

On the Secret Internal Police Reports about the 1968 mobilizations against the Vietnam war in in London

Monday 16 June 2008, by [TATE "Ernie" Ernest](#) (Date first published: 30 May 2008).

Recently, Solomon Hughes of the British daily, the *Guardian*, has been in touch with me regarding the recently released London police reports about the preparations for the October 27th, 1968, mobilizations against the Vietnam War, which my partner, Jess MacKenzie and I were involved in. The story broke on BBC television yesterday evening [\[1\]](#)

and it certainly shows the scope of the protests and the vicious role of the police, with sections of the press playing along, in trying to isolate those of us who were organizing opposition to the war.

Following is my letter to Hughes and I've pasted in one of the recently released police reports. He says the file is about three inches thick. If you clear away the hysteria, the report shows just how wrong the cops got it all, which as Paul Mason of the BBC suggests, is why they kept their reports hidden for forty years. Aside from that, I've used this opportunity to give some information on some of the difficulties we faced in organizing the demos at that time. It's an important period in the history of the socialist left in the U.K.

Ernest Tate, Friday, May 30, 2008

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1) Tate letter to Hughes

Toronto,

Tuesday, May 27, 2008

To Solomon Hughes:

Hello Solomon:

Again, thanks very much for the internal police reports. After forty years, they make interesting

reading and sort of capture the flavour of those tumultuous times. What is not expressed in the reports, however, is the anger which was wide-spread then about the American actions in Vietnam as a result of what people were seeing on television every evening and reading in their newspapers, and the absolute obsequious role of the Wilson Labour Government in the face of this. Its policy of "neutrality" and its talk about Britain "using its good offices to act as an intermediary" between the U.S. and the Vietnamese "to bring an end to the conflict", in many peoples eyes lacked any moral basis.

The VSC's criticism of this policy, asking how the British would have reacted if other countries had applied such a policy to Britain when it, during the Second World War, was under assault from fascist Germany, was one of the most powerful arguments we made and it found a deep response throughout Britain and helps to explain why a relatively small organization, such as the VSC with hardly any resources, quickly increased its influence over a short time to where it was able to have a dramatic influence on the streets. Whether we were able to have any influence on Government policy, I don't know, but it certainly must have caused some concern because it showed just how quickly an "unofficial" opposition could develop outside the influence of the Labour Party.

Regarding October 1968, from the police reports you sent and my experience there, it seems to me the police were feeding many stories to the press in an attempt scare people away — with much of the press co-operating — and which back-fired somewhat, because I'm sure it only helped promote our actions and helped us reach a much larger audience than if we were relying only on our limited resources. The police reports certainly captured the hyper-anxiety of those running the security forces and maybe even the state, probably more induced by what was happening in the rest of Europe, especially in France, than in Britain itself.

Some of the police statements are simply factually wrong and surprisingly ill informed, and I'm sure, they were meant to re-enforce their own political prejudices. Or maybe they were smoking some strong stuff. Every little tit-bit of information, the gossip, the stupid speculations by un-named people, who could even be other plain clothes cops, the talk about cutting GPO lines setting vehicles on fire, etc., is just silly, and meant to put the wind up their superiors, I'm sure.

Take the issue of violence, for example. In the report, "Vietnam Solidarity campaign 'Autumn Offensive'", Sept. 10, 68, p3, it states: "The more cautious representatives of the International Socialism and International Marxist groups paid lip service to the vision of a peaceful demonstration." This is written by someone who must have been asleep and had not been following what was going on, and it suggests that whoever they had planted inside, if it came from there, was somewhat inept, and collecting money under false pretences.

Let me explain. It's just not logical what the report says about this. The International Marxist Group, of which I was one of the leaders, was very clear about what our objectives were: very simply, we wanted the Labour Government to break from the Americans on Vietnam. This would be the best way, we thought, to put pressure on the U.S. to withdraw their troops and the best tactic for accomplishing this was having tens, if not hundreds of thousands of people on the streets of London protesting. This is what we meant by solidarity with the Vietnamese and why we, along with the Bertrand Russell Foundation, set up the VSC. Some of VSC posters even carried the slogan calling for victory for the NLF.

To achieve this, we had to make it possible for ordinary people to come out onto the streets and protest peacefully. A deliberate policy of seeking out confrontation and fighting the police stood in the way of this. At a special VSC conference in early 1968, after a very brief stay, most of the Maoist groups — especially Albert Machanda — broke from the VSC, strange as it may seem, because we had refused to adopt their proposal to endorse the programme of the Vietnamese National Liberation

Front. It was their way of trying to tie us into the politics of the NLF, and the Maoism of the Communist Party of China.

It was in the Ad Hoc Committee where we had the strongest debates about violence and confrontation, especially around the question of a possible route for the October, 1968, action. It seems whoever was writing the reports, was totally unaware of this. The Ad Hoc Committee, initiated by the VSC in the spring of 1968, was a broad coalition of anti-war and political groups who, although they did not necessarily agree with the VSC's "solidarity" line, united around the common task of organizing the October, 1968 demo. (The police report gets this all confused.) The VSC proposed an assembly point on the Embankment and then proceeding to Hyde Park for a mass rally; the Maoists and other ultra-lefts, instead, proposed going to Grosvenor Square and the American Embassy as we had done the previous March, for a confrontation with the police.

After a long debate, the majority supported our point of view. About the same time, we also had a debate about the route with the International Socialists, who were not in the VSC (the police report is also incorrect about this) but who were in the Ad Hoc Committee. I.S. had proposed organizing a mass rally at the Bank of England and encircling it in some kind of symbolic gesture "against finance capital"! This was also rejected because it would have given maximum opportunity for the ultra left and anarchists to create chaos and violence and we would have had great difficulty controlling it. Basically, we thought it irresponsible to invite people out for a peaceful protest then force them, without them having any say about the tactic, into a confrontation with the police with perhaps tragic circumstances. (I don't think the I.S. was ultra-left at that time, but simply misguided. I think the I.S. (now the SWP) - who were a lot smaller then - learned a lot from this experience, because it seems to me, they have been quite successful over the past few years, in organizing through the Stop the War Coalition some very successful demos against the war in Iraq.)

On the actual day of the October 27th, 1968, demonstration (which incidentally, I think was much larger than the 100,000 we had initially projected), we took action to ensure that the ultra-left would not try and divert everyone to the American Embassy. We placed recognized leaders - myself included - immediately behind the ultra-left contingent. Tariq Ali played an invaluable role here. When they made their move at Trafalgar Square to head towards the American Embassy, we simply turned around and stopped the demonstration and let the Maoists and their friends head off and Tariq took up a megaphone to explain what was happening to those behind us. The ultra-left and anarchists hesitated a little while and began yelling insults at us, but we told the people around us to wait until they left. I estimate they took around 5000 people to fight the police in Grosvenor Square and had quite a few people arrested, including people who did not know what they were getting into.

In the previous years, in 1966 they had been brutal in their treatment of people on our demonstrations which were quite small - around a couple of hundred - but the best we could do as the war escalated. The police were known to carry lead-filled leather black-jacks which they would use to thump the backs of protestors who resisted being pushed around. People told me it was like a kidney punch which caused temporary, but very painful paralysis. Unlike CND, or the Committee of 100 which carried out sit-downs, and were largely influenced by pacifism, we in the VSC recommended that people not be violent but be militant and resist the police attacks. As the report confirms, the police were totally surprised by the new mood of militancy they met on the streets.

We were also angry at their covert disruption operations to prevent us functioning and carrying out our normal activities. For example, several times over the summer of 1968, they tried to prevent the National Council of the Ad-Hoc Committee from meeting by phoning and pretending to be an official of the Committee to cancel our hall rental. Several times we had to meet out on the Yorkshire moors to conduct our business. In addition, when our people travelled to the continent they were victimized, Ralph Schoenman being a case in point, if he had to check in his luggage for the flight, at

the other end the bags would not show up and only appear after a couple of hours, long after every one else on the flight had gotten theirs. Of course, the authorities were illegally opening our bags to see what was there.

But we weren't silent about the role of the police in trying to intimidate us. If you check the media reports from that time, you'll see that in September we began a concerted media campaign to limit police presence on our demonstrations. Our argument was that the police were at the demonstrations on the assumption that violence was going to take place and that it was they who provoked violence. I remember some intellectuals, some of the folks around New Left Review, Robin Blackburn specifically, publically making the point that the police presence gave the impression that there was something illegal in the act of protesting and that protest was a normal civic duty and part of the democratic process.

Tariq Ali, who helped orchestrate this campaign and who had more media access than anyone we knew, in the weeks leading up to the demo, gave several important T.V. interviews under this theme, where he very cogently argued our case explaining that we had our own monitors for the demo and that the police should stay away. Ralph Milliband also felt very strong about this issue, appearing several times in the media demanding that the police stay away. John Palmer, who worked for the Guardian was also very supportive of what we were trying to do, as was Paul Foot.

And indeed, on the day of the demonstration, there were hardly any police visible; they and their horses, kept to the back streets out of sight. And as you mention, on that day things were rather peaceful as far as we were concerned and very clearly, the police had over-reacted. The West End was like a ghost city. All the welding of the manhole covers on the route of the march was just absurd, as was all the heavy plywood on bank buildings and windows. Another demand we raised, but I don't know how successful we were, was to give individual policemen the right to refuse duty to police a demonstration, as a matter of conscience.

The foregoing is my reaction to the material you sent me. Of course the times were much more radical then than now and people, generally, especially the youth, felt they could influence events, and maybe change things for the better. In such a radicalization, everyone comes onto the streets, often with their own weird ideas and concepts. This was true in London that year and is also reflected in the police report. In this sense it is an important historical document which reminds us of the times and how the authorities responded to one of the most significant protests in those years. I'm glad you made the effort to dig it up and give it the light of day. I hope what I've put down here helps you sort your way through it.

Yours truly,

Ernest Tate

2) Secret Police Report

Secret [marked "SECRET" top and bottom of all three pages]

Metropolitan Police Special Branch

Subject: Vietnam Solidarity campaign "Autumn Offensive"

Reference to papers 346/68/15 (2)

10th day of September 1968

The climate of opinion among extreme left-wing elements in this country in relation to public political protest has undergone a radical change over the last few years. The emphasis has shifted first from orderly, peaceful, cooperative meetings and processions to passive resistance and "sit downs" and now to active confrontation with the authorities to attempt to force social changes and alterations of government policy. Indeed, the more vociferous spokesmen of the left are calling for the complete overthrow of parliamentary democracy and the substitution of various brands of "socialism" and "workers control". They claim that this can only be achieved by "action on the streets", and although few of them will admit it publicly, or in the press, that they desire a state of anarchy, it is nevertheless tacitly accepted that such a condition is a necessary preamble to engineering a breakdown of our present system of government and achieving a revolutionary change in the society in which we live.

Between 1956 and 1963 the Campaign For Nuclear Disarmament acted as a catalyst for the discontent of the British left, and this organisation was used as a platform and a stalking horse by almost all the dissident groups. The virtual cessation of nuclear bomb-testing removed the strongest plank from the C.N.D. platform, and the committee of 100 took up the banner of protest. This latter organisation became more extreme with the passage of time, and when it foundered earlier this year was almost wholly anarchistic in character.

The Vietnam War was the next issue taken up by British political extremists. Protest was sporadic at first, but in Jun 1966 a new organisation called the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign was formed under the leadership of Ralph SCHOENMAN, the notorious American agitator, and financed by Bertrand RUSSELL. The Trotskyist influence was strong from the beginning; although anarchists and pacifists were attracted by the anti-war and anti-establishment flavour of the group they have never possessed power within it and it remains the preserve of revolutionary factions. A parallel organisation, the British Committee for Peace in Vietnam, founded in 1965, is communist-controlled and moderate in tone. 1967 saw the rise of a number of Maoist groups, notably the Friends of China led by Albert MANCHANDA, and the Maoists are active in the British Vietnam Solidarity Front and openly advocate the use of violence. The "Stop It" committee of expatriate Americans is also involved in the protest activity over the Vietnam War; the members are split on the violence issue.

The leaders of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign belong chiefly to two Trotskyist factions - the International Socialism and International Marxist groups. Pat JORDAN, a veteran Trotskyist, is the power behind the scenes; Ed GUITON, Mike MARTIN and Ernie TATE are leading officials. Others closely involved in V.S.C. activity are XXXXXX of the Revolutionary Socialists Student Federation and XXXXXX of the Radical Students Alliance. Tariq ALI is popularly supposed to be a leading light in the V.S.C. and the student protest movement: this is not the case. His power and influence are in inverse ratio to his acknowledged flair for personal publicity and his natural gifts as a mob orator.

It is a matter of common knowledge that disorderly demonstrations took place in Grosvenor Square outside the American Embassy in October 1967 and March 1968 under V.S.C. auspices, and that there were numerous arrests and much damage to property. The pattern at both these demonstrations were remarkably similar. A meeting, followed by a march to the American Embassy, followed by disorder in the square and adjacent streets. In the second demonstration a number of aliens and students from provincial universities took part. Another anti-American demonstration in July 1968, nominally under communist auspices, was heavily infiltrated by V.S.C. supporters and

again there was disorder and many arrests. At this time an announcement was made that there would be a week of activity in October 1968 under the general title of the "autumn offensive" culminating in a mass demonstration on the weekend of the 26th/27th October 1968.

In the past few months a number of revolutionary leaders have produced study papers on this demonstration, the theme is common. It is said that the anti-Vietnam war protest movement is merely part of the continuing struggle to bring about world-wide revolution and that this demonstration can only be regarded as a skirmish before the larger battle. The figure of 100,000 demonstrators began to be bandied about; there was general agreement that this number of militant demonstrators would bring about a total breakdown of law and order. To this end a number of moribund V.S.C. branches were resurrected and local activity stimulated. The existing London branches are:

Earls Court

Hampstead

Kilburn

Notting Hill Gate

Fulham

Lambeth

Walthamstow

Hornsey

Highgate and Holloway

Hackney

Additionally the following ad-hoc committees have been formed to co-ordinate local activity:

North London ad-hoc committee

North West London ad-hoc committee

North West London Action Group

Wes Middlesex Vietnam ad-hoc committee

Libertarian ad-hoc committee

The national headquarters of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign are at 120 commercial road, E.1 . The organisation occupies offices on the second-floor, and the following persons are employed full time on the premises

XXXXX

XXXXX

XXXXX

During the early planning stages of this demonstration it was apparent that the question of the use of calculated violence as a political weapon was causing division in the ranks of the V.S.C members. The Maoists felt that violence was inevitable and said so. The more cautious representatives of the International Socialism and International Marxist groups paid lip service to the vision of a peaceful demonstration. In the event the Maoists did not gain any places on the National Council or the national ad-hoc committee, and are outpaced as apostles of violence by the more volatile anarchists. All the indications are that the Maoists and anarchists will disregard any sort of instructions - from Police or march leaders - and take an independent line on the day

XXXX REDACTED PARAGRAPH XXXX

The following buildings have been suggested as alternative "targets" at one time or another

XXXX REDACTED LIST OF TARGETS XXX

XXX REDACTED FINAL PRAGRAPH XXX

—30—

Footnotes

[1] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programm...>