vietnamese Solidarity Campaign in Great Britain, with sixty member organizations. Our public view, and that of Bertrand Russell during those years, was that we must face U.S. rulers with the demand "Out Now," not pressure the Vietnamese victims of onslaught to make concessions to U.S. imperial policy in the name of "peace."



Bertrand Russell and Ralph Schoenman (far right)

The occasion of these remarks by Ms. Brightman is an ostensible review of Carl Oglesby's memoir. Ms. Brightman quotes extensively from "Oglesby's account" which, she states, "gives a vivid portrait of Ralph Schoenman, the American expatriate and Russell's representative."

Mr. Oglesby writes as follows: "Schoenman was about thirty, a tall man with broad shoulders. He wore his black hair combed straight back and varnished down. His skin was pale, his dark eyes nervous and darkly shadowed. He was always in a black turtleneck sweater and dark blue blazer, always stiffly erect with his chest out ..."

Mr. Oglesby's self-description to the Tribunal was as "a playwright and political essayist" and perhaps he thinks of himself as entitled to dramatic license.

My height is under 5' 10" and I am of slender build. My shoulders are not broad nor does my chest protrude. My weight was in the 150's in 1967. It is 145 today. My hair is not black, but medium brown. I have never combed it straight back nor plastered it to my scalp. My hair was combed loosely forward, Beatles style.

My color now as then is pretty good. I have never been accused of suffering from pallor. My eyes are light hazel with a touch of green, not black or even dark. I have never owned a black turtleneck sweater nor attempted to wear one. My standard dress was a suit or a jacket, dress shirt and necktie. My preference in pullovers, worn occasionally in less formal settings, has been those of light colors.

Mr. Oglesby may have someone else in mind. He writes, however, to Ms. Brightman's delectation:

"In one closed meeting of the tribunal during our second session in late November in a town called Roskilde, about twenty miles from Copenhagen, Schoenman announced that Russell wanted the tribunal to take an affirmative position on the genocide question, one of several questions the tribunal was examining.

"The practical question was whether the United States was specifically targeting Vietnamese population centers. Attacks on civilians constituted a

crime of war, technical genocide. Schoenman told us that Russell believed such attacks were happening and that the United States was therefore guilty of genocide.

“Sartre disagreed. He saw American attacks on population centers as a consequence of the fact that Viet Cong and North Vietnamese combat units often stationed themselves in cities and villages. As Sartre saw it, such attacks were deplorable but nonetheless did not constitute genocide. In Sartre’s view, one could not use that term without evoking memories of Hitler’s assault on the Jews. Compared to the Holocaust, what the United States was doing in Vietnam was just fighting an ugly war in an ugly way. If the United States was in the wrong, he felt, that was because its effort to subdue the Vietnamese resistance was in itself wrong, not because the United States was trying to exterminate the Vietnamese people.”

The claim by Mr. Oglesby that U.S. saturation destruction of the civilian population of Vietnam only occurred as an ancillary consequence of the deliberate placement by the Vietnamese of their soldiers and armed forces inside population centers is not merely a deeply reactionary and dishonest claim. It was the lying rationale of the U.S. State Department and of the Pentagon.

Ms. Brightman writes that “Oglesby was a great admirer of Jean-Paul Sartre, who together with Simone de Beauvoir and Vlado (sic) Dedijer, a World War II adjutant of Tito’s and a hero of the Yugoslav anti-Nazi resistance, presided over the tribunal. Schoenman represented Lord Russell, who remained a ghostly figure in Wales.”

Fathering this contemptible lie upon Jean-Paul Sartre is a strange form of admiration. Mr. Oglesby, cheered on by Ms. Brightman in her review, imputes to Sartre a defense of U.S. imperialism against the “baseless” charge of genocide.

He places in Sartre’s mouth the revolting rationale of U.S. rulers themselves that the mass death of civilians in Vietnam was really the fault of the callous Vietnamese communists who hid their armies within population centers to deploy massive civilian deaths (now called ‘collateral damage’) as cynical propaganda.

Mr. Oglesby elaborates upon these presumptive views of Sartre, which he claims Sartre set forth in indignant opposition to my assertions that genocidal attacks on the Vietnamese population were taking place.

“All day long Schoenman would say, on the one hand, things like, ‘Lord Russell says he expects the tribunal to find the United States guilty of genocide,’ where the subtext was that Russell was paying for this damned thing and did not want to be unhappy with its findings. And then on the other hand, when Sartre challenged him on the genocide issue, Schoenman would say, “ ‘Don’t expect me to defend Lord Russell’s positions because I would not think of speaking for him.’ ”

This is bizarre. I had been speaking and writing for six years on the subject. The Student Peace Union in the United States had published Bertrand Russell’s writing on the genocidal war in Vietnam in 1963.

Bertrand Russell’s book *War Crimes In Vietnam*, written before the Tribunal took place, set

forth evidence we had made public since 1962. The first chapter, entitled “The Press and Vietnam – March-July 1963” contains our exchanges with the New York Times regarding our documented evidence of U.S. saturation bombing of the civilian populace and of insidious chemical weapons, including gases that explode the pupil of the eye.

It cites our letter to the New York Times referencing “a year’s study ... of the chemicals sprayed in South Vietnam and their effect upon the health of human beings, animals and crops.” It sets forth data concerning the use of “white arsenic, various kinds of arsenite sodium and arsenite calcium, lead manganese arsenates, DNP and DNC (which inflame and eat into human flesh); and calcic cyanamide ... which has seriously affected thousands of the inhabitants of South Vietnam; with having spread these poisonous chemicals on large and densely populated areas of South Vietnam.

“ ... The use of these weapons,” we stated, “napalm bombs and chemicals, constitutes and results in atrocities and points to the fact that this is a war of annihilation.”

This chapter describes how the New York Times published this letter, while excising the cited evidence and then accused Russell in an editorial of “spreading communist propaganda, as he in his heart must know.”

It is instructive to note that Mr. Oglesby imputes to Jean-Paul Sartre the view that Bertrand Russell and I were “following the line of North Vietnam” on the subject of genocide.

War Crimes in Vietnam was published in 1967 by Monthly Review Press and by George Allen & Unwin, Ltd. It included a 48 page essay of mine containing a detailed eye-witness account of the weaponry used and the effects on the population of North Vietnam.

It lists the members of the Tribunal. (Mr. Oglesby was not among them.) It describes the planned convening of the Tribunal in London on November 13, 1966 “to announce its structure, statement of aims and time table.” It specified five areas of inquiry for which evidence would be assembled.

The fifth was “the pursuit of genocidal policies, including forced labor camps, mass burials and other techniques of extermination in the South.” This issue and the evidence pertaining to it was on the agenda in Roskilde, near Copenhagen.

As I described our work in *Against The Crime of Silence*, “We proclaimed our conviction that terrible crimes were occurring and that we were in possession of evidence of such magnitude that it was essential to investigate the charges of this accusation.

“Our evidence established that eight million people were placed in barbed wire internment camps by U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. It showed the systematic destruction of hospitals, schools, sanatoria, dams, dikes, churches and pagodas. It demonstrated that the cultural remains of a rich and complex civilization representing the legacy of generations had been smashed in a terror of five million pounds of high explosives daily.

“Every nine months, this destruction is roughly equivalent to the total bombardment of the Pacific theater in World War II. It is as if the Louvre and the cathedrals had been doused in napalm and pulverized by 1000 pound bombs.”

Mr. Oglesby does not rest at fathering upon Jean-Paul Sartre a rejection of my presumptive dogmatic insistence, allegedly without concern for evidence, that genocide was occurring in

Vietnam. Mr. Oglesby attributes a fundamental division on these matters to the Tribunal members at large:

“Apart from the existential problems between Sartre and Schoenman, this split over the question of genocide was the one serious split among the members of the tribunal. In crudest terms, Russell wanted a guilty verdict on this question, but Sartre was determined to let the evidence speak for itself. And as Sartre saw it, the evidence did not prove genocide. He thought it essential that the tribunal demonstrate its independence by voting to satisfy its own conscience. And he had let it be known that he thought Russell in the wrong to push North Vietnam’s line.”

Ms. Brightman, typically, cannot resist embellishing this citation. The word “propaganda” is not Mr. Oglesby’s but Ms. Brightman’s, who slips it into her citation of his text, writing “North Vietnam’s propaganda line.”

Mr. Oglesby resumes his breathless account of a supposed envenomed exchange on the subject between Jean-Paul Sartre and myself:

“Schoenman didn’t seem to care terribly about the quality of the evidence. He had already harangued several closed sessions about this and was now doing it again.”

Ms. Brightman picks up the theme eagerly from Mr. Oglesby: “Lord Russell was unhappy to hear of the recent attacks upon him by certain tribunal members,” Schoenman said, “He is all the more distressed by these attacks in that they are occasioned by large differences within the tribunal on the issue of genocide.’

” ‘No one has attacked Russell,’ said Dellinger, who acted as the tribunal’s secretary and occasional peacemaker. We simply disagree with him on this question. Why does he consider disagreement a personal attack?’

” ‘That is for Lord Russell to say,’ said Schoenman, ‘I would not presume to speak for him. I am here only to say that Lord Russell believes the United States guilty of genocide in Vietnam, and that he will be disappointed if the tribunal continues to attack him for this view. He believes it imperative that ...’

” ‘Premiere!’ thundered Sartre. ‘Our findings will be significant only if they are supported by facts. Deuxieme! It is you who are under attack, Schoenman, not Lord Russell! Troisieme! You cannot both stand behind Lord Russell and put him in your pocket!’ “

Ms. Brightman then writes as follows:

“Schoenman bowed his head slightly but kept his composure. ‘I will see that Lord Russell receives a faithful account of your statement.’ “It was not a ‘knockout’ as Oglesby puts it.”

Revealingly, Ms. Brightman tampers with a quotation once again. Mr. Oglesby had written actually, “It was not a knockout” with regard to the putative denunciation of my views by Jean Paul Sartre.

Ms. Brightman alters Oglesby's text and places his "knockout" comment after my presumptive rejoinder!

Mr. Oglesby's breathless, blow-by-blow dramatization of this imputed conflict between Jean-Paul Sartre and myself, unfolding as he recounts it in Roskilde, near Copenhagen during the second session of the International War Crimes Tribunal, has one fatal flaw to which your readers should be alerted.

I was never there!

The entire drama in Roskilde set forth by Mr. Oglesby never happened. Nor was my inability to enter Denmark for the session of the Tribunal that Mr. Oglesby purports to describe, something known only to insiders.

After my imprisonment in Bolivia immediately after the execution of Che Guevara during October 1967, and following upon a five months sojourn in Nuancahuazu during the time of Che Guevara's Bolivia campaign, I had escaped, was recaptured and imprisoned again.

After being deported to Peru, Panama and the U.S., my passport was nullified. The State Department refused to issue another, despite legal intervention by Leonard Boudin, General Counsel of the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee.

I secured an international travel document from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in a vain attempt to get to Copenhagen and Roskilde to resume my duties as Secretary General of the Tribunal and to be present at the session.

My flight first landed in Amsterdam where I was taken into custody by airport police. My Swedish lawyer, Hans-Joran Franck, who was an active part of the preparatory team of the tribunal in Stockholm, arranged with the Swedish government to allow my entry into Stockholm, whose good offices it was assumed would be invoked to facilitate my admission into Denmark, albeit on a North Vietnamese travel document.

Instead, the Swedish police took me off the flight and into jail where I was roughed up, my sternum fractured. I was then placed on a plane bound for Hamburg. Swedish supporters called in a bomb threat to the plane and it was compelled to return to Stockholm, to much fanfare in the European press.

From there, I was placed on a flight that stopped in Helsinki, where the police took me into custody. The name of the interrogating officer was Kafka - a touch, one would think, that would suit the theater of the absurd that so tempts Mr. Oglesby.

For several days I was a "flying Dutchman," unable to land in any European country, placed finally on a flight back to New York sandwiched between two U.S. federal agents.

All of this received ongoing notice in the media, particularly in Sweden and Denmark. I was not permitted to enter Denmark and did not attend the Danish session of the Tribunal nor engage in dialogue with any of its members.

Mr. Oglesby is not fazed. Describing further his "adventures" in Copenhagen, he writes:

"Also sitting on the tribunal was the Polish historian Isaac Deutscher, author of major biographies of Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin..."

Unfortunately, my close friend, Isaac, died of a heart attack in Rome the previous August 18th and, like me, was absent from the tribunal session in Roskilde.

The second session of the Tribunal alone examined the sixth question, on which evidence was presented during that meeting, namely: "Whether the combination of the crimes imputed to the government of the United States met the general qualification of genocide."

This issue was discussed in Copenhagen, but without me. What then of the actual opinions of Jean-Paul Sartre on the subject of genocide and on the judgment appropriate to the Tribunal?

Did he espouse the views ascribed to him by Mr. Oglesby?

Fortunately, although Sartre is no longer with us, his views on the subject are memorialized in his presentation On Genocide, published in Against The Crime of Silence: Proceedings of the Russell International War Crimes Tribunal - Stockholm and Copenhagen (Ohare Books, 1968), pages 612 to 626 and expanded upon by tribunal member Lelio Basso in his Summation on Genocide, pages 626-643. They are entirely consonant with those of Russell and myself.

Sartre's On Genocide states, "The Americans want to show others that guerrilla war does not pay: they want to show all the oppressed and the exploited nations that might be tempted to shake off the American yoke by launching a peoples' war, at first against their own pseudo-governments, the compradors and the army, then against the U.S. Special Forces and finally against the G.I.s. ... To Che Guevara, who said 'We need several Vietnams,' the American government answers 'They will all be crushed the way we are crushing the first.'"

He continues, "They do offer an alternative: Declare you are beaten or we will bomb you back into the stone age. The fact remains that the second term of this alternative is genocide. They have said: "genocide, yes, but conditional genocide." Is this juridically valid? Is it even conceivable?

".... An act of genocide, especially if it is carried out over a period of several years, is no less genocide for being blackmail. ... And this is all the more true when, as is the case here, a good part of the group has been annihilated to force the rest to give in."

Sartre is clear, specific and passionate:

"In the South, the choice is the following: villages burned, the populace subjected to massive bombing, livestock shot, vegetation destroyed by defoliants, crops ruined by toxic aerosols and everywhere indiscriminate shooting, murder, rape and looting. This is genocide in the strictest sense: massive extermination. ... What are the Vietnamese people to do to escape this horrible death? Join the armed forces of Saigon or be enclosed in strategic or "New Life" hamlets, two names for the same concentration camps."

Jean-Paul Sartre continues:

“As the armed forces of the United States entrench themselves firmly in Vietnam, as they intensify the bombing and the massacres, as they try to bring Laos under their control, as they plan the invasion of Cambodia, there is less and less doubt that the government of the United States, despite its hypocritical denials, has chosen genocide.”

Despite the claims by Ms. Brightman, pace Mr. Oglesby, that Sartre rejected the evidence of genocide marshaled at the International Tribunal, his actual words demonstrate where their half-truths lie.

Jean- Paul Sartre was unambiguous.

“The genocidal intent is implicit in the facts. It is necessarily pre-meditated. ... The anti-guerrilla genocide that our times have produced requires organization, military bases, a structure of accomplices and budget appropriations. Therefore, its authors must meditate and plan out their act.”

He continues as follows:

“When a peasant falls in his rice paddy, mowed down by a machine gun, every one of us is hit. The Vietnamese fight for all men and the American forces against all. Neither figuratively nor abstractly. And not only because genocide would be a crime universally condemned by international law, but because little by little the whole human race is being subjected to this genocidal blackmail piled on top of atomic blackmail, that is, to absolute total war.

“This crime, carried out every day before the eyes of the world, renders all who do not denounce it accomplices of those who commit it, so that we are degraded today for our future enslavement.”

Here is how Sartre concludes his exposition “On Genocide”:

“In this sense, imperialist genocide can only become more complete. The group that the United States wants to intimidate and terrorize by way of the Vietnamese nation is the human group in its entirety.”

Mr. Oglesby and Ms. Brightman have imputed to Sartre an embrace of the rationale of U.S. rulers for their genocidal war. In the process, they reinvent me as a catspaw in furthering this farrago.

Late in 1968, well after the conclusion of the Tribunal sessions, the Stalinist regime of Brezhnev invaded Czechoslovakia to crush the students and steel workers who fought to reclaim the socialist ideal during the Prague Spring.

I flew to Rome to meet Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir at the Hotel Nazionale. We prepared a petition together to summon people to a defense of socialism with democratic control and content.

Together, with Bertrand Russell, Antonin Liehm, C.L.R James and prominent others, we prepared an international conference of socialists and anti-imperialists to defend the Czech worker and student resistance.

That conference also took place in Stockholm – in early Spring 1969.

It is not the evil that is new; nor is it the crisis that has changed. Today, forty-one years later, Ms. Brightman and Mr. Oglesby, reprise their political role in these matters. In making truth a casualty to their predilections and petty ambition, they evince, now as then, the dishonest lengths to which they are prepared to go and, in the process, the limits of liberalism.

Ralph Schoenman Vallejo, California, January 21, 2008

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