

genocide



A view of the Russell Tribunal jury moments before it delivered its verdict. French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre is Executive President of the Tribunal. At his side is outstanding French authoress Simone de Beauvoir. Second from the left is Melba Hernandez.

an interview with

Jean Paul Sartre

Translated from Le Nouvel Observateur by Francis Weil

QUESTION: It seems that we know almost everything about the Vietnam war. Hundreds of testimonies and descriptions have been published. Even the Americans seem to have the merit of being frank in their reports. They welcome journalists to South Vietnam, and don't mind describing the new weapons which they are using to break the resistance of the Vietnamese people. . . . One can very often find, included in the pages of the NEW YORK TIMES, a "courageous" picture of a Viet Cong being tortured - though always by a South Vietnamese soldier. Such things give the impression that in this war nothing is being hidden, everything is being done in daylight, and in front of a faithfully informed public.

The first session of the "Russell Tribunal" already clarified the conditions of the U.S. Aggression, and the methods which the U.S. troops use in the war. I would like to ask what you learned in the second session that you had not known before.

J.P. Sartre: We learned a lot of things, but more important, we understood. We have come to understand, among other things, that never before has there been a war less frankly described, or a war more hypocritical, than this one. Never has the public been so well informed of the details of a battle, and so ignorant of its real significance.

A very strange thing happened in Copenhagen. We all knew that the question of genocide would be raised, and we talked about it right at the beginning. But I must say that the expression caused embarrassment to most of us. Taken in its broad sense of "extermination of a people" it is vague. In its legal sense it is a notion established by Lemkin between the two world wars, and has been acknowledged by an international convention only since 1948 to condemn any enterprise comparable to the systematic killing of the Jews by Hitler.

I was reluctant to use such a word in connection with the Vietnam war. . . . Would it not be sufficient to show—and we could prove—that the Americans are using torture, destruction of the flora and the family

structures, and committing different other war crimes?

Then, as the testimonies were being accumulated, as the true face of the war was being shown—in fact we learned many things—we realized that there is no notion other than genocide that could describe what is going on in Vietnam. Everyone was convinced—even the most skeptical.

QUESTION: Is there a difference between what the Americans are doing in Vietnam and what other Armies engaged in "total wars" have done, elsewhere, in the past? When the Allies destroyed Dresden and Hamburg during the second world war, nobody said it was genocide. The purpose, though, was to kill as many Germans as possible.

J.P. Sartre: You can't really talk about "genocide" in the case of a "total war" between nations of comparable strength, because the risks of annihilation are equally divided, at the beginning at least. . . . The U.S. could destroy the U.S.S.R. with atomic bombs but they would know that the soviet retaliation would immediately kill millions of Americans. Even if they were foolish enough to do that, it could not be called genocide, because the extermination would not be one way, deliberate, and without risks.

. . . The killing of the Jews by the Nazis, of the Tartars by Stalin's USSR are examples of genocide. . . . The wars of the nineteenth century involved limited genocide, limited in the sense that the Europeans wanted to keep the populations up to certain levels in order that they could exploit it by having cheap manpower. . . .

In Vietnam the situation is very different. The U.S. do not face a classical colonial situation, because they have almost no economic interests to protect.

The goal of the war is not to maintain a source of raw materials, or a market, but, as General Westmoreland said very clearly last October, to keep a military base on the Asian continent, and prove to the whole world that being a "Guerilla does not pay." To accomplish these ends, the U.S. does not need the Vietnamese people. Economic interests do not put any limit on the massacre of those who oppose them. And, as the whole population is now against them, they are logically led to a full extermination, that is to the destruction of the Vietnamese people, at least as an organized body.

This is to understand it implicitly, for when they are in the jungle they quickly adopt two formulae that are contradictory only in appearance.

The first one is, "The only good Vietnamese is a dead Vietnamese." From the American point of view, this is exact, as they cannot even be sure of their al-

lies in the South. There is always a fifty per cent chance that a soldier from the Saigon army will betray. When they went on their big "cleaning job"—which was a failure—in the "Iron Triangle", the Americans didn't say a word to the Vietnamese staff because they know that the leaks always occur.

The second formula is "every dead Vietnamese is a Viet Cong." It is used to justify the massacres committed in the name of the first one, but it also contains the implicit recognition of the fact that the whole population is against them.

QUESTION: You are saying that, logically, the American intervention leads to the annihilation of the whole Vietnamese people. Is this what is really happening there?

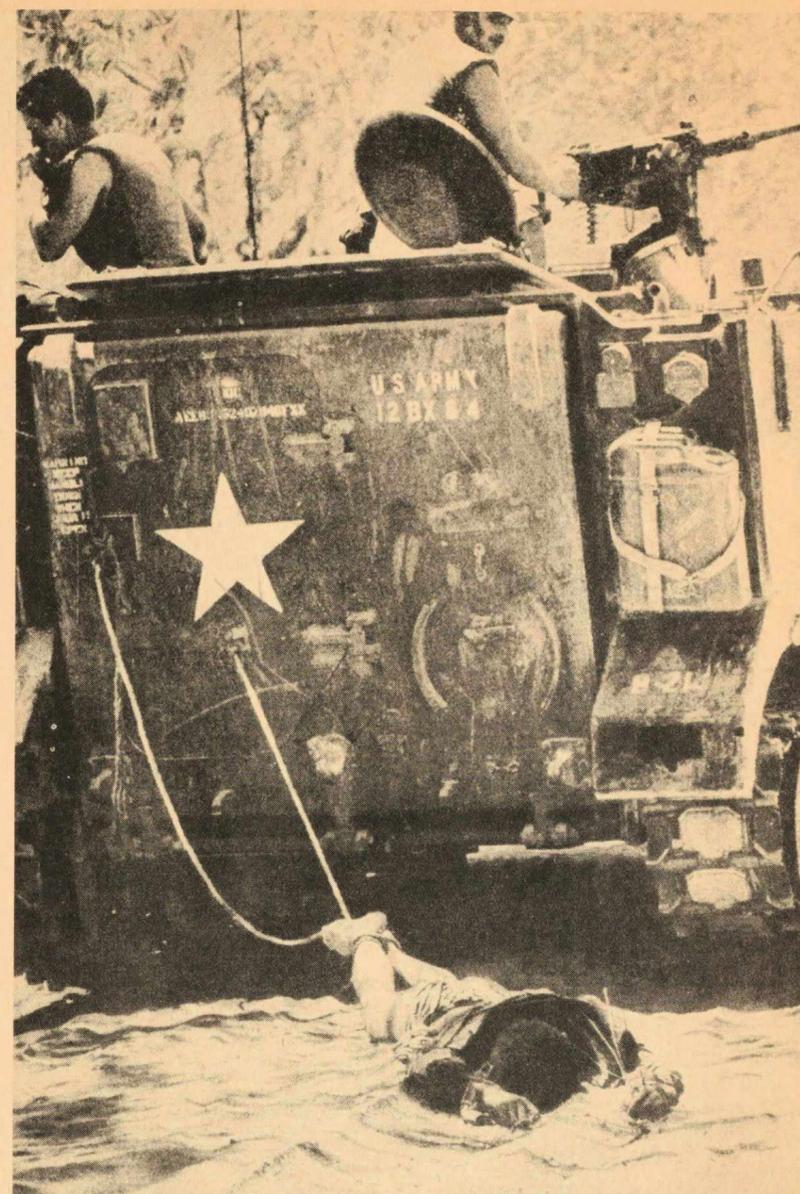
J.P. Sartre: We have learned what the Americans are doing there through the testimonies heard in Copenhagen. Some Vietnamese testified—honestly and with an admirable moderation—but so did Americans—not deserters, but young men who served in Vietnam, and came, freely, to tell of what they did and what they saw.

Earlier you mentioned pictures of torture which have been printed from time to time in the NEW YORK TIMES showing Vietnamese being tortured by other Vietnamese. In fact, there is always an American instructor standing in the background. The interrogation procedure has been very well explained to us by one of the American witnesses, who had himself tortured, and taught others how to torture. . . .

When a village is conquered in an area controlled by the Viet Cong, it is destroyed, and everyone is shipped away—mainly elders, women, and children, as the men are far away in the fighting units. All these people are sent to the "New Life Hamlets." Some are questioned. When the Saigon army units take part in the operation, it is the Vietnamese who lead the interrogation. But always under American control. The Vietnamese have nothing to learn on the subject of torture, but the Americans are there to teach the art of progression in the sufferings, without which there is no efficiency. "When a guy was brought in, his face already smashed, how could you expect me to get any information out of him?" said the witness.

When only Americans are involved, they interrogate—torture-themselves, with a South Vietnamese interpreter. We saw a movie showing a fat American endlessly kicking the sexual organs of a lying Vietnamese. The Americans are always there, and to pretend that it is only the Vietnamese who torture each other is a half truth that becomes, in the States, a racist lie which strengthens the idea: "all these people are a bunch of brutal savages anyway."

In most cases a prisoner, after the torture, is delivered by the Americans to the Saigon forces and put in jail. There, he experiences again new and terrible tortures. The testimonies that we have collected con-



cerning the horrible sadism which prevails in the Pulo-Condor prison, for example, are overwhelming. The Americans visit it quite often, and they know what is going on, but they don't care. This too is a war crime, for an army is responsible for the prisoners it takes on the battle grounds.

In fact, there are very few fighting men made POW. In most cases the Viet Cong are shot when they are caught. We saw a film made by an American showing soldiers killing wounded prisoners. When a witness who had captured four Viet Cong inquired about what should be done with them, the answer was, "Get rid of them. . . ."

Remember how horrified we were after the second world war to see pictures, taken by none other than the Germans, of naked Jews and Jewesses going to the Gas Chambers, of men suffering and being killed. The Nazi soldiers were having fun taking these pictures. We saw exactly the same thing in Copenhagen. The film assembled by Pic couldn't have been made if most of the pictures and documents shown hadn't been made by Americans. There is a horrible scene where a soldier kills a Vietnamese and then, for fun, to amuse his buddy who is holding the camera, shoots one more bullet in the anus of his victim.

I am not saying that all the Americans have that kind of fun, many, we were told, are disgusted but some of them have the same kind of serene joy in extermination that the S.S. had.

The others obey reluctantly. A young Negro told how an officer pointed to a woman and said, "You! Shoot her!" He did it. The officer was not a sadist. The orders were to shoot everyone during the operation. When asked why he had fired, the witness said, "If I had not done it, it would have been my turn one day or another."

We were told of an American general who used to go "Viet hunting in a helicopter. He shot every man he saw. "But never the women," he made a point to explain. But as you know, the women wear the same black pajamas and the same hats as the men. It is not easy to distinguish between sexes when you are above them.

I could tell you twenty other stories, but they would not add anything to the fundamental phenomenon: When one starts to shoot at sight everything which moves and is yellow, the genocide has started. Oddly enough, it was the privates who first realized this. They arrived without many ideas—usually just the conviction that their job was to protect the "good ones" from the "bad ones". They quickly realized that they are hated by every Vietnamese; therefore there are no "good ones", and they are not here to liberate a nation, but to kill all the Vietnamese. They realize that they have been cheated, but instead of turning their disappointment against the government, they turn it against those who refuse to be liberated. Although many of them understand what they are being made to do, they don't talk about it because it is not easy. Remember the young Frenchman who came back from Algeria, where they had been forced to "certain things" which they also preferred not to talk about.

This intention to commit genocide doesn't only manifest itself in purely military actions. It can also be seen in a deliberate effort to produce a decrease in the birth rate, to systematically maim people in a physical and mental way, and to transfer large portions of the population. The Americans do not admit this, but the effort is being made.

Certainly for example, the tactic which consists of burning the land. In the South chemical products are spread over good land in the regions controlled by the Viet Cong. At first the Americans tried to defoliate the jungle, but with very poor results; the jungle is tough, and cannot be easily destroyed. So they worked on the open areas. The reasoning is as follows: "The revolutionary army is living among the people as a fish in water. Then let us empty the water from the tank," that is, let us destroy the people by preventing them from feeding themselves, and thus the Vietnamese. Abandoning their burnt villages, the peasants are taking refuge at the edge of the jungle, cultivating narrow pieces of land protected from the planes by the trees.

In fact the whole tactic is a failure for the Americans. The fighting units of the NLF are quite safe in the jungles and they receive their food from other regions. In fact, not only are they independent of the peasants that the Americans are trying to starve, but it is they who feed and help the peasants that the other side is trying to destroy.

The Americans, however, offer a choice to these peasants: if they don't want to be bombed and starved, they can go to the nearest American or government post (preferably during the night, if they don't like to be shot at from a helicopter) and they will be installed in a "hamlet of the new life."

What happens there? The people grouped in these hamlets are evidently considered as suspects, as they come from a region controlled by the Vietcong. They will be treated as such. First, the institution of the family, an important thing in most Asian Countries, is destroyed. Often the husband left long ago to fight with the F.N.L. But if he is still here, and if he surrenders together with his family, he is interrogated right away and often tortured. If he is very young, he is forced to join the government army. As a result the family ties have almost all disappeared and this leads to a lower birthrate. I, personally, insisted on knowing how significant this decrease is. I was told that it is high: 500,000 people are in jails, and, in the regions controlled by the Americans, more than a third of the population lives in the "hamlets of the new life." The 1948 Convention has qualified as an act of genocide any action causing a decrease in the birthrate.

The inhabitants of the hamlets have very few job opportunities. Some (least suspected) get menial tasks in the American Army camps, but the daily living conditions, the basis of any culture, are off balance. Hygienic conditions are horrifying. The food is shamefully insufficient, either because the Americans "forget" to distribute it, or because the rice which is delivered—and which, by the way, has been stolen from the peasants of the region—is sold in the black market by the South-Vietnamese civil servants. All this leads to the "physical and mental degradation" denounced as an act of genocide by the 1948 Convention.

The only choice, therefore, for the Vietnamese, is between death in their village, if they stay, and the slow degradation in the "hamlet of the new life". It is not really a choice as their decision is inspired by terror: the peasants seek refuge in the hamlets when they can't take any more bombings or when they are taken by force. The idea of a "free choice" is only an American propaganda lie.

Question: You are saying that the American policy in Vietnam only has a meaning if it implies genocide. Then, why doesn't the U.S. try to end the war quickly by escalating it "all the way"?

J.P. Sartre: They cannot do this for economic, strategic and military reasons. You can't improvise an operation of such importance. You have to build a whole network of air and army bases, of roads and harbours. You can't do that in one day. Maybe this problem could be simplified by the use of atomic weapons. However their efficiency would be small because North Vietnam doesn't have big urban centres, and, according to the experts, it would be dangerous for the Americans and their allies as well. Moreover the international implications would be far too serious.

Finally the cost of an extermination war is very high. It is therefore necessary to accustom the U.S. public to big financial sacrifices. In fact the American leaders are faced with a serious psychological problem: they announced three years ago that the war would be an easy matter to deal with; how can they now tell the public that in order to fight a tiny agricultural Asian country it is necessary to reorganize the whole U.S. economy, just as during the Second World War?

Thus you can see that the slow rate of increase in the escalation is not due to humanitarian reasons, but rather, to the fact that financially and psychologically it is not possible to go faster.

But the ultimate result is still the same: it is genocide because, and I repeat, there is no other possible solution for an industrialized country which wants to maintain under its control a poor country, whose population is determined to fight a revolutionary war.

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Dave Dellinger, U.S. lawyer and activist; Stokeley Carmichael, a leader of the Black Power movement in the United States; and Peter Weiss, Swedish playwright, jury members on the International War Crimes Tribunal.