



Wielding the human rights weapon against the American empire: the second Russell Tribunal and human rights in transatlantic relations

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Abstract

The article discusses the evolution from the 1966–1967 “first” Russell Tribunal, an unofficial and political gathering that censured the USA for its aggression in Vietnam, to the “second” Russell Tribunal, which took place in Rome and Brussels between 1974 and 1976 and put human rights violations in Latin America in the international spotlight. Both Tribunals shared a profound anti-Americanism and an explicit proximity to Third Worldism. Yet, there was also an important difference, since the language of human rights shaped only the “second” Tribunal. The article is mostly based on documentary sources held by the Fondazione Lelio and Lisli Basso in Rome. This choice is based on the importance Italian Senator Lelio Basso had for the Tribunal. Basso was the main organizer and the driving force of the Tribunal and coordinated many transnational groups in support of this event. Moreover, his intellectual reflections on decolonization as a revolutionary force and his fierce anti-Americanism offered a blueprint for the proceedings and the sentence of the Tribunal. Bringing together the recent literature on the emergence of human rights during the 1970s and that on European anti-Americanism, the article shows how some prominent European intellectuals and politicians appropriated human rights jargon to criticize American foreign policy and denounce its responsibilities for ongoing human rights violations in Latin America. In doing so, it argues that the human rights language renewed European anti-Americanism during the 1970s.

Keywords Human rights · Self-determination · Anti-Americanism · Russell Tribunal · Latin America

This article discusses how some European intellectuals and politicians appropriated the human rights language of the 1970s in order to denounce US responsibility for

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human rights abuses and violations occurring in Latin America. To achieve this, it will focus on the “Second Russell Tribunal on Repression in Brazil, Chile and Latin America”. Summoned by Italian politician Lelio Basso, the Tribunal was an unofficial and political gathering that, in three sessions between 1974 and 1976, investigated human rights violations and abuses occurring in several Latin American states, namely Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Bolivia, Paraguay, Haiti, Santo Domingo, Guatemala and Puerto Rico and denounced these violations as products of American imperialism. It drew inspiration from the “International War Crimes Tribunal”. Summoned by Lord Bertrand Russell, the “first” Russell Tribunal, as it was known, investigated American conduct in Vietnam. In two sessions that took place in 1967 in Stockholm and Copenhagen, it condemned the USA and its allies actively participating in the War for their aggression against Vietnam.¹

The two tribunals shared a number of common features and assumptions. Firstly, they were non-governmental tribunals, namely “international colleges consisting of well-known persons, [which] do not have legal power, but aim at contributing to the formation of international law”, as the official *Handbook* of the Russell Tribunals explained.² Secondly, their members were prominent intellectuals and politicians, mostly from Western Europe and connected to vast social movements. Indeed, the first Russell Tribunal was a specific expression of a global movement against the Vietnam War, whereas the second drew inspiration from transnational activism for human rights. Moreover, both Tribunals shared similar political and ideological assumptions, such as an explicit hostility toward the USA and an equally explicit solidarity with Third World proposals and projects. However, there were also

¹ On the “first” Russell Tribunal see Marcos Zunino, “Subversive Justice: The Russell Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal and Transitional Justice”, *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 10, no. 2 (July 2016), 211–229; Zachary Manfredi, “Sharpening the Vigilance of the World: Reconsidering the Russell Tribunal as Ritual”, *Humanity. An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 9, no.1 (2018), 75–91; Arthur Jay Klinghoffer and Judith Apter Klinghoffer, *International Citizens’ Tribunals: Mobilizing Public Opinion to Advance Human Rights* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Roberto Colozza, “Il Tribunale Russell. Intellettuale contro la guerra del Vietnam”, *Ventesimo Secolo*, Anno XIII (2014), 49–75; Philipp Gassert, “Das Russell-Tribunal von 1966/67. Blaming and Shaming und die Nürnberger Prinzipien”, in *Toward a New Moral Order? Menschenrechtspolitik und Völkerrecht seit 1945*, edited by Norbert Frei und Annette Weinke, 149–163, (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2013); Tor Krever, “Remembering the Russell Tribunal”, *London Review of International Law* 5, no.3 (2018), 483–492. Salar Mohandesi traces the intellectual origins of the Tribunal in French radicalism and opposition to the war. See Salar Mohandesi, *From AntiImperialism to Human Rights, The Vietnam War and Radical Internationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2017), 93–99. In comparison, the “second” Russell is a neglected and overlooked field of research. Nevertheless, some useful works are Giancarlo Monina, “Lelio Basso e as Origens Ideias e Políticas do Tribunal Russel II”, in *Ditaturas militares, Estado de exceção e resistência democrática na América Latina*, edited by G. Tosi e L. de Fátima Guerra Ferreira (João Pessoa: Editora do ccta, 2016), 107–127; Fondazione Lelio e Lisli Basso-Issoco; Fondazione internazionale Lelio Basso per il diritto e la liberazione dei popoli; Lega internazionale per i diritti e la liberazione dei popoli, eds., *Lelio Basso e le culture dei diritti. Atti del Convegno internazionale, Roma 10–12 dicembre 1998* (Roma: Carocci, 2000); Giancarlo Monina, ed., *Memorie di repressione, resistenza e solidarietà in Brasile e in America Latina* (Roma: Ediesse, 2013).

² Fourth Russell Tribunal and Frank van Vree, *Handbook. Fourth Russell Tribunal. The Rights of the Indians of the Americas* (Amsterdam: Werkgroep Indianen Project, 1980), 18.



significant differences between the two Tribunals. This essay will concentrate on a fundamental difference, arguing that only the second Russell Tribunal embraced human rights. In doing so, it will also argue that human rights jargon entered European anti-Americanism during the 1970s.

As such, the essay brings together two bodies of scholarship that so far have had little contact. Firstly, it aims at enriching historians' appreciation of the reasons, slogans, and ideas of European anti-Americanism during the 1970s. A contested category—indeed, scholars have alternatively defined anti-Americanism as an ideology, a set of values and practices, or even an inconsequential myth—European anti-Americanism drew on many sources and assumed different meanings over the years. During the Cold War, many Europeans converged in perceiving the USA as the major threat to international peace. According to scholars O'Connor and Friedman, despite tensions within the “strained” Atlantic community,³ European citizens' attitude toward the USA softened somewhat during the 1970s, as it was caught between the global protest of the late 1960s and a new wave of anti-Americanism during the early 1980s, when Ronald Reagan's military build-up fuelled fears of a possible “Euroshima”. To the contrary, this essay will argue that during the 1970s anti-Americanism embraced the language of human rights to denounce US responsibility for many ongoing human rights violations around the globe.⁴

Secondly, this essay aims to offer a new perspective on the impact of the human rights breakthrough of the 1970s on transatlantic relations. Many historians have concurred with Samuel Moyn's iconoclastic definition of human rights as a sort of quasi-apolitical *Last Utopia* that cut across political divisions and ideological disputes to define a new moral and universal foundation for international relations.⁵ Hence, it is generally assumed that both American and European activists embraced human rights, as much as Western European governments and the USA did, despite some significant differences in the place of human rights in their diplomacy. To

³ Thomas A. Schwartz and Matthias Schulz, eds., *The Strained Alliance: US-European Relations from Nixon to Carter* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴ Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreibier, *Le défi américain* (Paris: Denoël, 1967); Paul Holander, *AntiAmericanism, Critiques at Home and Abroad, 1965–1980* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Brendon O'Connor, “A Brief History of AntiAmericanism. From Cultural Criticism to Terrorism”, *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 23, No. 1 (July 2004), 77–92; Kenneth J. Heineman, “The Anti-Vietnam War Movement and Anti-Americanism”, in *Anti-Americanism: History, Causes, and Themes, Vol.2 Historical Perspectives*, edited by Brendon O'Connor, Martin Griffiths, (Oxford and Westport: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), 203–230; Harald Mueller and Thomas Risse-Kappen, “Origins of Estrangement. The Peace Movement and the Changed Image of America in West Germany”, *International Security* 12, no. 1 (1987), 52–88; Jean-François Revel, *Anti-Americanism* (New York: Encounter Books, 2003); Max Paul Friedman, *Rethinking AntiAmericanism. The History of an Exceptional concept in American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 211–223; Rob Kroes, “Anti-Americanism in its cultural context: the United States and Europe and the cultural ties that bind them”, *Pacific and American Studies* 8, n.3 (2008), 55–74.

⁵ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia. Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn, eds., *The Breakthrough. Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Barbara Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Joe Renouard, *Human Rights in American Foreign Policy: From the 1960s to the Soviet Collapse* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).



scholars of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, for example, Western activists and, later, governments supported dissidents' in the communist bloc and played a major role in placing human rights at the centre of East–West relations.⁶ Even for those scholars who have recently suggested that the human rights revolution of the 1970s was a hyper-individualistic ideology that has weakened (and is weakening) collective rights and favoured the ongoing neoliberalism, human rights were ideologically accepted by political and economic elites on both shores of the Atlantic.⁷ Yet, as this essay aims to demonstrate, the principle of human rights was also highly divisive in transatlantic relations. Human rights could have offered a universal principle to many activists. However, others could not transcend their own political and ideological beliefs. In other words, many of those who during the 1960s had denounced American imperialism and militarism found in the issue of human rights a new way to criticize the USA and its imperialist stance in international relations.

The First Russell Tribunal and America's War

In April 1966, English philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell proposed to French philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir the creation of an opinion tribunal to investigate and denounce American war crimes in Vietnam.⁸

Russell had a long history of anti-war activism. By the early 1960s, he had become increasingly critical of American foreign policy, mostly because of American actions toward Cuba and Vietnam. For him, these actions showed the imperialist hubris of American foreign policy. In an open letter addressed to *Harper's*

⁶ Angela Romano, *From Détente in Europe to European Détente. How the West Shaped the Helsinki CSCE*, (Brussels: PeterLang, 2009); Joe Renouard, "No Relief for a Troubled Alliance: Human Rights and Transatlantic Relations in the 1970s", in *Transatlantic Conflict and Consensus: Culture, History and Politics*, edited by Roberta Haar and Neil Wynn (Cambridge: Cambridge Academic, 2009), 145–162; Barbara Keys, "Something to Boast About": Western Enthusiasm for Carter's Human Rights Diplomacy", in *Reasserting America in the 1970s: U.S. Public Diplomacy and the Rebuilding of America's Image Abroad*, edited by Hallvard Hottaker, Giles Scott-Smith, and David Snyder (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2016), 229–244. On the CSCE see Sarah B. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Sarah Snyder and Nicolas Badalassi, eds., *The CSCE and the End of the Cold War: Diplomacy, Societies and Human Rights* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019).

⁷ S. Marks, "Four Human Rights Myths", in *Human Rights: Old Problems, New Possibilities*, edited by David Kinley, Wojciech Sadurski, Kevin Walton (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, 2013), 217–235. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2008); Ernst-Ulrich Petersmann, "Time for a United Nations Global Compact for Integrating Human Rights in the Law of Worldwide Organizations: Lessons from European Integration", *European Journal of International Law* 13, issue 3 (2002), 621–622. See also Mary Nolan, "Human Rights and Market Fundamentalism in the Long 1970s", in *Toward a new moral world order?*, edited by Norbert Frei, Annette Weinke, (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2013), 172–181; and Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁸ Bertrand Russell to Jean-Paul Sartre, Plas Penrhyn, 19 April 1966, in *The Selected Letters of Bertrand Russell, Volume 2: Public Years 1914–1970*, edited by Nicholas Griffith (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), 587–588.



Magazine in 1963, he claimed that the American government had imposed “intolerable regimes on Asian, Latin American, and Middle East countries” and that “the American government pursues a policy of genocide”. In another letter to the *New York Times*, he wrote that American conduct in Vietnam was “reminiscent of warfare as practiced by the Germans in Eastern Europe and the Japanese in South East Asia”, thus implying that American actions should be considered war crimes.⁹ By the end of the year, he established the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation and started a correspondence with Ho Chi Minh and other Vietnamese leaders. These and other public actions made Lord Russell one of the most outspoken critics of American involvement in Vietnam and more in general of America’s Cold War policies. According to a RAND corporation analyst, his words and actions were motivated by an “almost pathological anti-Americanism”.¹⁰

Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were a logical choice for Russell’s proposed tribunal, as they shared a similar understanding of the American foreign policy and the Vietnam War. By the late 1950s, Simone de Beauvoir had already argued that America was “becoming fascist”, while Sartre was already known as one of the most influential anti-American intellectuals in France whose “explosive anti-Americanism set the tone of elite opinion in Europe”.¹¹ Moreover, both had a long record of anti-imperialist activism dating back to the French War in Algeria, which caused them to draw parallels between the French in Algeria and the USA in Vietnam.¹²

Despite strong opposition from the United States government and its attempt to sabotage the Tribunal through diplomatic pressures on the French and British governments, which led to the denial of visas to some members of the Tribunal, Russell and Sartre succeeded in convincing a wide array of intellectuals and politicians, mostly from Western Europe, to join their initiative.¹³ When it opened, the Tribunal had twenty-six honorary and effective members. Honorary president Russell, executive president Sartre, and de Beauvoir were joined, among many others, by Yugoslav historian Vladimir Dedijer, Isaac Deutscher, Mahmud Ali Kasuri, Peter Weiss, Lázaro Cárdenas, Lelio Basso, and Jewish philosopher Gunther Anders. In order to dilute their clear anti-Americanism and to compensate for the absence of the defendant, the organisers of the Tribunal included representatives of American associations and civil society on the jury. They selected opponents of the Vietnam War such as the president of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee Stokely Carmichael, radical pacifist leader Dave Dellinger, the leader of the Students for a

⁹ “Bertrand Russell on the Sinful of Americans”, *Harper’s Magazine* (June 1963): 21–22, “Lord Russell’s Letter”, *New York Times*, 8 April 1963.

¹⁰ Harvey A. DeWeerd, “Lord Russell’s War Crimes Tribunal”, RAND Corporation Research Paper P-3561, available on line <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2008/P3561.pdf> (last accessed on March 2019).

¹¹ Paul Hollander, ed., *Understanding anti-Americanism: its origins and impact at home and abroad* (Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 2004), 239–257, quote at page 240. A more nuanced view on Sartre’s criticism of American foreign policy is in Friedman, *Rethinking anti-Americanism*, 109–118.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Luke J. Stewart, “Too loud to rise above the silence: the United States vs. the International War Crimes Tribunal, 1966–1967”, *The Sixties. A Journal of History, Politics and Culture* 11, issue 1 (2018), 17–45.



Democratic Society (SDS) Carl Oglesby, and African-American writer James Baldwin.¹⁴ Other prominent individuals such as British theatre critic Kenneth Tynan, American historian Lewis Mumford, and American playwright Arthur Miller declined the invitation to participate in the Tribunal. They believed that its political bias could not contribute to a meaningful assessment of what was really happening in Vietnam.¹⁵

Originally, the Tribunal was supposed to meet in November 1966 in Paris. Its aim would have been to try President Lyndon B. Johnson and other American political and military leaders for their criminal conduct in Vietnam. Opposition from the French government forced the organizing committee to move the Tribunal. They tried first to move it to London, facing a strong opposition from the British government and, finally, to Stockholm.¹⁶ This change of seat had a crucial consequence. Since Swedish laws forbade insulting and causing embarrassment to foreign leaders, the Tribunal opted for assessing the responsibility of the entire United States government, rather than focusing on individuals' choices and guilt.¹⁷ Members of the Tribunal identified five questions that would be at the core of their investigations and pronouncements: have the United States and its allies committed acts of aggression? Has the U.S. military made use of illegal weapons? Has the U.S. bombed civilian targets? Have prisoners and civilians suffered inhumane treatment? And has the United States committed genocide in Vietnam?¹⁸ To answer these questions, the Tribunal collected materials on the nature of the war and its impact, through a series of research missions in Vietnam. Indeed, much of the evidence used by the Tribunal was based on investigations carried by its members in North Vietnam and in some North-controlled areas of South Vietnam. Photos, a documentary movie, and input from scientific and medical advisors, as well as a few direct testimonies from Vietnamese citizens supplemented these shreds of evidence. The Tribunal then described the bombings of civilian targets, such as schools and hospitals, violence against the population, tortures, and the use of cluster bombs and defoliants.¹⁹

After two sessions, the first in Stockholm and the second in Copenhagen, the Russell Tribunal found the American government and its allies that had actively participated in the war, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines

¹⁴ Colozza, "Il Tribunale Russell".

¹⁵ Klinghoffer and Klinghoffer, *International Citizens' Tribunals*, 112–113.

¹⁶ British National Archives, Kew Gardens (hereinafter NA) PREM 13/1915 Harold Wilson to Bertrand Russell, March 14, 1967. See also Bertrand Russell to Harold Wilson, February 9, 1967, and, J.A. Chilcot to D. Andrews, March 8, 1967.

¹⁷ NA PREM 13/1915 A.M. Palliser to C.M. MacLehose (on the meeting between Prime Minister Wilson and Swedish Prime Minister Erlander), 27 April 1967. See also Zunino, "Subversive Justice", 211–229.

¹⁸ NA FCO 168/2773 Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, "Aims and Objectives of the International War Crimes Tribunal", December 1967; Fondazione Lelio e Lisli Basso, Rome (hereinafter FLLB), Collection Tribunale Russell (TB), 01 01 01, Draft Programme of the Tribunal and "Official Communiqué", 15 November 1966.

¹⁹ Ken Coates, ed., *Prevent the Crime of Silence. Reports from the Sessions of the International War Crimes Tribunal* (London: Allen Lane, 1971); Klinghoffer and Klinghoffer, *International Citizens' Tribunals*, 103–160.



and Japan guilty of all charges, including genocide.²⁰ Although the sentence could not end the war, it was far from ineffective.

Firstly, the proceedings of the Tribunal provided anti-war activists in the United States and Western Europe with new evidence and documentation for their opposition to American aggression. As historian Harish C. Mehta has argued, the Russell Tribunal broke the news about the use of cluster bombs in Vietnam, which became a fundamental issue in the anti-war mobilization over the following months.²¹ Even its format was a source of inspiration to protesters. In December 1970, around thirty veterans testified at a “war crimes” hearings organized by the Citizens Commission of Inquiry in Washington DC, and a few months later more than a hundred veterans testified at the Winter Soldier Investigation staged in Detroit by the Vietnam Veterans’ Association.²²

Secondly, the Russell Tribunal was part of a growing effort to judge the war in Vietnam as violating international law. According to international lawyer Richard Falk, whereas the Tribunal itself was a “juridical farce”, it nonetheless contributed to consideration of the “criminal responsibility” of the United States and its President. Admittedly, the Tribunal inspired new academic debates on the nature of the war. Of course, the leftist International Association of Democratic Lawyers shared the Russell Tribunal’s conclusion with enthusiasm, but many independent scholars and international lawyers also began referring to the Tribunal and its evidences in order to assess the “war crimes” perpetrated by the United States in Vietnam.²³

Moreover, the Tribunal was successful in strengthening a counter-narrative for the war. Its investigation demonstrated that in its conduct of the war, the USA was lying about both its respect for international law and the rationale for American intervention. President Johnson had repeatedly claimed that the USA entered the war to protect the Vietnamese people from external invasion and to guarantee their national sovereignty. To the contrary, the Tribunal had concluded that the USA was the major threat to both Vietnamese sovereignty and survival. As Lelio Basso put it during the Tribunal’s first session, the Vietnam War put “the people on one side” and “the American army and mercenary troops on the other”.²⁴ In a similar vein, Lord Russell pointed out that the aims of the United States were no different from

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Harish C. Mehta, “North Vietnam’s Informal Diplomacy with Bertrand Russell: Peace Activism and the International War Crimes Tribunal”, *Peace & Change. A Journal of Peace Research* 37, no.1 (2012), 64–94.

²² Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue*, 60.

²³ Richard Falk, “International Law and the United States Role in the Viet Nam War”, *Yale Law Journal* 75, issue 7, (June 1966), 1122–1160; Id., “International Law and the United States Role in Viet Nam: A Response to Professor Moore”, *Yale Law Journal* 76, No. 6 (May 1967), 1095–1158; Anthony A. D’Amato, Harvey L. Gould, Larry D. Woods, “War Crimes and Vietnam. The Nuremberg Defense and the Military Service Resister”, *California Law Review* 57, n.5 (November 1969), 1055–1111. See also International Association of Democratic Lawyers, ed., *Conférence mondiale de juristes pour le Vietnam: Grenoble, 6–10 juillet 1968* (Bruxelles: Éditions de l’Association internationale des juristes démocrates, 1969).

²⁴ Lelio Basso, “Summary of the First Two Charges”, in *Against the Crime of Silence. Proceedings of the International War. Stockholm – Copenhagen*, edited by John Duffett (New York: Clarion, 1968), 297.



“any other imperial power ... domination, markets, cheap labour, raw materials, conscript armies and strategic points from which to control or threaten”.²⁵

Despite the reference to international crime and international law, the purpose of the Tribunal was not juridical but political. Its primary objective was to make Western public opinion aware of the crimes the USA was committing in Vietnam and to turn citizens against American imperialism and violence. As the French Friends of the Russell Tribunal wrote in one of its brochures, by “raising consciousness in the Western world” of the criminal conduct of the United States, the Tribunal could contribute to the heroic resistance of the Vietnamese people.²⁶

Members of the Tribunal had never concealed their hostility towards the USA. In deconstructing the governmental narrative about the war, they were fighting “American imperialism”, as Sartre claimed in an interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*. He then clarified that “there is no question of judging whether American policy in Vietnam is evil” and that the Tribunal wanted to determine whether American actions fell “within the compass of international law on war crimes”.²⁷ Similarly, Russell claimed that American imperialism was “the common destroyer of peace and justice”, and that the Tribunal was parallel to the “heroic” and “epic” struggle of the Vietnamese people.²⁸ For this reason, in the introduction to the edited proceedings of the Tribunal, he wrote that he hoped that “the United States (would) be isolated and rendered incapable of further crimes” and that “the peoples of the Third World will take heart from the example of the Vietnamese and join further in dismantling the American empire”.²⁹ Lelio Basso reached the same conclusion, by arguing that the Tribunal would contribute defeating American imperialism.³⁰

A Marxist theoretician who studied Rosa Luxemburg, Basso was a prominent Italian politician and lawyer. During the 1960s, as a leader of the leftist wing of the Italian Socialist Party political, Basso led a split within the Party and participated in the foundation of the Italian Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity (Partito socialista italiano di unità proletaria, PSIUP) that espoused an anti-Atlanticist line. Basso himself was the first Italian Marxist to appropriate the word “totalitarian” to argue that both the United States and the Italian centrist Democrazia Cristiana should be considered the heirs of fascism.³¹ To Basso, fascism and imperialism were the main features of American foreign policy. By the mid-1960s, he celebrated the revolutionary

²⁵ “Introduction by Bertrand Russell”, Duffett, *Against the Crime of Silence*, 3.

²⁶ Cited in Bethany S. Keenan, *Vietnam is fighting for Us: French identities and the U.S.—Vietnam War, 1965–1973* (PhD Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 2009), 205.

²⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Le crime”, *Le Nouvel observateur*, 30 November 1966, reprinted in translation as “Imperialist Morality: Interview with Jean Paul Sartre on the War Crimes Tribunal” *New Left Review*, 41 (1967), 3.

²⁸ Bertrand Russell, *War Crimes in Vietnam* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967), 95 and 99.

²⁹ “Introduction by Bertrand Russell”, in Duffett, ed., *Against the Crime of Silence*, 4.

³⁰ Lelio Basso, “Ragioni e obiettivi del Tribunale Russell: suscitare nuove energie per la lotta antimperialista”, *Mondo nuovo*, n.49 (11 December 1966), 3; Lelio Basso, “La sinistra italiana ed europea”, *Momento*, n.14 (July 1967b), 5–14.

³¹ On Lelio Basso and the PSIUP, see Roberto Colozza, *Lelio Basso. Una biografia politica (1948–1958)* (Roma: Ediesse, 2010); Giancarlo Monina, ed., *Novecento contemporaneo. Studi su Lelio Basso* (Roma: Ediesse, 2009).



potential of the colonial struggle and argued for a convergence between socialism and Third World nationalism. Writing at the height of decolonization, after the Cuban Revolution and in the midst of what he believed to be the imminent defeat of the USA in Vietnam, he concluded that Third World nationalism could represent a fatal blow to imperialism and neo-colonialism.³² From such a perspective, Basso was an enthusiastic supporter of the Russell Tribunal and in a series of articles he wrote in 1967 defined “American imperialism as the main enemy of all mankind” and the task of the Tribunal as a small contribution to the global and “unrelenting fight against American imperialism”. For this reason, despite Basso’s criticism of the Soviet Union for the Prague invasion, Moscow continued to consider Basso an ally in the struggle against American imperialism and to finance his activities.³³

In other words, to members of the Russell Tribunal, their own struggle against the American empire was a political action developed through the language of international law. Such language was useful to express a legally constructed fact and to measure the actions of the USA against its own laws, those that it had recognized since Nuremberg. According to Sartre, the goal was to understand whether “imperialist policies infringe laws formulated by imperialism itself”.³⁴ Yet, Nuremberg was far from being a model for the Tribunal. As Sartre explained, Nuremberg was based on the laws of the victors, while the legitimacy of the Russell Tribunal was in the absence of a mandate by any government or institution, in its “absolute powerlessness and its universality”. For this reason, its legitimacy should have been defined “in retrospect or a posteriori”, in the universal condemnation of American imperialism.³⁵

According to radical historian Robin Blackburn, constant references to international law and the Nuremberg Trials were a clear example of how activists used human rights to promote global social justice.³⁶ In fact, the Tribunal made only sporadic references to human rights, mostly to collective and national rights, such as national self-determination, or to preventing genocide. Indeed, far from heralding the global surge for human rights that a few years later would focus on the protection of individuals’ rights from state power, the Tribunal’s ideas about rights were shaped by decolonization, the rejection of the American empire, and the struggle for national sovereignty. As Sartre claimed in his address at the opening of the Tribunal: “in the last twenty years, the great historical event has been the struggle of the Third

³² Lelio Basso, “Summation on Genocide”, in Duffett, *Against the Crime of Silence*, 626–642, quote at 642.

³³ Lelio Basso, “Vietnam e imperialismo”, *Problemi del socialismo*, n. 17 (April 1967e), 391–395. See also Lelio Basso “Una sporca guerra”, *Il Ponte* n.4 (30 April 1967a), 450–461, Id. “Perché il Vietnam vincerà la guerra”, *Mondo nuovo*, n. 16 (16 April 1967c), 10–11, id., “Una guerra di tutti. Intervista con Lelio Basso di ritorno dal Vietnam”, *Mondo Nuovo*, n.15 (9 April 1967d), 5. On Basso’s connections to the KGB, see Roberto Colozza, “De l’Italie à la France, de l’Algérie au Vietnam. La gauche vue par Lelio Basso”, *Vingtième siècle. Revue d’histoire*, n. 115 (2012), 103–114.

³⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Le crime”, *Le Nouvel observateur*, 30 November 1966, reprinted in translation as “Imperialist Morality: Interview with Jean Paul Sartre on the War Crimes Tribunal”, *New Left Review* 41 (1967): 6, Jean Paul Sartre, “Inaugural Statement”, in Duffet, ed., *Against the Crime of Silence*, 43–44.

³⁵ Jean Paul Sartre, “Inaugural Statement”, in Duffet, ed., *Against the Crime of Silence*, 43–44.

³⁶ Robin Blackburn, “Reclaiming Human Rights”, *New Left Review* 69 (May–June 2011), 135.



World for its liberation: colonial empires have collapsed and in their place sovereign nations have come into existence, or have recovered a lost traditional independence, destroyed by colonization”.³⁷ Similarly, for Russell, the basic rationale for the Tribunal was massive evidence of crimes “perpetrated against the people of Vietnam”, not against individual Vietnamese.³⁸ Even those who gave testimonies at the Tribunal were invited not as victims of human rights abuses by the Americans, but as direct witnesses of how the American empire was using its immense power and violence to deny the rights of the Vietnamese people as a whole. For example, Chau Hong, a 50-year-old man wounded in his eyes by a bomb fragment, spoke of “the policy of extermination of our people”. Similarly, rather than detail his imprisonment, the testimony of Buddhist monk Rena Khan, who had been detained for alleged contacts with the Viet Cong, focused on the destruction of pagodas and the “more than seven hundred monks” forced to flee by American policies of religious suppression.³⁹ Of course, these were (and are) violations of individuals’ human rights, but in the context of the Russell Tribunal, they were assumed to be an exemplar of the American attacks on the collective right to self-determination.

Individual human rights and Anti-imperialism. The Second Russell Tribunal.

Whereas the first Russell Tribunal sprang from global mobilization against the Vietnam War, the origins of the 1974–1976 Russell Tribunal was inspired by the transnational mobilization against human rights violations in Brazil and Latin America.

At first, the military overthrow of Joao Goulart’s democratic government in Brazil in 1964 caused sporadic international condemnation. Protests were to some extent limited by the fact that until 1968, the new regime maintained a façade of democratic rule, although opposition was silenced and intimidated. Things changed in 1968 when the Brazilian government approved Institutional Act n.5 that closed the Parliament, disbanded political parties, denied *habeas corpus*, and began mass arrests and torture. Moreover, news of Brazilian violence reached Western capitals and inspired mass demonstrations against the systematic use of torture and human rights abuses in what began to be known as the gorilla’s regime.⁴⁰

The campaign on behalf of Brazilians was one of the first initiatives to position human rights at the centre of transnational mobilization. After the coup, hundreds of academics, artists and politicians fled Brazil for other Latin American countries, the USA, and Europe. Brazilian émigrés were a living testimony of the ongoing repression in their country and the backbone of a transnational solidarity movement with

³⁷ Sartre, “Inaugural Statement”, in Duffet, ed., *Against the Crime of Silence*, 42.

³⁸ Bertrand Russell, “Opening Statement to the First Tribunal Session”, in Duffet, ed., *Against the Crime of Silence*, 49. A similar point is in Salar Mohandesi, *From AntiImperialism to Human Rights*.

³⁹ “On Cambodia. Testimony by Mme Rena Kahn and other witnesses”, in Duffet, ed., *Against the Crime of Silence*, 134–137.

⁴⁰ Patrick William Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies. Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 21–33.



the Brazilian people.⁴¹ In doing so, the campaign of solidarity with the victims of the Brazilian junta contributed to renewing European Third Worldism. Those Western groups and activists that had been denouncing the economic underdevelopment of many Third World countries and celebrating the Third World's revolutions now began focusing on ongoing political repression, lack of democracy, and human rights violations. These became the new buzzwords of movements and campaigns in solidarity with Latin American, Asian, and African populations. Similarly, it also fuelled (and was fuelled by) the denunciation of American imperialism. Solidarity with Brazil benefited from real and alleged American responsibilities for the coup. While historians still debate the timing of US policymakers' decision to support the coup, by the end of the 1960s, many in Latin America and Europe had reached the conclusion that the American role in the coup was not limited to the almost immediate diplomatic recognition of the new regime, but that it also encompassed clandestine operations, funding, and training.⁴²

It was precisely within this growing awareness of human rights violations in Brazil and US influence over the Brazilian regime that the idea of convening an opinion Tribunal to investigate Brazilian repression began to make headway. In October 1971, during a conference in Santiago in Chile, some Brazilian émigrés belonging to the *Comité de denuncia da repressão no Brasil* proposed to Lelio Basso convening a new Tribunal to denounce the systematic violation of human rights in Brazil.⁴³ Within weeks, other Brazilian émigrés who had fled to the United States, contacted Vladimir Dedijer. In discussing possible initiatives to protest Brazilian President Emilio Medici's official visit to Washington, they informed Dedijer about the Tribunal. Basso and Dedijer tried immediately to involve Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Noam Chomsky, and the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation.⁴⁴

There were, however, some difficulties. Firstly, several members of the "first" jury had died over the previous years, including Lord Russell, and others had retired from active political commitments. Secondly, Brazil was not Vietnam. If the focus of the first Russell Tribunal was on the self-evident US military aggression against Vietnam and well-documented violations of international law, the authoritarian involution of Brazil was mostly a domestic affair, and it would have been difficult

⁴¹ Barbara Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue*, esp. 98–101; James N. Green, "Clerics, Exiles, and Academics. Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States, 1969–1974", *Latin American Politics and Society*, no. 45 (2003), 108–109; Maud Chirio, "Formes et dynamiques des mobilisations politiques des exilés brésiliens en France (1968–1979)", *Cahiers des Amériques latines*, no. 48–49 (2005–2006), 75–89; Mazé Torquato Chotil, *L'exil ouvrier: la saga des Brésiliens contraints au départ, 1964–1985* (Auchie lez Orchies: Éditions Estaimpuis, 2015).

⁴² James N. Green, *We cannot remain silent. Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 19–45. For a broad review of works on the American involvement in the 1964 coup, please refer to Anthony W. Pereira, "The US Role in the 1964 Coup in Brazil. A Reassessment", *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 37, issue 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.12518>.

⁴³ FLLB, Collection Second Russell Tribunal (hereinafter TBR II) 02 003 "Costituzione Tribunale" (Lelio Basso to Youth Federations of Italian Political Parties), Rome, January 1973.

⁴⁴ FLLB TBR II 02 003, V. Dedijer to J.P. Sartre, 12 April 1971; FLLB TBR II 02 001, L. Basso to Ken Coates, March 15, 1972; FLLB TBR II 02 001 L. Basso to Noam Chomsky and Reply, February 4, 1972.



to prove any direct American involvement. On the contrary, both Basso and the representatives of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation had identified the Brazilian junta as Washington's puppet. Hence, they were determined to prove American responsibility both for the coup and for human rights violations occurring in Brazil. To them, what was happening in Brazil was a "new form of sub-imperialistic development" whose main objective was to give the USA control over Brazilian economic resources.⁴⁵ For this reason, it was necessary to put the American government and its neo-colonial foreign policy in the dock. As Basso later put it, the Tribunal's objective was not limited to denunciation of human rights violations, but encompassed the identification of "the forces, mechanisms and processes which were at the root of these violations".⁴⁶

From this original blueprint, it is possible to find three major differences between the assumptions of the first Russell Tribunal and those of the second.

Firstly, there was a different evaluation of American imperialism. By 1972, the idea that the American empire was destined to be defeated by Third World resistance had failed. On the contrary, the Brazilian case demonstrated a renewed capability for America to impose its control over the periphery of its empire, as well as its economic exploitation. Basso himself believed that America's "economic neo-colonialism was even more dangerous" than its military intervention in Vietnam, for it was establishing an equally oppressive although less evident domination.⁴⁷

A second difference was the growing importance of economic self-determination for both the international debate and the organizers of the Russell Tribunal. Sartre had identified national self-determination as the background of the first Russell Tribunal. Now Basso was trying to link the new Tribunal to economic self-determination and the international debate on the New International Economic Order. It is no coincidence that between 1972, when the expression was first used, and 1974, when the "Declaration on the New International Economic Order" and the "Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States" were adopted, the UN General Assembly constantly referred to the rights of less developed countries to possess and dispose of their national resources, to control foreign direct investments, and more generally to realize a more favourable redistribution of the power of decision-making within international organizations.⁴⁸

It is against this background that Basso, Dedijer, and the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation began to focus on human rights violations in Latin America. This was the third major difference between the first and second Tribunal. Whereas discussion

⁴⁵ FLLB TBR II 01 03 012, "Memorandum", Nottingham, June 26, 1972.

⁴⁶ FLLB TBRII 02 003 "Report of the constitutive meeting of the Second Russell Tribunal". See also L. Basso, "Introduzione", in *Le multinazionali in America Latina*, edited by Tribunale Russell II (Roma: Coines Edizioni, 1976b), 7–12.

⁴⁷ FLLB TBR II 02 003, Lelio Basso to several organizations, 11 October 1972. See also Colozza, "De l'Italie à la France, de l'Algérie au Vietnam".

⁴⁸ On the NIEO, see among many others Nils Gilman, "The New International Economic Order. A Reinroduction", *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism and Development*, 6, n.1 (2015), 1–16; Sara Lorenzini, *Global Development. A Cold War History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), 119–123.



of international law during the International War Crimes Tribunal had focused mostly on the collective and national rights of the Vietnamese people, the second Russell Tribunal attempted to craft a synthesis between the Brazilian junta's abuses of individuals' rights and American imperialism's economic predatory attitude. This was the fundamental idea of the Tribunal: the denial of the collective right of the Brazilian people to economic self-determination by the US government and American corporations was the rationale for the blatant violations of individuals' human rights perpetrated by the Brazilian junta.

Over 1972 and 1973, news of the organization of the Tribunal spread throughout the world. Within just a few months, Lelio Basso and Vladimir Dedjier were joined by Palestinian intellectual and political scientist Abu Omar, former President of the Dominican Republic Juan Bosch, theologians Georges Casalis, Johann Baptist Metz, and Giulio Giraldi, French trade unionist Emilio Maspero, American sociologist James Petras, former Chilean ambassador Armando Uribe, and French lawyer François Rigaux. In addition, the Tribunal inspired dozens of groups across Western Europe, ranging from Catholic and leftist organizations, to student movements and human rights NGOs. Each group had its own ideological and political rationale for supporting the Russell Tribunal. Leftist groups and student movements were generally inclined to denounce American imperialism. In Western Germany, for example, several sections of the youth organization of the socialist party *Juso* established working groups on the Second Russell Tribunal and American imperialism. Later on, the entire organization gave its full support to the summoning of the Tribunal on human rights violations and American imperialism.⁴⁹ Catholic grassroots mobilization was based on a strong solidarity with coreligionists facing repression and intimidation by Latin American regimes. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council and the emergence of the controversial Liberation Theology in Latin America, many European Catholics were genuinely outraged at human rights violations occurring in Latin America. Basso and his staff identified Catholic groups as a specific target in their attempt to develop a “broad network of support committees” to increase the visibility of the Tribunal. Equally important, given the importance of Catholicism in Brazilian society, Catholics' contribution to the organization of the Tribunal was essential to investigating and understanding the Brazilian context.⁵⁰ While the convergence between some Catholic groups and leftist organizations became fundamental to the success of the Tribunal, other Catholic groups avoided getting involved. To the more conservative *Pax Christi*, for example, Marxist forces could impose their agenda on the Tribunal, thus cancelling Catholics' contribution.⁵¹

⁴⁹ FLLB TBRII 02 003, Linda Bimbi, “Cost. Trib. – Resoconto aprile 1973”, HAEU, EEA 221, Notes of a meeting of the organization committee, January 23, 1974; See also *Quaderni del Tribunale Brasile, n.4: Verso la seconda sessione* (December 1974).

⁵⁰ FLLB TBRII 02 003 “Costituzione Tribunale”, Lelio Basso to Italian Catholic groups and associations, October 11, 1972. See also the open letter to Catholics prepared by Italian journalist Ettore Masina. FLLB TBRII 02 004, “Ai nostri fratelli della Chiesa che è in Italia (solidarietà con la Chiesa che è in Brasile)”.

⁵¹ FLLB, TBRII, Linda Bimbi “Costituzione del tribunale. Resoconto viaggio”.



A similar tension shaped the contacts between the organizers of the Tribunal and human rights NGOs. On the one hand, individual Amnesty International activists and local chapters were enthusiastic supporters of the Tribunal. Similarly, the International Association of Democratic Lawyers adhered to the Tribunal, and its president Jo Normand later served as member of the jury. On the other hand, the international Secretariat of Amnesty International was more sceptical and refused to adhere to the Tribunal because of its political and militant nature. Indeed, Amnesty International mobilization for human rights was different from that of the second Russell Tribunal. The former very narrowly focused on some specific violations of human rights, was officially apolitical, and had no direct interest in investigating the political, economic, or social conditions that made such human rights violations possible. The latter wanted to document human rights violations in order to denounce Washington's economic exploitation as their main cause. Such a perspective offered enough room for a political approach to human rights violations. After all, as one critic of the Tribunal commented, this was criticizing the USA for Brazilian violations of human rights, but not the Soviet Union for human rights violations in Czechoslovakia.⁵² This was a well-grounded charge. Not only was Lelio Basso receiving financial support from the Soviet Union, but his determination to prove the US government's responsibility for Latin American violations of human rights was crucial to the entire organization of the Tribunal.⁵³

Finally, news of the organization of the Tribunal reached many Latin American opposition groups and parties. They began urging the organizing committee not to limit its investigation to Brazil and to denounce ongoing violations of human rights in other Latin American countries.⁵⁴ The June 1973 coup in Uruguay and the September 1973 coup in Chile convinced Basso that it was necessary to broaden the focus of the Tribunal in order to understand, document, and denounce the role of the USA in the weakening of Latin American democracies. As Basso put it at the opening of the Second Russell Tribunal, it was not just a question of "adding one country to another", but also of pointing out that between "the Brazilian and Chilean generals, as well as between the two police forces, there was an agreement that contributed to the coup. But the same had happened with Uruguay and Bolivia. Brazil was not only a case of military dictatorship but also served as a model that tended to spread to all of Latin America", and the USA was its master.⁵⁵

The Chilean coup also had another effect on the organization of the Tribunal, since it focused world opinion on the violent repression of political opposition and

⁵² FLLB TBRII 01 02 Martin Ennals (A.I. International Secretariat) to Lelio Basso, February 2, 1973. More positive replies arrived from Amnesty International's local chapter in Aarhus and the Western German section, see FLLB TBR II 01 02 Joergen Lage Jacobsen (Aarhus) to L. Basso, March 9, 1973, and Peter Klein to L. Basso, January 13, 1973.

⁵³ R. Colozza, "De l'Italie à la France, de l'Algérie au Vietnam", 103–114.

⁵⁴ See for example FLLB TBRII 01 02 Movimiento argentino antimperialista de solidaridad latinoamericana to L. Basso, January 20, 1973, and Historical Archives of the European Union, Florence (hereinafter HAEU), collection EEA 221 *Bulletin Russell Tribunal Brasil*, n.4, September/October 1973.

⁵⁵ *Discorso inaugurale del presidente Basso*, in *Brasile. Violazione dei diritti dell'uomo*, edited by Tribunale Russell II e Linda Bimbi (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1975): 9.



on the US government's responsibility. As Basso put it, "American imperialism could not celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Monroe Doctrine in a more successful way than with orchestrating a coup and with the killing of its democratically elected President".⁵⁶ Moreover, after the coup, thousands of political refugees fled to Europe. Chileans joined Brazilian émigrés in offering their testimonies about human rights abuses in their own country and disseminating news about the Tribunal. This was, for example, what *Chile Democrático* and the *Frente Brasileira de Informações* did. The former was an organization of Chilean opponents and émigrés funded in Rome in December 1973 by Jorge Arrate, who had been a minister in Salvador Allende's Chile. The latter was established in 1970 in Algiers by former governor of Pernambuco Miguel Arraes. Both groups provided the Tribunal with "political and material support".⁵⁷

In November 1973, the Tribunal was given a fundamental boost when thousands of European activists protested the international trade fair *Brasil Export 73* which had been organized in Brussels by the Brazilian government. The official aim of the fair was to celebrate the economic success of Brazil and strengthen its international trade. However, its most important outcome was in fuelling transnational protests against the regime. European leftist political parties, Catholic and Christian groups, Latin American émigrés, human rights activists, and networks in solidarity with Brazilian victims of the ongoing repression took to the streets chanting slogans against the Brazilian government, such as "No to Brasil Export; no to exploitation", or carrying signs denouncing the American empire. A leaflet recalled that "in Brazil, in Chile, in all Latin America—as in Vietnam—people are fighting for their freedom and to build their future against the same enemy: Fascism, Imperialism, America". These slogans were shaped by traditional ideas against the American empire, ideas that had led many anti-war activists to oppose American imperialism and support decolonization. Yet, the presence of Amnesty International and other human rights groups was a new element that introduced new slogans and buzzwords against torture, political imprisonment and repression.⁵⁸ Lelio Basso explicitly linked these two forms of protest. The very same day that the Brazilian government

⁵⁶ "L'eroica resistenza del Cile", *L'Unità*, 13 September 1973.

⁵⁷ Through *Chile Democrático*, for example, Lelio Basso received a letter from Hortensia Bussi, widow of Salvador Allende, who assured her personal support for the Tribunal. FLLB, TRII 02 003, Hortensia B. Allende to Lelio Basso, November 2, 1973. On *Chile Democrático* see Raffaele Nocera, Claudio Rolle Cruz, eds., *Settantatré: Cile e Italia, destini incrociati* (Napoli: Think Thanks, 2010); Thomas C. Wright, *Chilean Political Exile in Western Europe*, in *European Solidarity with Chile, 1970s–1980s*, edited by Kim Christiaens, Magaly Rodríguez García and Idesbald Goddeeris (Frankfurt am Main: PeterLang, 2014), 47–67. On the Frente Brasileira, see Kim Christiaens, "Why Brazil? The Belgian Mobilization against Repression in Brazil and its significance for Third World Solidarity Activism in the 1970s and Beyond", *Journal of Belgian History*, XLIII, 4 (2013): 108–147.

⁵⁸ HAEU, EEA 221, Flyer: "Manifestation Nationale: Brésil, Chili, Solidarité – Brésil – Chili, même dictature sanglante", and "Resoconto della conferenza stampa tenuta da Lelio Basso a Roma il 13.11.1973"; FLLB TRII 02 003, Clippings: "Deuze mille personnes à Bruxelles contre Brasil Export et pour l'Amérique Latine", "La réalité brésilienne sous le miracle". See also Christiaens, "Why Brazil?"; and Id., "European Reconfigurations of Transnational Activism: Solidarity and Human Rights Campaigns on Behalf of Chile during the 1970s and 1980s", *International Review of Social History* 63, issue 3 (2018), 413–448.



was presenting its economic fair, Basso was in Brussels to announce the constitution of the Tribunal. In presenting the fifteen effective and five honorary members of the jury, he clarified that their task was not limited to documenting human rights violations, but also encompassed the study of their deeper reasons in order to understand “the influence of American corporations, identifying what links the military regime to international capital”. In other words, the Tribunal wanted to prove that human rights violations in Latin America were a consequence of American imperialism.⁵⁹

The Tribunal held its first session in Rome on 31 March 1974. The formal accusation was read by Miguel Arraes, who compared Brazilian economic growth to a “pre-emptive Vietnamization”, whose aim was to grant American corporations all the natural, financial and industrial resources that should belong to the Brazilian people. In addition, he pointed out that Brazil was just the first of a “series of similar regimes that took power in the area under the influence of the United States”.⁶⁰

Following the model of the first Tribunal, the second Russell Tribunal called experts to explain how American capitalism worked in Latin America, its history, and its responsibility for human rights violations. Italian lawyer and politician Salvatore Senese described the Brazilian government as a new form of international regime made possible by international capitalism: “The most powerful interests that support the regime [are] foreign interests. Hence the despotic nature of the regime and its contradiction with some traits of the modern nation-state, including authoritarian ones, and the compatibility of some of its features with forms of colonial rule”. From his side, anthropologist Ettore Biocca put torture in Brazil in the spotlight. To him, not only was torture a fundamental feature and pillar of the Brazilian regime, but it was also a key to favouring the interest of multinational corporations, for it was “transforming Brazil into a paradise for international investments”. Sharing Senese’s ideas on the relationship between the junta and international capitalism, Biocca defined torture as the expression “of the interests of those enormous financial, industrial and military forces that could shape and control the world”. As such, the only possible conclusion was that the Brazilian government was the perpetrator of intimidation, harassment, imprisonment, and torture, but the instigator was Washington DC behind the influence “exerted by ... multinational corporations” on “Brazilian repressive forces”.⁶¹ Even for those Brazilian witnesses who gave direct testimony of the abuses they had suffered, the USA was directly responsible for their sufferings. As René de Carvalho put it during his testimony, “in the torture room ... there were American devices, those that had arrived as part of the technological aid from the United States”. Similarly, in bearing witness, Brazilian journalist Fernando Gabeira recalled that both American and Brazilian officials had interrogated him.⁶²

⁵⁹ *Quaderni del Tribunale Russell Brasile n. 5*, January–February 1974.

⁶⁰ M. Arraes, “Atto d’accusa contro il governo brasiliano”, in Tribunale Russell II, *Brasile*, 15–19.

⁶¹ Both Senese and Biocca’s analyses have been reprinted in Tribunale Russell II, *Brasile*, 44–89 and 98–177 respectively.

⁶² Statements by René de Carvalho and Fernando Gabeira, in Tribunale Russell II, *Brasile*, 228–30 and 255–257.



Direct testimony became central to the second Russell Tribunal. The International War Crimes Tribunal had called just a few Vietnamese citizens to bear witness to the destruction that American aggression had wrought upon the Vietnamese people, whereas witnesses at the second Russell Tribunal described and detailed abuses of human rights that they had suffered. There was a close interdependence between the voices of the victims-witnesses and those of the experts. The direct testimony of those who had been tortured or arrested for political reasons, such as filmmaker Wellington Diniz or lawyer Marco Antonio Moro, aroused compassion and indignation in public opinion. It was what historian Steve Stern labelled “testimonial truth”. Providing their direct “personal experience and witnessing”, victims of human rights abuses related “a living memory of the authentic”.⁶³ The perspective of scholars and experts provided a framework for reading such abuses, pointing out the responsibility of Latin American governments and, above all, that of the United States.⁶⁴ The subjective account of the witnesses’ testimony and the apparently more objective analysis of the experts together gave credibility to the entire accusatory system. Such a methodology had a dual impact. On the one hand, it triggered an emotional response from public opinion. As an Italian journalist put it, “what remains is not the socio-economic and political analyses made by the speakers (based on precise ideological assumptions and based on partial points of view), but the direct account of the witnesses, at times victims of the repression itself”.⁶⁵ On the other hand, it established a link between human rights violations in Brazil and the responsibility of the US government. In Basso’s words: “we have moved from the observation of evidence to the search for causes”, a path that led directly to Washington, the CIA, and the “complex mechanism” of Brazilian “economic dependence” on the United States. For this reason, at the conclusion of the session, not only did the Tribunal find the United States guilty of ongoing violations of human rights in Brazil, Basso also announced that it would summon new sessions of the Tribunal. These would further investigate the role of American and Western corporations in the economic exploitation of Latin America and ongoing violations of human rights.⁶⁶ Indeed, during the following sessions, in Brussels in 1975 and in Rome in 1976, respectively, the Tribunal determined that “the ultimate responsibility” for human rights violations in Brazil and other Latin American countries “lies with the American government, with American imperialism of which the

⁶³ Steve Stern, *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet’s Chile, 1973–1988* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 90–97. On Testimony see also Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006) and Emma Kuby, *Political Survivors. The Resistance, the Cold War and the Fight against Concentration Camps after 1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 1–45 and 109–134.

⁶⁴ “Denunciati i sistemi coloniali degli Stati Uniti in Sudamerica”, *Corriere della sera*, April 4, 1974; Antonio Padellaro, “Torture ed atrocità da Medioevo davanti al Tribunale Russell”, *Corriere della sera*, April 6, 1974.

⁶⁵ “I golpisti sudamericani violano i diritti dell’uomo”, *La Stampa*, April 7, 1974. See also Guido Vicario, “Una donna cilena: «Ho visto come torturavano mio figlio»,” *l’Unità*, April 4, 1974.

⁶⁶ “Conferenza di Basso sulle prossime sedute del Tribunale Russell”, *Corriere della sera*, January 10, 1975; “Al Tribunale Russell sotto accusa gli Stati Uniti e le multinazionali”, *Corriere della sera*, January 12, 1975.



Washington government—the expression of the military-industrial complex—is the authorized representative”.⁶⁷ During these later sessions, the voices of the victims were overshadowed by experts’ analyses. Since the first session had already documented many examples of human rights violations, members of the Tribunal were now determined to define the background that made them possible. Bringing together the human rights jargon of the 1970s, analyses of Latin American economic dependence, and anti-Americanism, the second and the third sessions reiterated that to understand the “systemic violation of human rights” in Latin America, it was necessary to understand its economic rationale. “Those countries where human rights are systematically violated were part of the system of economic dominance” whose centre was the United States.⁶⁸ The judgement was even more explicit: not only were Latin American governments guilty of “gross, repeated and systematic violations of human rights”, but their actions were produced by an economic system in which “the United States and foreign corporations, among these the most powerful and numerous are based in the United States, ... exerted and continue to exert with the complicity of the ruling Latin American classes, a constant intervention whose objective is to ensure the highest economic profits and strategic control”. The sentence thus reiterated that “American multinational corporations are behind both plundering all the resources of Latin America for their own profit and the consequent violations of human rights”.⁶⁹

Conclusions

Like the International War Crimes Tribunal, the Second Russell Tribunal drew inspiration from self-determination and anti-Americanism, which reinforced each other. Members of the two tribunals opposed the USA because its imperialist foreign policy denied the right to self-determination in both Vietnam and many Latin American countries. At the same time, they supported the right to self-determination as a weapon that, *inter alia*, could contribute to the defeat of American imperialism. Yet, there was also a deep difference between the two tribunals. In their discussion of international law and international rights, members of the first Tribunal consistently focused on the collective rights of the Vietnamese people. Their interest was not in affirming the rights of individuals against political power, but in denouncing American aggression against a Third World population. In doing so, they argued that the

⁶⁷ L. Basso, “Premessa”, in *Le multinazionali in America Latina*, edited by Tribunale Russell II (Roma: Coines edizioni, 1976b), 12.

⁶⁸ FLLB TRII 01 08 Lelio Basso, Draft article for Il Giorno, December 1974.

⁶⁹ FLLB TBRII 03 02 “Sentenza del Tribunale Russell 2, Bruxelles, gennaio 1975”. See also HAEU, EEA 221 Synthesis of the second session of the Second Russell Tribunal, January 11–18, 1975; FLLB TBRII 03 03 01 L. Basso, Address at the Third Session of the Second Russell Tribunal; “Il Tribunale Russell condanna gli Usa”, *La Stampa*, January 19, 1975; Vera Vegatti, “Il «Russell» condanna gli USA e le tirannie latino-americane”, *l’Unità*, January 19, 1975. The proceedings of the second and third sessions were published as *Le multinazionali in America Latina*, edited by Tribunale Russell II (Roma: Coines edizioni, 1976b) and *Controrivoluzione in America Latina. Eversione militare e strumentalizzazioni dei sindacati, della cultura, delle chiese*, edited by Tribunale Russell II (Milano: La Pietra, 1976a).



aggression itself was an unjustified violation of international law and a clear demonstration of the American empire as a major threat to international peace. The second Russell Tribunal added a further reason to oppose American imperialism. Self-determination and anti-Americanism were matched by the denunciation of ongoing violations of individuals' human rights in Latin America. To members of the second Tribunal, the USA and its neo-colonial practices made human rights violations possible. This was the ideological assumption and the conclusion reached by the Tribunal: capitalist exploitation and the American denial of the right to self-determination was the rationale for human rights abuses in Latin America.

Such a judgement was both part of and in opposition to the global rediscovery of human rights of the 1970s. By documenting ongoing violence, naming names of victims of political repression, and calling political prisoners to bear witness to their direct sufferings, the Tribunal was part and parcel of the global movement for the promotion of individuals' human rights. However, it differed from other forms of transnational mobilization in terms of its reliance on the right to economic self-determination that, the members of the Tribunal argued, was a prerequisite for the real promotion of human rights. As Basso put it some months later, human rights violations could occur in any part of the world but “the enslavement of national communities by capitalist societies and the United States” was both a violation of a collective right and the main reason for abuses of individuals' human rights.⁷⁰

Far from offering a universal and apolitical understanding of human rights, the Second Russell Tribunal introduced a new political cleavage, for it was pointing out US responsibility for human rights violations in Latin America. Consequently, the human rights language spoken by the Tribunal assumed a clear anti-American tone. It was used as an irritant in transatlantic relations and as a new weapon to attack the American empire. For this reason, American diplomatic missions in Rome and Brussels followed with anxiety the sessions of the Tribunal and breathed a sigh of relief “for major non-communist papers did not carry prominent articles on the final sentence passed by the tribunal”.⁷¹

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⁷⁰ FLLB, Collection Carta d'Algeri, B.1, F.6 Lelio Basso's Opening Address at Algiers, July 4, 1976.

⁷¹ The quote is from Telegram from the American Embassy in Rome to the Secretary of State, April 9, 1974, available on line <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=75363&dt=2474&dl=1345> (last access on October 2019). See also Telegram from the American Embassy in Brussels to the Secretary of State, January 22, 1975, available on line at <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=110473&dt=2476&dl=1345> (last access October 2019), Telegram from the American Embassy in Rome to the secretary of State, January 16, 1976, available on line at <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=137046&dt=2082&dl=1345> (last access October 2 2019).



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