

17th February 2016 The Building of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and its Consequences for the British Left

Ernest Tate (1) and Phil Hearse (2)

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Part 1 – Building the VSC



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In line with the theme of this conference this presentation will not say much about the large anti-war mobilisations in 1968 or what happened later. Rather, it will discuss what lay behind the remarkable rise of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) and the factors that influenced its development.

Launched on 20 December 1965, the VSC initiated a series of ad-hoc committees to organise mass protests on the streets of London against the escalation of the war in Vietnam and the Labour Government's complicity in it. These protests came to characterise the period. They are now seen as an important expression of the youth radicalisation of those years, and raised the central question for the whole British left of the attitude the working class should take towards the colonial revolution.

Looking at what was happening in Vietnam in those years helps to explain the moral outrage that gripped a new generation of youth who were engaging with politics for the first time. The American empire's war against the people of Vietnam was one of the longest – over 20 years – and most brutal in modern history. It is hard to imagine it today, because the scale of death and destruction was so enormous, but the Americans dropped over seven million tons of bombs on Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, a third of them cluster bombs designed specifically to create the maximum number of deaths and injuries. The bombing, along with the burning with napalm and the drenching with herbicides of vast swaths of jungle, inflicted untold suffering on the entire population of those countries.

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More than twice as many bombs were dropped on Vietnam as had been dropped on Europe and Asia during all of the Second World War. Out of a population of just over 50 million, 1.5 million people – most of them peasants – were killed. At the war's peak in 1965 the Americans had increased their invasion force to half a million, of whom 58,000 died.

The Vietnam War was part of a long, historic struggle against colonialism. It began during the Second World War as European and Japanese control over large areas of Indochina began to crumble in face of mass uprising

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gs of indigenous guerrilla forces. This situation was especially true in Vietnam, formerly a French colonial possession.

The Viet Minh under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh fought against both the French and the Japanese and when the Japanese surrendered to the Allies in 1945 a spontaneous wave of revolts swept the country bringing the Viet Minh to power. With the encouragement and financial backing of the Americans the French launched a bitter counter-offensive to try to regain control. But the attempt ended in their humiliating defeat at the hands of the Viet Minh led by General Giap in the now historic battle of Diem Bein Phu.

Not long after its victory, however, the Viet Minh gave in to pressure from China and the Soviet Union (its allies and main providers of weapons) and acquiesced in a settlement with France and the Western Powers, eventually settling for less than it had won on the battlefield. With the United States, France's main backer, threatening a nuclear attack, the Viet Minh entered into talks with the Western Powers in Geneva in 1954 to negotiate an end to the fighting. This process produced what became known as the Geneva Accords.

Under the Accords the French agreed to end their colonial rule by withdrawing from the region entirely. The Vietnamese accepted a partitioning of their nation into northern and southern entities, with a promise from the European powers to hold future elections (never held) to determine the relationship of North and South to each other.

The South, it was agreed, would remain under Western control, a fundamental violation of the victorious nation's right to self-determination and one that would provide the Americans with sufficient time to ignore the agreements and carry out a coup in the South to install a pro-US regime. All of this had the support of successive British governments, both Tory and Labour.

The great majority of Americans remained unaware of this long drawn-out struggle in a far-off land because it was not reported much in the US press or in the media generally. This helps to explain why, by 1964, when the number of US troops in Vietnam had passed the 20,000 mark, there were relatively few protests against the war, most of them small and made up of students.

Formal organised opposition to the Vietnam War in the early years mainly involved the traditional peace groups. Fearful of being labelled "pro-communist" in those witch-hunting times, these groups tended to take a neutral position on the war and accused both sides of being responsible for it. Their main strategy was to pressure various "progressive" figures inside the Democratic Party, Congressional Representatives and Senators, even though these politicians invariably blamed the Vietnamese for the war.

With the relentless escalation of the conflict, however, the mood of the American people began to change. Early in 1965 President Lyndon Johnson announced the bombing of North Vietnam in conjunction with an increase in the number of US troops to be stationed in the South to nearly half a million. He said there would be a national compulsory draft to accomplish this. Even more alarming, voices were raised at the same time in the US press advocating the use of nuclear weapons. But by April 1965 resistance to the war had burst onto the streets.

In a "March on Washington" organised by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), over 20,000 people turned out, twice as many as the organisers had anticipated. By the weekend of 15-16 October an anti-war demonstration of 30,000, the largest so far, was marching up Fifth Avenue in New York City.

Massive assemblies began to take place in many major educational institutions throughout the country, sometimes lasting around the clock and often attracting tens of thousands of students who debated the merits of the war. It became known as the teach-in movement and was soon a central feature of campus life that year.

The response of the British left to the Vietnam War developed at a slower pace, for the obvious reason that Britain had not decided to enter the war, even though it was under a lot of pressure from the Johnson Administration to do so. Johnson's biographers tell us that the President pressed the then British Prime Minister Harold Wilson to send troops every time the two of them met, if only to show that the war in Vietnam was not solely a US project. But Wilson, very sensitive to the criticism of his policy on the war, was forced to demur. He was beginning to feel the heat from his critics within the Labour Party to his policies.

During the election of 1964 which resulted in the Labour Party forming the government Wilson had been critical of American policy on Vietnam, but upon his election he countered his critics on Vietnam, saying that, with his narrow majority, his hands were tied. Even after the election a year later when his party won a 100 seat majority he still rebuffed his critics and continued with the Tory policy of backing the Americans.

Opposition in the country and the party to government policy continued to grow nonetheless. A campaign

organised by members on the left of the Labour Party, among them Ken Coates and Pat Jordan in Nottingham and Tony Topham in Hull, raised tens of thousands of pounds for medical aid for the Vietnamese. Opposition had grown to such an extent that two successive annual party conferences went on to pass resolutions submitted by the Fire Brigades Union that were critical of Wilson's policy on Vietnam. It was the first time such a thing had happened to a sitting Labour government.

An early and singular public critic of Wilson on Vietnam was Bertrand Russell.⁽³⁾ In 1963, a year after the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation had been set up ⁽⁴⁾ and before CND's Aldermaston March, Russell issued a public statement in the name of the Foundation accusing the US of conducting a war of annihilation in Vietnam. By 1965, doing his utmost to cut through the British media's indifference to the atrocities being committed, he demanded that representatives of the Vietnamese struggle be allowed into the country to tell their side of the story. Backed by a sustained campaign inside the Labour Party, Russell appealed to the Wilson government to provide visas to representatives of the Vietnamese resistance whom he was sponsoring to come to Britain. Many Labour Party members including a few MPs backed the campaign, but Wilson categorically refused. So Russell led a delegation of party members to Westminster to protest and publicly tore up his Labour Party membership card.

While Russell may have been ahead of everyone else on the Vietnam war, there were important signs from around the country that the issue was beginning to move up the agenda of many socialist activists. Ad hoc anti-war groupings started to appear and many Maoist groups, mainly active in the South Asian communities, mounted campaigns. Most of the Trotskyist groups were not focussed on the issue – indeed they tended to be sectarian towards it – but the International Socialists (IS) were active and more sympathetic, setting up local committees such as those organised by Ian Birchall and Peter Sedgewick. John Palmer became a much requested speaker on the issue.

The idea for a formation such as the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign came from Bertrand Russell and his secretary Ralph Schoenman who had been to Hanoi on behalf of Russell several times for discussion with representatives of the North Vietnamese government. In the autumn of 1965 just before the coup in Indonesia when over one million Communists were massacred, Schoenman and Chris Farley, a director of the Russell Foundation, met with them again in Jakarta at an international solidarity conference convened to discuss ways of building solidarity with the Vietnamese internationally.

On his return, and against the background of a rapidly escalating war, Schoenman tried to cut through the British media's indifference to the issue. He appealed to everyone to join together to build some kind of movement in solidarity with the Vietnamese. Russell and Schoenman argued that such a movement's first priority should be to campaign against the Wilson Government's complicity in the dirty war. They were also exploring the idea of an international commission, to be comprised of prominent, internationally recognised intellectuals, to investigate the American actions and to put a spotlight on the possible war crimes. It wasn't a new idea. In the United States in the 1930s a similar body had been initiated by John Dewey, the well-known liberal philosopher and public intellectual of his day, with the support of the Socialist Workers Party. It was a desperate effort to try to save the lives of the defendants in Stalin's infamous Moscow trials. Although not an active participant in the Dewey Commission, Russell had given his support to that campaign.

Another aspect of Schoenman and Russell's commitment to building a solidarity campaign on Vietnam was that it represented a link to the protests organised by Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the late 1950s and early 1960s against the H-Bomb and nuclear testing and against the introduction of the American Polaris missile system into Britain. Russell had been the president of CND and he and Schoenman had helped organise the Committee of 100, famous at its height for its mass protest sit-downs, involving thousands of activists. ⁽³⁾

Among the first to respond to Russell's appeal to organise a solidarity campaign on the issue of Vietnam was a small grouping of Fourth International supporters in Nottingham known in the British Left as the International Group (IG). Although relatively small in numbers the IG came to have an important influence on the Vietnam protest movement in those years. It was known for its publication *The Week* which circulated widely on the Labour Party left. Its two most prominent leaders, Ken Coates and Pat Jordan, had been members of the Communist Party until the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the Khrushchev Revelations in 1956.

For Coates and Jordan, the issue of Vietnam was at the centre of their thinking. After leaving the Communist Party they had joined the Labour Party and later moved close to the Fourth International. The FI was the international formation organised by Leon Trotsky in the 1930s, but whose main spokesperson was now Ernest Mandel, the well-known Belgian Marxist economist. At its 1965 World Congress the FI had called for all its member organisations to place a high priority on developing opposition to the war in their respective countries. Its main supporter in the United States, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), was already leading the way on this, with its members in the leadership of a massive anti-war movement organised around the demand "Out Now!"

Ken Coates had just been expelled from the Labour Party – with his expulsion reported extensively in the national press – and was on a campaign to be re-instated. The group was still at the centre of an opposition caucus of left Labour activists in the party, in an alliance with people from around *New Left Review*, including writers such as Robin Blackburn and Quintin Hoare. The caucus was active throughout the Labour Party, coming together at annual conferences and organised around a mimeographed newsletter, *Briefing*, written

especially for the delegates with information articles very critical of government policies. The *Briefing* caucus was also in the forefront of the earlier mentioned campaign in the Party to raise money for medicines for the Vietnamese National Liberation Front. It was probably why Ken Coates and Pat Jordan came to the attention of Ralph Schoenman. Contacts developed through campaigns such as this would later prove very important when it came to organising against the war.

On his return from Jakarta Schoenman, with a delegation from the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation (BRPF), met Ken Coates and Pat Jordan in Nottingham. There was a virtual meeting of minds on the question of Vietnam, all agreeing about the urgency and necessity of organising a solidarity campaign. Over the course of the next few weeks a verbal understanding was arrived at to work together on such a project and to set up a preparatory committee. The International Group committed to making it a priority and Pat Jordan consented to go on the staff, paid by the Russell Foundation, to head up a committee to plan a founding conference for what would eventually become the VSC. At Ralph Schoenman's invitation, Ken Coates would later become a director of the BRPF.

At that first meeting in Nottingham nothing much was said about Russell's idea of an international commission of prominent intellectuals to look into possible American war crimes in Vietnam. That idea was still in its formative stage but Ralph Schoenman was discussing it with virtually anyone who would listen, getting ideas from wherever he could about how it might work. At one point, he met the editors of *New Left Review* (NLR) to see what could be done. Although he did not get the support he expected, Quintin Hoare, the business manager of *NLR*, agreed to help with organising such a body if it got underway. Hoare's participation would become very important because of his language skills – French and Italian – and his association with Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and the group of radical French intellectuals around the journal, *Les Temps Modernes*, edited by Sartre.

It is understandable why the people around *NLR* were hesitant about Russell and Schoenman's idea for a war crimes commission. The IG, even though it looked favourably on the concept, initially had doubts about whether such a thing could ever get off the ground. It was potentially a massive project and although Schoenman seemed very confident everyone agreed it would require a huge effort and level of resources. Then there was the problem of persuading some of the world's major public intellectuals not only to participate in the project but also to take responsibility for it, including financing it.

By this time the "new left" in Britain had begun to differentiate somewhat into two broad intellectual currents, with E P Thompson on one side, more pre-occupied with specifically British issues and national identity, and on the other, a younger, newer generation of radical intellectuals, more internationalist and activist-inclined.

The latter could also be characterised as an "interventionist new left" because of the role played by many of its key representatives, among them young intellectuals such as Robin Blackburn, in the growing Vietnam war protests. Grouped around Perry Anderson and *New Left Review* many of them went on to become important propagandists in the universities and colleges for Vietnam solidarity.

The first formal call to the British Left for the setting up of a solidarity campaign came on 20 December 1965, in a special public meeting of nearly 200 people organised by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the founding of the National Liberation Front. Schoenman, who had just returned from Hanoi, outlined for the first time Russell's idea for an international commission of prominent public intellectuals to examine possible American war crimes in Vietnam. Also on the platform of this boisterous affair were Ken Coates, Mark Lane, an American, well-known on both sides of the Atlantic for his writing about the Kennedy assassination, and Ralph Miliband, who along with John Saville, had just begun publishing the *Socialist Register*. Miliband's presence on the platform was significant in that he represented an important segment of the new left.

Six months later the founding conference of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (see below) met in Mahatma Gandhi Hall in London amidst a great sense of urgency about a new expansion of the war. It was not long after Johnson had announced the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong and a further escalation. Extreme talk in American ruling circles about "bombing Vietnam into the Stone Age" even forced Harold Wilson into making a few mild criticisms of the Americans.

Since the December meeting the group of activists who had responded to Russell's initial appeal had been working at full speed to get the proposed organisation off the ground. There was a sense of urgency as a result of the very real fears that Wilson at any time might succumb to American pressure and commit British troops. Regional meetings and ad-hoc committees took place in the Midlands, the north of England and Scotland.

On the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament's Aldermaston March at Easter that year everyone who supported the "solidarity" position – as opposed to the official CND call for a "negotiated settlement" – was urged to march behind our banner. At every stop we organised speak-outs about the war where we debated the CND position. That's when Tariq Ali, who later became a major spokesman for the VSC, took a prominent role in the campaign and spoke at many of these stops.

One of the more significant events to take place in the months leading up to the founding of the VSC came in response to an appeal from the Berkeley Vietnam Day Committee in San Francisco for protests against the war

to take place on 25 and 26 March. This call set the pattern for the future as many of the major protests in Britain were subsequently organised in response to such international appeals.

With the movement not yet at the stage where the organisers could stage protests of any significance on the street, they decided on a protest rally instead. The gathering turned out to be a very large meeting of several hundred, giving the campaign a large boost of confidence. David Horowitz, now infamous in the US for his far-right conservative views, but then a director of the BRPF, was in the chair. He had been prominent in the new left in California. On the platform also were Robin Blackburn of *New Left Review*, Ken Coates, and the very important new left intellectual, Raymond Williams, an influential figure among Marxists and a very welcome addition to the platform.

With Ralph Schoenman in the chair, the founding conference of the VSC took place on 4-5 June 1966, and was opened with the good wishes and words of encouragement from a frail but intellectually acute ninety-four year old Bertrand Russell. The planning committee, set up at the previous December meeting, had worked hard to make the conference a success, with many committee members touring the country speaking about the war to university socialist societies and others. Over 200 delegates were on hand including groups that had spontaneously sprung up all over the country in the previous months, but also a number from Labour Party constituencies, Labour Party Young Socialist groups and a few trade union branches. Notably over 40% of delegates came from several Maoist groups led by Albert Machanda, editor of the *West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian News*.

The Maoists had come to the founding conference with a specific agenda in mind. They wanted to persuade the new organisation to adopt as its programme the essential content of the Geneva Accords from 1953 which among other things called for a "negotiated settlement" to the war and "supervised elections" and which had very little to do with British politics.

It was but a continuation of the debate that the organisers of the new movement had been having up and down the country with supporters of the Communist Party who were peddling a similar line though argued somewhat differently. They stated a negotiated settlement should be supported because that's what the Vietnamese themselves wanted and that they were also asking for the implementation of the Geneva Accords. This may have been true but it ignored the fact that the Vietnamese were going through the living hell of being pounded by the US military machine, one of the mightiest in the world. There are limitations to what a people can endure, and at some point they might be forced into accepting a compromise with their enemy, as the supporters of the "solidarity" position recognised. That was their right, they argued, but we in Britain were in a different, much more favourable position, to carry out a solidarity campaign. We shouldn't be putting pressure on the Vietnamese to come to some kind of settlement but should focus on doing everything in our power to help them.

The debate was not new nor was it unexpected. But the main aim of the Machanda people was to turn whatever solidarity campaign that came into existence into some kind of front for their aims. When the conference rejected their demands, they immediately jumped to their feet and marched as a body out of the hall to another meeting room nearby which they had rented for such an eventuality. Their exit, though not unexpected, came as quite an astonishing turn of events when it actually happened. Still, the conference remained in session and went on to adopt a series of proposals to take the campaign forward. These included an informational leafleting campaign at a local Hovercraft plant that had been shipping vessels to Vietnam and the development of anti-war educational materials targeted at American military forces – of whom there were many – in Britain. Another proposal put forward by Ian Birchall of the International Socialists for a conference later in the year of trade unionists about the war, was also adopted.

But probably the most important immediate proposal put before the founding conference was from Ralph Schoenman on behalf of Bertrand Russell. Having just returned from Hanoi where he had met with the North Vietnam government representatives, Schoenman outlined Russell's proposal for the setting up of an international war crimes tribunal. It was a project that would see him eventually banned from entering Britain and most other European countries and having his passport lifted by the US State Department. But with the help of activists from the VSC, the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation would go on to make a uniquely British contribution to the campaign against the war by initiating what became known as the Russell International War Tribunal.

Tribunal representatives included some of world's major intellectuals, many from the third world, and the most notable from Europe were Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and the famous French mathematician Laurent Schwartz. The representatives from Britain on the Tribunal, though neither could be described as typically British, were Isaac Deutscher, the Polish biographer of Leon Trotsky, and Lawrence Daly, supporter of Scottish nationalism and the leader of Scottish Mine Workers' Union.

Hostility from the Americans was such, that they put strong diplomatic pressure on their allies in Europe to make it as difficult as possible for the Tribunal to even meet. It was banned in France by Charles de Gaulle and by Harold Wilson in Britain who refused to provide visas to allow it to take place. Nevertheless many investigative teams were sent by the Tribunal to Vietnam to gather information about the consequences of the war on the civilian population and the Tribunal finally met publicly in two separate sessions, on two different dates in Stockholm, Sweden, and Roskilde, Denmark, to hear the reports of its investigative teams. Its final report, *Against the Crime of Silence* became a major expose of the degree of the American crimes. It circulated

widely around the world, giving a boost to the international campaign against the war.

The VSC, even with its limited capacities and a loosely connected membership of approximately 2000, went on to become the dominant organisation in Britain campaigning against the war. It by-passed such organisations as the Communist Party-influenced British Council for Peace in Vietnam, and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, both of which were calling for a negotiated settlement to the war, not much different in principle, VSC maintained, from what the Wilson government was saying.

All of these developments were taking place in the midst of a rising radicalisation in many British universities and colleges, with students organising to demand more control over the educational institutions. This was where the campaign against the war found its greatest support. Meetings called to discuss the war turned into mass affairs, with several hundred turning out to hear VSC speakers.

The VSC successfully used a version of the "united front" tactic to take advantage of the new opportunities opening up and to advance the campaign. In a statement adopted at its founding conference, it appealed to everyone, on non-exclusionary basis, to come together to end British complicity in the war and to fight to get the American troops out. It quickly initiated, through consultation and discussion with interested left groups, such as the International Socialists, the setting up of ad-hoc committees to plan the street demonstrations, the dates for which were usually determined by the American anti-war movement's appeals for international days of protest. It was a breakthrough in the campaign against the war. The ad-hoc committees came together for each major protest in London and brought new forces into organising opposition to the war. By any count they were very successful. As many as 200 people sometimes turned out to planning meetings alone where it was often standing room only.

And as the war escalated, with a multitude of images of American's brutality in Vietnam appearing on TV screens every evening, a moral outrage about the war seemed to take hold. Demonstrations in front of the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square made up of thousands of mainly young people, came to characterise the period when the Vietnam protestors would defend themselves against violent attacks by the police. These demonstrations are seen as an essential part of the sixties.

An important feature of the ad-hoc committees that organised these protests was their inclusive character. As long as one supported the main agreed-upon demands – which were only arrived at after considerable debate – everyone one could participate. Moreover, unlike CND and its protests in previous years which were strictly monitored to ensure participants would only carry CND-approved placards, participants in the ad-hoc committees' protests were allowed carry their own banners and slogans, a difference clearly seen when one compares photographs of CND and VSC protests, the latter being more boisterous and much more democratic. It was an important departure for the British Left, a tradition that remains to this day.

Part 2 – The crystallisation of a new militant left

The VSC was the result of a whole wave of development which built and deepened a new militant left. At the beginning of the 1960s the left as a whole was dominated by the Communist Party-Tribune Labour left axis, and the far left was dominated by Gerry Healy's Socialist Labour League (later Workers Revolutionary Party). VSC was a product of politics which broke with both of these traditions. The leaders of both were bitterly hostile to the VSC.

One has to have a sense of proportion however. The Communist Party had around 30,000 members still (with about 5000 in the Young Communist League), despite the trauma of the Hungarian 1956 revolution, which saw thousands of its activists leave. By contrast the SLL at around 300 members was much bigger than the other revolutionary groups, but only because these groups were tiny. IS, later the SWP, had only a few dozen members and their leader, Tony Cliff, would say they could have the annual conference in his front room.

In terms of tracking a new kind of politics on the left the key development was the late 1950s formation of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Mass support for CND was significant because it broke with the Cold War Atlanticist consensus, opposing NATO and demanding neutrality between the Cold War blocs. This struck at the heart of the foreign policy consensus between the main parties that had been in place since the Second World War: it caused major alarm when it resulted in the 1960 Labour conference passing a motion calling for unilateral nuclear disarmament.

CND and its annual Aldermaston marches provided an umbrella under which all kinds of tendencies could put forward their politics to a wider audience.

The early 1960s, however, saw a series of events which radicalised a whole wing of the broad pro-CND alliance. Before going into that, developments inside the Young Socialists should be noted. Labour under Neil Kinnock always had problems with its youth wing. The Labour League of Youth, set up in the 1930s, was heavily influenced by the CP and shut down in 1954. In 1960 the Labour leadership set up the Young Socialists and it was almost instantly dominated by the supporters of two newspapers – *Keep Left*, produced by the 'Healyite' SLL and *Young Guard*, supported mainly by the pre-SWP International Socialists but also formally by the proto-Militant RSL. This latter alliance was not to last. At first virtually all the leadership positions were taken by *Keep Left*. The formal mechanism of *Keep Left* and *Young Guard* was sponsorship by YS branches: each garnered dozens of sponsors, and some branches sponsored both.

It should be remembered that by the early 1960s Gerry Healy had given up the alliance with Tribune and

launched the Socialist Labour League with *The Newsletter* as its paper. In 1960 the SLL and the Newsletter were proscribed and after expulsions the SLL began to regroup as a public organisation. Keep Left was the last gasp of the Healyites as an entrust organisation. In 1962 Keep Left was in turn proscribed and expulsions begun. By the end of the year the 'Young Socialists', Healyite variety, was a public organisation that specialised in intervening among the youth on council estates with dances and football competitions. From the mid-1960s onwards most of the far left regarded the SLL as a side show, mainly outside of the main political developments of the left, whatever its party-building successes.

The departure of Keep Left meant that Young Guard carried the torch of Marxism in the YS. By 1964 the Militant had walked out of Young Guard to organise around their own paper. For a period in the mid-1960s IS supporters produced a paper called *Rebel*. But in reality they also were on their way out of the Labour Party and YS, and were to become a major force in VSC.

The Committee of 100

The Committee of 100 was formed in 1960 to carry out non-violent civil disobedience against nuclear weapons. Part of the original group came from the Direct Action Committee against Nuclear Weapons that had been formed in 1957, for example Pat Arrowsmith, Michael Randle and Michael Scott. But the key impulse in propelling the Committee of 100 was the link up with Bertrand Russell and the energetic Ralph Schoenman. Ralph Miliband was involved in the initial discussions, although never played a significant role in the organisation. Russell resigned his position as national chair of CND to lead the Committee.

The 100's first sit down outside the Ministry of Defence was largely ignored by the police but the second sit-down in Parliament Square April 1961 led to 826 arrests. Multiple sit downs followed outside American bases in England and Scotland, and in central London, with thousands of arrests. In 1962 six key leaders of the 100 were arrested and tried on conspiracy charges. Ian Dixon, Terry Chandler, Trevor Hatton, Michael Randle and Pat Pottle were sentenced to 18 months and Helen Alagranza to 12 months. Eventually the 100 declined because politically it had nowhere to go. It had just one tactic and in the face of massive repression could not elaborate a political way out that was much different to CND as a whole, although some supporters were later involved in putting forward nuclear disarmament candidates in elections, with little success.

The key thing about the Committee of 100 experience was what it showed to young people in the movement about the state in general and the police and judicial system in particular. The experience of being thrown into the fountains in Trafalgar Square by the police and rough handling from the same source on many sit downs opened a lot of eyes.

Like CND the Committee was affected sharply by events of 1962-3. The Cuban missile crisis in October 1962 was experienced by millions in the West as something which could easily lead to imminent nuclear war. It is difficult now to imagine such a scenario, but the decision by President Kennedy to impose a physical blockade on the island of Cuba to stop Soviet ships reaching the island led to a widespread expectation of a military clash between the two superpowers in the Caribbean. Kennedy's action was clearly an act of war under international law, and the Soviet Union sending nuclear missiles to Cuba with Cuban consent was perfectly in accordance with international law (whether it was politically a good idea is another question). But among the majority in the left and the peace movement, even if they opposed the sending of the missiles to Cuba, the United States was seen as the aggressor and protest at the time was largely directed at the Americans. The crisis helped identify the peace movement with the militant left.

Without doubt the main inspiration for the turn to non-violent direct action was the civil rights movement in the United States. Like the South African anti-apartheid struggle, the civil rights movement enjoyed 100% support on the British left, although some disagreed with non-violence as a strategy. The violent repression with which the movement was met in the southern states was a crucial factor in shifting big sections of public opinion away from sympathy with the United States. It would be hard to overstate the impact of the images of the extreme violence used by US police forces in the South, on young people open to moving towards radicalism

The paradoxical outcome of the Cuban missile crisis was unexpected. Nuclear war did not take place. When Khrushchev backed down and recalled the ships an enormous wave of relief flooded over Europe. The world had been to the brink of nuclear war. But 'mutually assured destruction', i.e. catastrophic consequences for both sides in the case of nuclear war, seemed to have worked to prevent an apocalypse. Then in 1963 the major nuclear powers signed the nuclear test ban agreement. The Conservative Party published newspaper advertisements showing protestors with 'Ban the Bomb' placards and the heading 'Meanwhile the Conservatives signed the Test Ban Treaty'. To many it did indeed seem that the threat of nuclear war had receded.

On the final day of the Aldermaston March in April 1964, Stuart Hall declared from the Trafalgar Square plinth: "People say CND is dead. If that's true there are 20,000 corpses in front of me". Of course CND was not dead and 20 years later would come back enormously reinforced during the crisis over the stationing of Cruise and Pershing missiles in Europe. But for the moment the nuclear disarmament issue ceased to be the focus of the left's attention on international issues. During 1965 and 1966 it became clear it had shifted to Vietnam, opening up a vacuum into which VSC was able to march.

'Go Home Queen Fred' and 'Spies for Peace'

Before the nuclear disarmament movement left centre stage for a while, it had in July 1963 another couple of bursts of demonstrations which drew major public attention. The first was the Spies for Peace affair and the second was the protest against the July 1963 state visit of Queen Frederika of Greece – a distant relative of both the Queen and Prince Philip.

People associated with the Committee of 100, notably Nicholas Walter (father of feminist writer Natasha Walter), discovered that the government had set up a series of Regional Seats of Government (RSGs), underground shelters from which government would be exercised in the event of nuclear war. The guest lists for these RSGs was limited to the great and good, and top politicians, police, senior generals etc. Spies for Peace published a pamphlet blowing the gaffe on this, and during the 1963 Aldermaston march led a section of the march – against the wishes of moderate CND leaders like Canon John Collins – to hold a demonstration outside the RSG at Warren Row, near Reading. (See 'How my father spied for peace' by Natasha Walter <http://www.newstatesman.com/node/198271> [<http://www.newstatesman.com/node/198271>] .)

Greece's Queen Frederika was a notorious right winger (she had an affair with CIA director Allan Dulles), had been a member of the Hitler Youth during her early years living in Austria, and intervened vigorously against the Greek left through her husband and then her son King Constantine. Her visit to London coincided with two things. First the aftermath of the assassination of leading Greek left social democrat MP and peace campaigner Grigoris Lambrakis, that had caused international outrage. And secondly the national campaign run by the Communist Party for the release of Greek seafarers' leader Tony Ambatielos, who had been imprisoned for 18 years. His wife Betty (née Betty Bartlett) was a former central leader of the CPGB and toured the country gathering widespread support for the release of Greek political prisoners (see http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=655:betty-and-tony-ambatielos&catid=1:a&Itemid=97 [http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=655:betty-and-tony-ambatielos&catid=1:a&Itemid=97]).

For a week during Frederika's stay every evening demonstrators assembled in Trafalgar Square with the ambition of marching down the Mall to Buckingham Palace. Each time the police blocked them and there were running battles around adjacent back streets. The CPGB and especially the YCL were very much to the fore in these demonstrations, as was of course the CND-Committee of 100 milieu. These events once again associated the peace movement with the left (see on Youtube the spectacularly neutral report of protests against the Greek royals <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgvT-ATHlmY> [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgvT-ATHlmY>])

The early 1960s Aldermaston marches were a high point of the first wave of CND. More than 100,000 people attended the final day of the march in 1963. But the movement started to decline once the major powers had signed the 1963 Test Ban Treaty. The first wave of CND was coming to an end, creating a vacuum that the VSC was able to march into.

Other signs of turbulence in the mid-60s that were clues to the formation of a new left were the beginnings of student militant action, notably sit-ins the London School of Economics over the institution's financial links with apartheid South Africa, and the growing militancy inside the National Organisation of Labour Students where supporters of several left groups made an impact.

Political Consequences of VSC

Overall we can say that the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign was the culmination of a process of radicalisation which benefitted all the groups to the left of the Communist Party-Tribune axis. But it helped to diffuse important political ideas that became embedded in the British far left.

First, internationalism. Of course it would be an outright slander to say the pre-VSC left, in whatever form, was not internationalist. In its own way the Anti-Apartheid movement was indeed an example of solidarity with struggles abroad. But VSC embodied internationalism in a different way. This can be seen by looking at the contrast between the approaches of VSC and the British Council for Peace in Vietnam and its CND allies. The BCPV called not for support for the Vietnamese struggle, but for peace through negotiations. It decidedly did not want to appear partisan, in support of the NLF and the North Vietnamese; neither did it simply call for the withdrawal of American troops.

Given the growing militancy of the time, the popular VSC slogan was 'Victory to the NLF'. Actually after a lot of debate this slogan was not used as the official organising platform for the March 1968 demonstration, but replaced with 'US troops out now', particularly to try (successfully) to get the sponsorship of the South Wales miners.

But however tactically put, the basic idea of *solidarity* with the struggles of workers, peasants and the popular masses in other countries became embedded in the British left, rather than appeals for peace and for the imperialist leaders to see sense.

Leaders of VSC also pioneered direct co-ordination with similar campaigns internationally, through a series of conferences in which militant left tendencies were able to directly encounter each other (for example the Brussels November 1967 organising conference).

The second impact came through VSC's united front form of organising, making a conscious attempt to include

all the political tendencies, and supporters not involved in any organised group, who supported the campaign. In this it was inspired by the single-issue united front approach of the US Socialist Workers Party in the anti-war campaign, but of course this campaign took place in a very different context. This is summed up in the classic account of the movement 'Out Now' by Fred Halstead, one of the SWP organisers of the movement. One can say that this approach was carried out almost down to the last detail by the leaders of the Stop the War Coalition before and during the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In their different ways the old CP-Tribune axis and the Healyite SLL operated very differently. For the Communist Party campaigns were very much in the hands of its key organisers and the dignitaries and notables that it managed to involve: anyone suspected of 'ultra-leftism' was squeezed out. In its own way the Socialist Labour League was also opposed to united action campaigns involving other tendencies.

In the mid-1960s the SLL made support for the NLF ('Vietcong' in SLL speak) a key part of its propaganda. In 1966 SLL leader Mike Banda had a very friendly discussion with VSC leaders about bringing the SLL into the campaign. But this never happened and Gerry Healy imposed a harsh hostility to VSC. Such hostility led to the fiasco of SLL members standing alongside the huge October 1968 VSC march giving out leaflets explaining: "Why we are not marching".

In fact if the SLL had appeared on the VSC marches with revolutionary banners and red flags in contingents of several hundred people, they could not have failed to recruit and to modify the rather harsh and sectarian reputation they had. The 'Healyites' were one extreme of a rather bad side of British Trotskyism – based on a propaganda routine, individual recruitment and 'front' organisations. Measuring organisations in terms of members recruited, finances raised and papers sold can tell you a lot about an organisation but not necessarily much about its usefulness to the struggle for socialism.

The International Marxist Group (IMG) embodied a different conception of what a revolutionary organisation could and should be. In early 1967 it had about 40 members. By the end of 1968 that had gone up to about 200. But between 1965 and 1968 the group was instrumental in the formation of the VSC and the International War Crimes Tribunal and IMG members Ken Coates and Tony Topham were the key organisers of the Institute for Workers Control. As explained above the organisation was central in *The Week* bulletin and in the *Briefing* handouts at Labour conference. In other words it tried to use 'the lever of a small group' to make a real political difference at a national level, despite its puny size. Some IMG members would later argue that the IMG had given insufficient attention to the daily routine of party building and too much to staffing and running broader movements. Whatever the truth of that, it certainly represented a break from the 'British Trotskyist' sectarian propagandist models of organising.

Moving On

It has hardly been mentioned here because it is so obvious, but the shock troops of the VSC were students. That is not to say that labour movement organisations were not involved, there were Labour Party and trade union banners at every demonstration, but the mobilising focus tended to be the universities and colleges. VSC demonstrations were the first political experience for many thousands.

Precisely because of this experience many of these students were keen to move beyond student-based activism, especially after the May-June general strike in France that seemed to confirm everything Marxists said about the central role of the organised working class. At the same time, the Tet Offensive of January-February 1968 transformed the war in Vietnam and seemed to many to be the harbinger of inevitable American defeat and eventual withdrawal. Although over-simplified this view was essentially correct.

VSC called a final big demonstration in the spring of 1969 but only about 10,000 people turned out. There was perhaps fatigue with the round of bigger and bigger demonstrations. The huge October 1968 demonstration was played up by the press (who foresaw major street violence that did not occur on a large scale), leading to a sort of anti-climax among many participants. (For the March 1968 'Battle of Grosvenor Square' see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sXslqs2wm8> [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sXslqs2wm8>])

At the October 1968 there was a huge banner (we don't know who produced it) with the legend 'NLF-AEF' (AEF being for a brief time the acronym of what was later called the AUEW engineering union). This expressed in its own way the gut feeling of many students that it was now necessary to take the militant socialist message to the working class. The Vietnam Solidarity Campaign had run its course as a major focus for the militant left. Student militancy at college level of course continued, most notably in the wave of sit-ins in universities in 1970 over the issue of secret files held on students.

But the start of the 1970s ushered in a wave of industrial militancy and of course the famous struggles during the 1969-70 'Winter of Discontent,' over the freeing of the five dockers leaders from Pentonville prison and the two miners strikes of 1972 and 1974. By then the militant left in Britain had been transformed.

Notes:

- (1) Author of the two-volume memoir, *Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 1960s*, published 2014 by Resistance Books, London.
- (2) Writer, blogger and long-time revolutionary activist. Editor of the on line journal, *Marxsite*.
- (3) Bertrand Russell, known world-wide as a Nobel Prize winner, mathematician, philosopher and public intellectual, had been in the forefront of the campaign in Britain against nuclear weapons in the years before. In

1955, he and Albert Einstein had caused a public sensation with their desperate appeal that warned of the danger confronting humanity should nuclear war be unleashed, and the dangerous long-term effects upon human health from the testing of these terrible weapons. Calling upon scientists everywhere to work for peace, the appeal signed by eleven of the world's leading scientists, among them nine Nobel laureates, would become known as the Russell-Einstein Manifesto. Essentially an intellectual argument about the consequences of nuclear war, the Manifesto had a profound public effect, giving a huge boost to a nascent anti-nuclear movement. And by 1957 a whole variety of anti-nuclear groups and movements had begun to appear everywhere. Thus the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament came into being, with Canon Collins as its chairman and Russell its President. Ostensibly their aim was to gather all opponents of the government's nuclear policies into a broad umbrella-like organisation to be able to effectively dissuade the government from proceeding along the nuclear path. CND organised many protests all over the country, often against nuclear missile sites and military installations, but its most memorable activity was organising every Easter some of the largest protest demonstrations ever seen in Britain— its famous four-day Easter marches from London to the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston. But CND was mainly oriented towards influencing the Labour Party, the high point coming in 1960 when it won a majority of the party's annual convention delegates to its positions, only to be ignored by Hugh Gaitskill and the majority of Labour's MPs. They simply took no notice of the conference decisions and within a very short time had reversed them. And with that, Russell began to question CND's tactic of focussing entirely on winning over Labour MPs to its positions, breaking with Canon Collins and the rest of the CND leadership. He proposed – now joined by Ralph Schoenman – a new course for the anti-nuclear movement in Britain with tactics inspired by the lunch counter sit-ins by black activists in the American south in their battle against segregation.

'If all those who disapprove of government policy,' Russell wrote in the *New Statesman* in February 1961, 'were to join massive demonstrations of civil disobedience they could render government folly impossible, and compel the so-called statesmen to acquiesce in measures that would make human survival possible.' Soon he had 108 signatories added to the statement, made up of many political activists but including broad representation from prominent figures in the world of culture. The first activities of this Committee of 100 were a series of civil disobedience protests: a sit-down of 5000 of its supporters in February 1961 outside the War Office in Whitehall in central London; demonstrations outside the embassies of the United States and the USSR, including marches and sit-downs around the country such as blocking roads to the Polaris submarine base in Holy Loch in Scotland. Thousands participated in these sit-downs leading to severe police repression, with the arrest and jailing of over 30 of the Committee's leaders, including Russell and his wife Dora. Schoenman got six months while Michael Randle, another important leader, received 18 months. And with that the Committee of 100 virtually collapsed, officially ceasing to exist by 1968.

- (4) After the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 Russell's public communications back and forth with Nikita Khrushchev had served as a channel for allowing the Western public to hear Khrushchev's views – without the media's distortions. According to President John Kennedy, there was a 50-50 chance of nuclear war. The crisis inspired Russell to set up the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation. Many leading figures, especially in the third world gave it their public support, including the UN secretary general U Thant.

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