

[Abhimanya Manchanda]  
**1968, Grosvenor Square – that’s where  
the protest should be made**

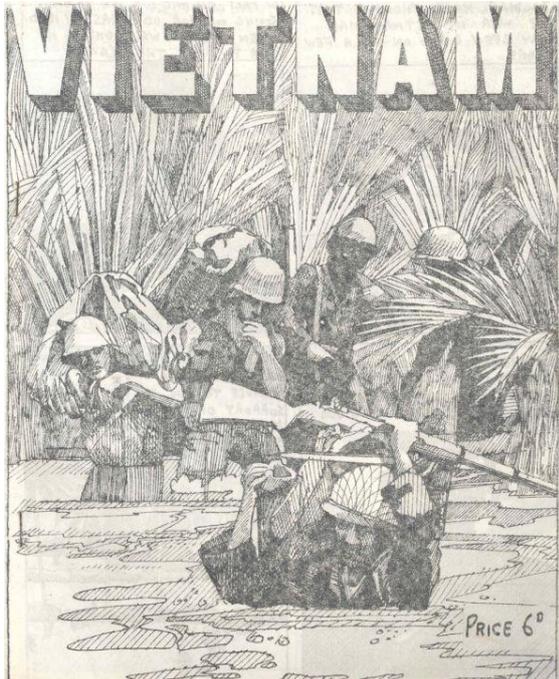
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The opposition to the Vietnam War in Britain had begun as early as 1953 when a communist sympathizer, Commander Edgar Young, formed the British–Vietnam Committee (BVC) and began publishing the Vietnam Bulletin. The CND – Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament – also raised Vietnam as part of their protests. CND’s position sought to strengthen the United Nations’ role in the conflict for the ‘implementation of the 1954 Geneva agreements’ and ‘the holding of national elections in north and south Vietnam’.

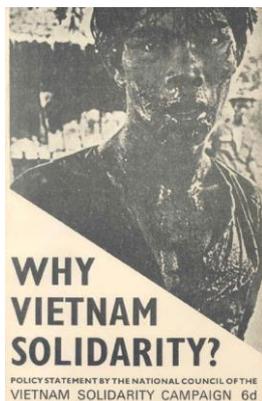
In 1962 the BVC held a rally with 70 protesters outside the US embassy in London. The movement grew in intensity after the US began bombing North Vietnam and introduced ground troops in February 1965, sparking protest demonstrations at universities around the

country and the formation of the Communist Party dominated **British Council for Peace in Vietnam** (BCPV) in April 1965. The British Council for Peace in Vietnam (BCPV) that was set up by a group of people close to CND had been the main campaign groups that addressed the Vietnam War until the mid-1960s.

Under its president Labour MP Fenner Brockway, the BCPV called for a negotiated settlement and British dissociation through a concerted poster and newspaper campaign.

The English philosopher, Bertrand Russell was an early campaigner on Vietnam, tearing up his Labour Party membership card in disgust at the failure of Labour to take an independent

stand on Vietnam. More importantly Russell used his connections and money for a new initiative in support of the Vietnamese people.



The first formal call to the British Left for the setting up of a solidarity campaign came on 20 December 1965, in a special public meeting of nearly 200 people organised by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the founding of the National Liberation Front.

“On the platform of this boisterous affair were Ken Coates, Mark Lane, an American, well-known on both sides of the Atlantic for his writing about the Kennedy assassination, and Ralph Miliband, who along with John Saville, had just begun publishing the *Socialist Register*. Miliband’s presence on the platform was significant in that he represented an important segment of the new left.” [\[i\]](#)

### Founding the solidarity movement

The founding conference of the VSC took place on 4-5 June 1966 in Mahatma Gandhi Hall in London. Over 200 delegates that included a number from Labour Party constituencies, Labour Party Young Socialist groups and a few trade union branches. Notably over 40% of delegates came from several Maoist groups led by Manchanda, editor of the *West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian News*.

The group, around the Nottingham journal “The Week” who were IMG Trotskyites, had a narrow majority at the 1966 VSC conference. They believed that the South Vietnam NLF was not a revolutionary organisation, refused to endorse the four-point programme of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the five-point programme of the South Vietnam Front for Liberation. They characterised the government of North Vietnam as “Stalinist”. One did not have to be a great theoretician to work out that their chairmanship of the founding conference of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign might lead to a walk-out.

Manchanda, who had foreseen such an eventuality had booked another hall nearby where the conference was reconvened immediately. Chinese observers from the embassy and the Hsinhua news agency, the Vietnamese News Agency journalists resident in London who were the unofficial ambassadors of the country in London, representatives of solidarity groups in Asia, Africa, Haiti, the Caribbean, Belgium, Holland, Italy and Switzerland. All the African Liberation Movement delegates who were in the pro-Chinese camp, including the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania, SWAPO and ZANU, walked out together. The CPGB and other pro-Soviet groups remained with the Trotskyist-dominated meeting.

The two organisation had been created in 1966, both emerging from the same conference.

Manchanda has often been reviled in leftist gossip and blamed for splitting the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. Unfortunately, not many of people who repeat this story correctly remember the circumstances. [\[ii\]](#) In a statement explaining their actions, Manchanda emphasised the political support given to the National Liberation Front,

“We found ourselves in a position of being unable to participate in the conference when a faction sought to impose on the movement a set of aims which were contrary to the views expressed by Lord Russell in his opening statement to the conference and as agreed previously in the Preparatory Committee. “We, as always, dearly wish to co-operate with all

those who desire to see a successful conclusion to the just struggle of the Vietnamese people, which can only end in complete victory for the National Liberation Front, the sole representative of the people of Vietnam. “At the same time, we must resolutely oppose all those who refuse to accept the programme of the Vietnamese people as the only basis for waging a successful campaign for solidarity in Britain, and so contributing to the inevitable victory of the Vietnamese people and a just and lasting peace.”[\[iii\]](#)

Leading VSC member Ernest Tate observed,

“Their exit, though not unexpected, came as quite an astonishing turn of events when it actually happened. Still, the conference remained in session and went on to adopt a series of proposals to take the campaign forward.”[\[iv\]](#)

On that day two organisation in solidarity with the Vietnamese emerged: **Vietnam Solidarity Campaign** (Trotskyist-led, the IMG’s *Black Dwarf* newspaper, on Carlisle Street, offering temporary staff headquarters) and the **Britain-Vietnam Solidarity Front** (Maoist-led based at Manchanda’s house).

## Britain-Vietnam Solidarity Front

Initially the smaller BVSF was less prominent than the dominant VSC, and the BVSF did not really function at all until the beginning of 1968. By the year of the great mass demonstrations against US imperialism, the Britain Vietnam Solidarity Front had grown into a national organisation with strong international links. Their national conference, according to the *BVSF Bulletin*, Summer 1968, was “attended by 34 delegates from London, the Midlands, North and South England as well as 14 fraternal delegates and 12 observers from the Republic of Ireland, Portugal, Denmark, Mozambique, Kenya, Azania and Malaya ... Telegraphic messages were received from Afro-American leader Robert F. Williams ... the South Vietnam Peace Committee and the Federation of Trade Unions of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.”



The main organisation to express unqualified support for the Vietnamese people’s struggle and for the NLF, was the Britain-Vietnam Solidarity Front (BVSF). Manchanda and others attacked the Communist Party [CPGB] position that followed the Moscow line of promoting peace talks.

“If the Vietnamese people refuse to ‘negotiate’ and submit to the aggressor, then there is a danger of a world nuclear holocaust – as some people put it ‘a single spark can lead to a world conflagration’ (Khrushchev). Hence, not only the people of Vietnam, but the whole world, is being asked to submit to the nuclear blackmail of US imperialism. That for the sake of world peace, the independence of Vietnam is expendable.”

Anything other than victory to the NLF was seen as denying the self-determination of the Vietnamese people. As it was argued in a Britain Vietnam Solidarity leaflet:

“Using the slogan ‘*Peace in Vietnam*’ is in fact demanding that the Vietnamese people give up their struggle for the independence of their country. It implies racial arrogance, denying

the people of colour of Vietnam the same right to defend themselves and their homes that is accepted for white North Americans and Europeans.”

Interviewing Manchanda in his bed-sitter in Hampstead Mary McCarthy records,

“He explained with patience the doctrinal differences between them. It was a question of correct slogans about the Vietnamese war. For a long time, the Trotskyists of the Vietnamese Solidarity Campaign had refused the slogan “Victory for the NLF,” on the ground that the NLF, a coalition of a number of class elements, had a bourgeois nationalist complexion; their slogan was “Support for the Vietnamese Revolution,” i.e., for a non-existent phenomenon. Similarly with the Maoist slogan, “Long Live Ho Chi Minh,” rejected by the Trotskyists on the ground that Ho had betrayed the revolution at Geneva in 1954, also that he exemplified the cult of personality and was a “bureaucrat.” “If Ho is a bureaucrat,” observed Mr. Manchanda, with glee, “I wish we had more bureaucrats in this country.”[\[v\]](#)

### **March 17, 1968: Vietnam War comes to London as demonstration turns violent**

It began with the marches assembling in orderly fashion with an estimated crowd of around 80,000 gathering in Trafalgar Square to protest against American action in Vietnam and the British government’s support for the United States. This was an immense upsurge in support and activism. Vietnam became an issue, an important expression of the youth radicalisation of those years. The previous VSC demonstration in London on 2 July 1967 attracted 5,000 protesters and resulted in thirty-one arrests after clashes with the authorities.[\[vi\]](#) One participation saw momentum building for the campaign:

The demonstration of October 22nd 1967, however, went better than we expected. The numbers were not fantastic, perhaps a couple of thousand, but there was a militant spirit; we took over the streets, in contrast to the marching 4 abreast and stop at traffic lights of the CND. Turning into Grosvenor Square we found that the police had put a cordon diagonally across part of the road, creating a restriction. This caused some pushing and shoving, but the march was moving on. The park in the square was surrounded by a box hedge which in those days was only about two feet high, and was guarded by only a thin line of police. I jumped over the hedge and ran into the park. A policeman chased me but soon stopped and turned back to see that the rest of the marchers were pouring through the gap he had left. We had nearly an hour of confrontation. I got as far as the parking meters just outside the US Embassy building before being pursued by a policeman charging on horseback. Eventually enough police arrived to push us out of the square. Militant opposition to the war was front page news and the activist layer was greatly energised.[\[vii\]](#)

Bruce Robinson at Trafalgar Square described the scene,

“The Square is full of the flags of the National Liberation Front (the “Vietcong”), who, only weeks previously had launched the Tet Offensive that had taken a largely rural guerilla war into the cities of Vietnam, getting as far as the gates of the US Embassy in the capital Saigon. Someone throws red dye into the fountains to symbolise the blood shed in the war.”[\[viii\]](#)

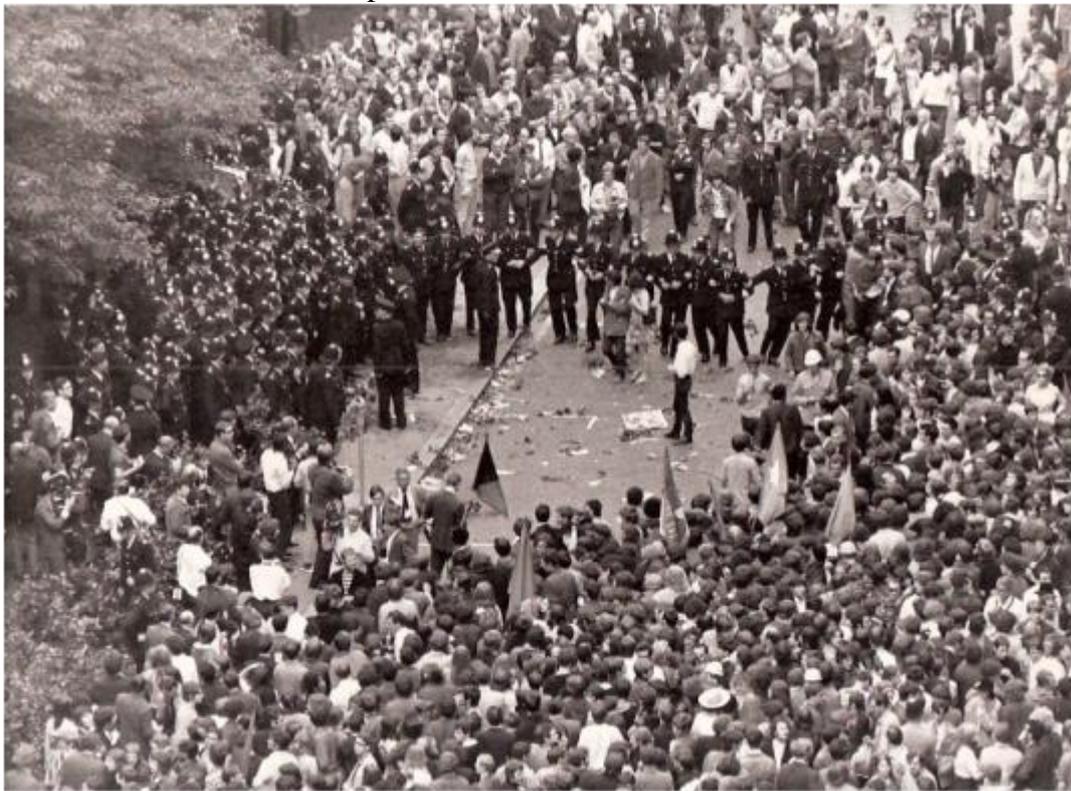
There they heard speeches from the likes of Tariq Ali, leader of the UK’s Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, and British actress Vanessa Redgrave, who announced that they would be delivering a letter of protest to the US embassy. The pair then led around 8,000 protesters to Grosvenor Square. Near the front a contingent from the German SDS, with arms linked chant, “Victory to the NLF”, “Hey, Hey LBJ [US President Johnson], how many kids have

you killed today?” and, in honour of leader of North Vietnam, “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh” — accompanied by jogging up and down.

Redgrave’s group was allowed through to deliver the letter, but the crowd was held back and then refused to back off.

Bruce Robinson recalled,

Reaching Grosvenor Square, they found the US embassy surrounded by hundreds of police, standing shoulder to shoulder in a vast cordon. The front of the march heads through the police cordon and privet hedges and makes for the Embassy, meeting lines of police with arms linked. Waves follow pressing harder. From two other sides of the square, lots more police, including horses, randomly lay into anyone they can, even those watching from the sidelines. Stones, earth, firecrackers and smoke bombs were thrown as mounted police officers were called in to disperse the crowd.



By the time order was restored some four hours later, there were over 250 arrests and over 50 protesters and 25 police officers had been hospitalised.

### The ‘Punch Up’

It is wrong to say the violence on the streets of London knew no precedent [\[ix\]](#)— for a start that would displays a shocking lack of knowledge about the protests of the 1930s – but it did shocked the watching public reading the lurid press coverage. Majorie Holt for the VSC referred to the March 17th events in *Vietnam Solidarity Campaign Bulletin* 13 (published in April 1968):

“V.S.C. has been subject to a great deal of criticism, in the press and from organisations who have “come along with us” about the militancy of Sunday’s demonstrations. On the issue of Vietnam it is obvious that all other protest channels have reached an impasse, since enormous

numbers of people ( particularly the young) have joined our already massive backing. We have, since October 22nd, made it clear that the V.S.C. Ad hoc Committee is an umbrella movement, covering all shades of opinion and protest. Nobody is compelled or expected to support militancy – all that is necessary if violence breaks out is for those who disapprove to retire from the scene!”

### **As Diane Langford pointed out....Tariq, Robin Blackburn and others were whistling The Red Flag in Hyde Park while the battle raged outside the lair of American imperialism, the Grosvenor Square embassy.[\[x\]](#)**

All this was documented in a contemporaneous article, by Mary McCarthy who judged that “The Trotskyites, in slogans and stance to the “left” of the Maoists, in practice were to the right of them. The Maoists, generally thought of as inflexible revolutionary extremists, showed pragmatic wisdom and adaptability. The style of Tariq Ali was radical; the style of Mr. Manchanda was modest petty bourgeois, recalling the home lives of Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky himself.”

With the increase of violence and Tariq Ali’s declared intentions to invade the American Embassy ‘for as long as the Vietcong held the American Embassy in Saigon,’[\[xi\]](#) condemnation of the VSC and student activism was widely publicised by the press. Newspapers were declaring that ‘this kind of thing has to be stopped’ [\[xii\]](#) and *The Times* redistributed their crime reporters to maximise coverage for the 27 October 1968 demonstration taking place in London. The establishment used a hysterical media campaign focusing on the threat of bloodshed and revolution to combat the escalating support for demonstrations.

According to Tariq Ali, however, ‘never at any stage did anyone seriously involved in VSC imagine that the October demonstrations would be anything more than a show of the anti-imperialist left’s strength. But the establishment embarked on a campaign of black propaganda and disinformation. They did it for two reasons: to isolate the march from the bulk of the population by raising the fear of violence, and because they over-reacted, panicked after May (Paris 1968). France shook the ruling classes throughout Europe, and the British decided to take no chances that the disease would spread. Hence their ferocious attacks on VSC and on me personally.’[\[xiii\]](#)

### **21st July Demonstration**

July 21<sup>st</sup> March on the embassy is less well remembered than the VSC organised demonstrations. It began as an initiative of the Young Communist League in an attempt to tap into the growth of militant student action in the UK. In inviting various groups to join them in forming a broad committee to organise a demonstration in London on July 21, they intended to head the coalition and secure support for a Communist Party plan to send bikes to Vietnam via a forthcoming Communist Festival in Bulgaria. But the plans back-fired when they failed to get a majority on the July 21 Committee. Organisations such as the BVSF, Folk Singers for Freedom in Vietnam, and the Internationalists secured a majority on the Committee and adopted a line of policy and slogans giving complete support to the NLF and calling for victory against imperialist aggression. This went against the negotiation line of the Communist Party and the YCL leaders pulled out of the ‘July 21 Committee for Solidarity with Vietnam’. In the tradition of the Left, the YCL went on to form their own similarly named committee.

The Britain Vietnam Solidarity Front had emerged as a new force to be reckoned with and played an important part in mobilising militants through the genuine 'July 21 Committee for Solidarity with Vietnam'.

Following the July 21 demonstration, plans were made by the VSC for the big march on October 27. The October 27 Ad Hoc Committee initially decided that the march would be organised under the slogan 'Victory to the Vietnamese Revolution' and that it should not go to the US Embassy. The BVSF was excluded from the Ad Hoc Committee. The three main organisations which were finally represented in the Ad Hoc Committee were the International Socialists (IS), the International Marxist Group (IMG) and the Young Communist League (YCL).

On the initiative of the BVSF, another Committee was formed – the '27 October Committee for Solidarity with Vietnam', which began to plan for a parallel march aimed at demonstrating outside the US Embassy. During the weeks prior to October 27, press, radio and TV devoted more space and time to the forthcoming event than they had to anything similar for many years. The BVSF was singled out as a dangerous firebrand bunch of fanatics whose only purpose was to rush into a punch up with the police. The Trotskyist-Revisionist Troika at the head of the Ad Hoc Committee for the round-London ramble helped out by labelling the BVSF as disruptionist and adventurist. [\[xiv\]](#)

So *two* co-existent marches occurred on October 27<sup>th</sup>: the VSC inspired "Ah Hoc Committee via Downing Street, and the '27 October Committee for Solidarity with Vietnam', which plan for a parallel march aimed at demonstrating outside the US Embassy.

Several weeks before October 27 a sharp controversy had developed about the target of the demonstration – whether or not the march should go to the US Embassy. Despite the bravo headline of Black Dwarf – "*We shall fight, we shall win, London, Paris, Rome, Berlin*" – McCarty accurately described the perception of many observers, not only on the far left:

"Tariq Ali, .....Having attacked Grosvenor Square in March, he did not wish to "repeat himself" in October, for the only way of topping the previous performance there would be by a heightening of violence. Hence he spoke of Grosvenor Square as "a death trap," to which he was unwilling to commit his followers. De-escalation, according to this reasoning, then became inevitable—a change of pace and direction, to Downing Street and Hyde Park, rather than to the US Embassy, and in disciplined, orderly formation, instead of in fighting salients."

Mary McCarthy thought Tariq Ali

"was thinking, clearly, in terms of showmanship.... Moreover, in his concentration on the manner of the demonstration, he lost sight of the matter: the US war in Vietnam."[\[xv\]](#)

This demonstration was the subject of more advance press and television publicity than any similar event for years. It was a media drama, Tariq Ali, a young mustached Pakistani, leading the way to Downing Street, and Abhimanya Manchanda, a middle-aged clean-shaven Indian, to Grosvenor Square. The general impression was created that on October 27 London was to see a repetition if not of the student uprising in Paris, then certainly of the fighting in Berlin.

The observation of fellow Maoists from the JCC on the October 27<sup>th</sup> march 1968 noted the media hype around the protest. [\[xvi\]](#)

“For weeks previously the newspapers had been preparing their readers for the big day with stories of conspiracies and intrigues involving the occupation or destruction of buildings, bomb plots, and plans for the total disruption of communications in London. Special TV programs were devoted to ‘The October Revolutionaries’ ”.

A Metropolitan Police Special Branch report noted,

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. [\[xvii\]](#)

The American author, Mary McCarty touched on this subject in her long piece for the press:

“On the issue of violence vs. non-violence, there did not seem to be a real theoretical difference. The Manchanda group had been described in the newspapers as favoring violence, and the Tariq Ali group not, but actually Tariq Ali was organizing dramatically for violence—that list of first-aid stations, the instructions published in *The Black Dwarf* on what to do when gassed—on the supposition, amounting to prophecy, that the police would start or “provoke” it, whereas Mr. Manchanda, when I asked him whether it was true that he planned to storm the US Embassy, shrugged and said simply, “We are too few.” In Grosvenor Square, the next day, a lilting voice I thought I recognized as his could be heard urging restraint on the crowd, though possibly this was merely pro forma. “

Mary McCarty’s recollection was similar to that of Diane Langford’s experience upon entering Grosvenor Square:

When we reached the US Embassy the police were waiting, riot shields poised. Horses were snorting and steaming and we felt the terrifying thunder of hooves resonate under our feet. Mounted police were waving batons and, as the crowd poured into the square, we came face to face with a wall of shields and sticks. Charge after charge was launched, the police lashing out with furious, twisted faces. Batons connected with heads, blood poured. A lilting voice I recognised as Manchanda’s was calling, ‘Don’t be provoked! Remain calm.’ [\[xviii\]](#)

The attitude of those Marxist-Leninists who participated in the October 27 demonstration was that a genuine demonstration of solidarity with the Vietnamese people’s struggle should concentrate its main attack on the main enemy -US imperialism. Therefore the main target of the demonstration could only be the US Embassy in London.

**“Tariq Ali is a revisionist playboy who’s planning to take people on a guided tour of the West End and into Hyde Park. The lair of U.S. imperialism is the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square and that’s where the protest should be made.”**

*Manchanda –*

## October 27 1968: Police clash with anti-war protesters

Mike Martin remembers: There was so much publicity in the media for what was billed as the “October Revolution” that there was little incentive to campaign; after all the Evening Standard carried a centre spread showing the route. ... We did what we said we would and marched on the agreed route\*1. There was no violence apart from having to deal with a group of fascists who tried to attack the platform. Meanwhile, the Maoists had their fight in Grosvenor Square. The day was something of an anticlimax especially for anyone who took the “revolution” hype seriously [xix]

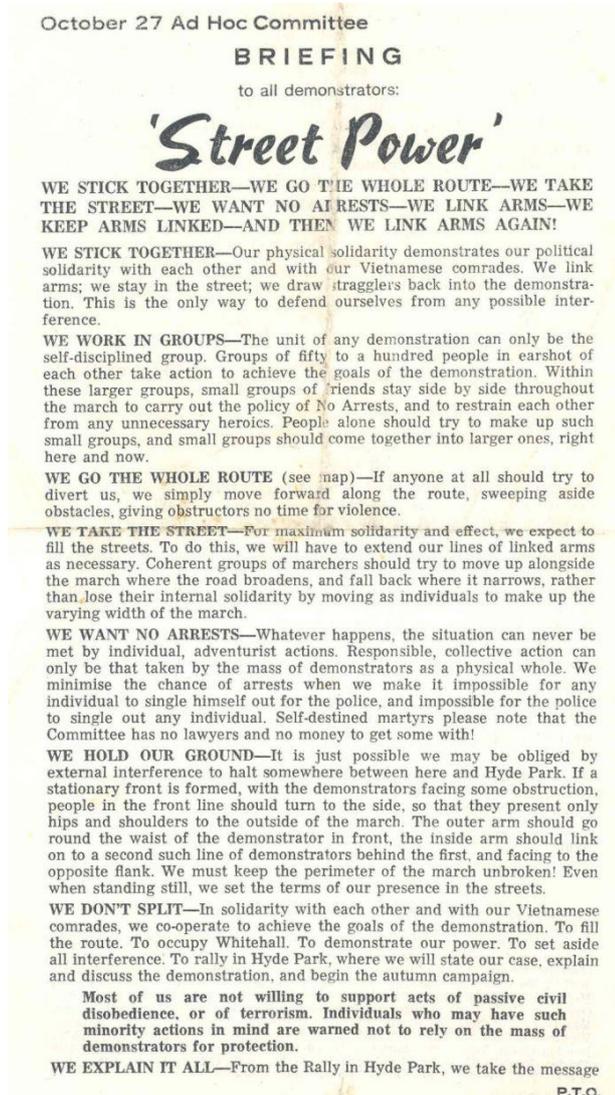
### ‘Street Power’: Briefing to all demonstrators, 1968

*Advice to marchers from the October 27 Ad Hoc Committee. An earlier demonstration against the Vietnam War, on 17 March 1968, had led to violence outside the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square, London. The 27 October demonstration was mostly peaceful but very heavily policed.*

### “wait until they left”

The breakaway group led by the Maoist Britain-Vietnam Solidarity Front was almost thwarted by the march organisers who were aware of the plan and feared violence would erupt. Ernie Tate of the VSC recalled the plans in hand to counter the BVSC and ensure the large majority were persuaded to march from the Charing Cross Embankment on a roundabout route via Whitehall, to Hyde Park:

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..” [xx]





The protesters had broken away but were confronted by a wall of police. Security for the march was high. A thousand-strong team of police was stationed outside the US Embassy and policemen lined the route of the march with back-up following in coaches.

### **Petition to Downing Street**

The rest of the march, which was organised by the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, continued peacefully to Hyde Park. On route, Tariq Ali, the head of the VSC, handed in a 75,000-signature petition to 10 Downing Street to ask the government to stop supporting the U.S. in its war against Vietnam.

A record from contemporary newsreel of the demonstration:

<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/vietnam-demonstrations-1> [xxi]

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Once in Grovesnor Square the protesters formed a human chain and charged at the police wall but failed to break through. McCarty recalled “the pushing and shoving and squeezing, which occurred whenever a charge of demonstrators was driven back into the square or into South Audley Street or when the police, having yielded ground, surged forward in a double wedge. At those moments I was conscious of a fear, for us all, of being crushed or trampled” [xxii]

Clashes continued for around three hours, with some of the violent protesters throwing stones, fireworks and other objects. But the 1,000 officers on guard, who included mounted police, were able to hold back the protestors led by the Maoist Britain-Vietnam Solidarity Front, and, after hours of stalemate, they all dispersed. Was it true the police joining the demonstrators in singing “Auld Lang Syne” as they prepared to call it a night?

## Afterwards

In the event, October 27th was a successful anti-climax: successful in terms of numbers and atmosphere, but an anti-climax in that it was ultimately just a demonstration and none of the political problems had been dealt with.

Following the October 27<sup>th</sup> demonstration, the editorial of *Vietnam Solidarity Campaign Bulletin* 19 (published November 1968) in a piece of political spin, stated:

“The demonstration on October 27th represents a sweeping vindication of the work of our campaign, and a significant contribution to the world-wide movement of support to the fighting people of Vietnam.....the fact the demonstration did not become a riot was due to the fact that the authorities conceded our right to occupy the whole street unhindered.”

However, there were more sanguine judgements carried by those who rightly saw the march as marking a critical time for the campaign, pointing out that “it was hoped that prior to the demonstration new people would be involved in ...political preparation for the demonstration. This failed to materialise in any significant degree. ...our aim to provide an alternative view of Oct.27th to that disseminated by the news media, has proved largely illusory.” And there were complaints regarding the “bureaucratic nature of the VSC organisation and the gulf which separates the organisation and the mass support it has”. Political opposition to the VSC positions had been expressed in the activities of the BVSF. [\[xxiii\]](#)

The Vietnam Solidarity Campaign declined rapidly, reviving as at the time of the invasion of Cambodia in 1970. The single issue protest cannot continue indefinitely mobilising people on issues without giving them a political perspective and linking them to the social forces that can make their aspirations reality. Otherwise, no matter how large, militant or imaginative, they will drift away.

Coverage of the events of that October 27<sup>th</sup> created further antagonism towards student activists, and enthusiasm for protest diminished from 1968 onwards with the London demonstration on 16 March 1969 only managing to attract 4,000 protesters. The memorial meeting called for Ho Chi Minh, who died in October 1969 saw its end as an active coalition. Chris Harman of IS pointed out Uncle HO had been responsible for the massacre of the Vietnamese Trotskyists in the nineteen forties. The Communist Party and official North Vietnamese speakers left the platform, and Bob Purdie of the IMG, a different variant Trotskyist group, declined to support Harman when he spoke next.

The collapse of movements that had been focal points in the course of ‘68 was not unique to Britain. The peak of mobilising significant numbers was recognised at the time. But the experience had energised a new generation of activists, Phil Hearse put this growth into context:

One has to have a sense of proportion however. The Communist Party had around 30,000 members still (with about 5000 in the Young Communist League), despite the trauma of the

Hungarian 1956 revolution, which saw thousands of its activists leave. By contrast the SLL at around 300 members was much bigger than the other revolutionary groups, but only because these groups were tiny. IS, later the SWP, had only a few dozen members and their leader, Tony Cliff would say they could have the annual conference in his front room.[\[xxiv\]](#)

It was the International Socialists led by Tony Cliff who recruited most successfully from the VSC according to Tariq Ali. IS went from 450 in 1967 to over 1,000 by the end of 1968, in contrast, the IMG, which was much closer to the common student-oriented politics of the year and was also central to the VSC, grew much more slowly until later in 1970.

On the far left there were other divisions than just the radical Maoist opposition.[\[xxv\]](#) While fellow Trotskyists in The Militant organisation remain stubbornly in its Labour Party grove aloof from the VSC but still selling papers on the sidelines, Gerry Healy's Socialist Labour League distributed a leaflet, *Why we are not marching*, to the Vietnam demo on October 27<sup>th</sup>; Because the march was, they claimed, just a stunt to distract attention from the SLL,

“The Socialist Labour League refuses...to participate in the demonstration. Our task is to direct all young workers and students towards serious consideration for the theory and role of Trotskyism and the Fourth International towards the building of the revolutionary party.”

The BVSF itself went into decline. Behind the BVSF was the small maoist group led by Manchanda, the Revolutionary Marxist-Leninist League. In quick successions two separate groups of activists were to break away and added to the Maoist constellation of small planets in London[\[xxvi\]](#). As Sam Richards made a common observation that [\[xxvii\]](#)

“the RMLL working in the BVSF had confused the single issue campaign with the wider strategic task of building a revolutionary party. Such solidarity activity was treating the broad front as the party organisation. Such an approach was seen repeated again as with the INSLF, North London Alliance and other occasions as the movement learnt how to work more appropriately and effectively in the broad movement and amongst the working class and people.”

The BVSF saw common errors in the work of the young activists particularly the sectarianism evident in the policy statement of the BVSF, which pledged the organisation to fight for the ‘unity of the whole working class in defence of their living standards and democratic rights and in their struggle for social advance’. This, a commitment appropriate to a revolutionary party of the British working class, reflected the confusion about what constituted a broad front organisation of solidarity with the people of Vietnam. There were lessons about Left Sectarianism to be learnt as *The Marxist* noted:

The statements produced by the BVSF are all too frequently written in a heavy-handed cliché-ridden style which is of no use to convinced Marxist-Leninists and frankly unintelligible to the broad mass of people for whom the statements are presumably intended.... Such a writing style either reflects or can lead to a sectarian working style.... Perhaps the worst example to date of what we mean is to be found in the October 1968 Bulletin of BVSF which was distributed on the march. One article in this bulletin has a full headline which reads ‘YCL Revisionist Leaders Unmasked as Police Agents and Stooges of US imperialism’.

People cannot be won if they are not permitted to develop in struggle, but are simply told: “We are correct, join us.” We must instead show how we are correct both through concrete work and by drawing correct conclusions from this work. Winning people to our position

does not mean their passive acquiescence, but rather their lively participation. Marxism-Leninism cannot be learned by rote.

As the Joint Committee of Communists later explained:

The ‘Revolutionary Marxist-Leninist League’, for a short time a member group of the JCC, attempted to promote a strategy built solely around the issues of the national liberation struggle in Vietnam. Primarily because of its petty-bourgeois base it was (and is) unable to build up links with the working class or in any way develop the internal contradiction between Labour and Capital on which the proletarian revolution in Britain will be based. It also epitomised the ‘leftist’ error of which Lin Piao reminds us: that is, one-sidedly pursuing struggle’ to the exclusion of ‘unity’.

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Ironically, in 2008, when it was announced that the US embassy was withdrawing from its central London fortress, moving to south of the river in the Nine Elms area of Wandsworth, Tarqi Ali suggested ” *When it finally happens, Grosvenor Square veterans should make sure there is a properly organised wake with proper music, etc. They should be sent off in style. Old memories must not be obliterated.* ”

He did not remind people that it was Manchanda, not Tarqi Ali who argued that

**“The lair of U.S. imperialism is the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square and that’s where the protest should be made.”**

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/oct/03/usa.foreignpolicy>

## ENDNOTES

[i] Ernest Tate, Building the VSC. Delivered at the Left Before 1968 conference, organised at UEA by the Socialist History Society and the University of East Anglia Department of History, February 13/ 14, 2016

[ii] Diane Langford & Claudia Manchanda. Letter to Marika Sherwood (2000)  
<https://dianelangford.wordpress.com/>

[iii] “The following is a statement [CONCERNING THE VIETNAM SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN](#) issued by all those who found it necessary to walk out from the conference called on June 4-5, 1966, at the Mahatma Gandhi Hall, Fitzroy Square, London W.1. to launch a Vietnam Solidarity Campaign in Britain.....”

[iv] Ibid. Ernest Tate, Building the VSC.

[v] Mary McCarthy, Letter from London: The Demo .*The New York Review of Books*, Volume 11, Number 11 · December 19, 1968 reproduced at <http://abhimanyumanchandaremembered.weebly.com/vietnam-solidarity.html>

[vi] VSC Bulletin, July-August 1967, no. 6, p.1

[vii] Mike Martin. A short account of the International Marxist Group

<https://redmolerising.wordpress.com/2015/12/17/guest-post-a-short-account-of-the-international-marxist-group/>

[viii] Bruce Robinson, 1968: Vietnam solidarity and the British left

<http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2008/03/20/1968-vietnam-solidarity-and-british-left>

[ix] See: Clive Bloom, *Violent London: 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolts* 2010

[x] Diane Langford, Letter to *The Observer* 4th October, 1998

[xi] *The Sun*, 19 March 1968, p. 16

[xii] *Daily Mail*, 19 March 1968, p. 6

[xiii] R. Fraser, *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt*, p. 279

[xiv] The Vietnam Movement: Report from Glasgow Communist Movement and South West London Marxist-Leninist Group. *The Marxist*, Vol. 1, No. 9, Spring 1969.

[xv] Mary McCarthy, Letter from London: The Demo .*The New York Review of Books*, Volume 11, Number 11 · December 19, 1968 reproduced at <http://abhimanyumanchandaremembered.weebly.com/vietnam-solidarity.html>

[xvi] The Vietnam Movement: Report from Glasgow Communist Movement and South West London Marxist-Leninist Group. *The Marxist*, Vol. 1, No. 9, Spring 1969.

[xvii] Metropolitan Police Special Branch, Vietnam Solidarity campaign “Autumn Offensive” Reference to papers 346/68/15 (2) 10th day of September 1968

<http://www.isg-fi.org.uk/spip.php?article637>

James Callaghan, Home Secretary in 1968, later admitted that the 17 March demonstration caught the police totally unprepared. In an interview for Peter Taylor’s BBC documentary ‘True Spies’, one Special Branch officer remembered: ‘[We had no training at all for demonstrations](#). We were just bussed in in a coach, didn’t know what we were going to do; no preparation for it whatsoever’. Echoing this, another noted: ‘We underestimated how many were coming. We were ill-equipped at the time and couldn’t bring enough men in to control it consequently when the violence erupted. [We were amateurs then](#)’.

<http://specialbranchfiles.uk/vietnam-war-story/>

[xviii] Diane Langford, The Manchanda Connection July 2015  
<https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/uk.secondwave/langford.pdf>

[xix] Mike Martin. A short account of the International Marxist Group

<https://redmolerising.wordpress.com/2015/12/17/guest-post-a-short-account-of-the-international-marxist-group/>

[xx] <http://www.isg-fi.org.uk/spip.php?article637>

[xxi] A British Pathe newsreel shows the beginning of the march in Trafalgar Square, where peace activists, including actress Vanessa Redgrave, assembled. And the reporter claimed that among them were “trouble maker” and filmed those with bushy beards carrying anarchist and communist flags. Then, in a smoke-filled Grosvenor Square, police were shown tacking to the ground and carrying away some protesters amid a hail of noise and firework missiles. In the streets surrounding the square fireworks and other missiles were thrown but no injuries were caused and police considered them to be isolated incidents. Some of the 117 policemen injured during the clashes were also filmed being stretchered away.

[xxii] Mary McCarthy, Letter from London: The Demo .*The New York Review of Books*, Volume 11, Number 11 · December 19, 1968 reproduced at  
<http://abhimanyumanchandaremembered.weebly.com/vietnam-solidarity.html>

[xxiii] *Vietnam Solidarity Campaign Bulletin* 19 published November 1968

[xxiv] Phil Hearse, The crystallisation of a new militant left. Delivered at the Left Before 1968 conference

[xxv] Points made by Ian Birchall in *Against the Grain, the British far left from 1956* p201

[xxvi] The Association of Communist Workers, launched in 1969 and led by Harpal Brar and Edward Davoren, who in August 1969 went on to lead the Irish National Liberation Solidarity Front that had at its core the Communist Workers League of Britain (Marxist-Leninist).

<https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/uk.secondwave/index.htm>

[xxvii] Sam Richards, The Rise & Fall of Maoism: the English Experience

<https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/uk.secondwave/uk-maoism.pdf>