

Between revolution and human rights: the testimonies of Brazilian exiles at the Russell Tribunal II

*Felipe Magaldi*¹

*Cynthia Sarti*¹

¹ Universidade Federal de São Paulo, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências Sociais, São Paulo, SP, Brasil

Abstract:

In this article, we study the testimonies given at the Russell Tribunal II, held in Rome in 1974 with the objective of denouncing Latin American dictatorships. The event was attended by exiles who had been arrested and tortured after joining clandestine organizations opposing Brazil's military dictatorship. The article analyses their testimonies based on documents published by the Amnesty Commission's Marks of Memory Project and others consulted at the Basso Foundation (Italy) and the National Archives (Brazil), as well as other dispersed records. The public expression of suffering is highlighted as a main vector of transformation in the repertoires of political action at the time, situated at the intersection between the ideals of the revolutionary left and those of human rights. This process exposed the limits to the idea of a purely individual aspect of suffering and the presumption of its incommunicable or unspeakable nature – both shown to be ways of silencing its political dimension.

Keywords: testimony; exile; Russell Tribunal; Brazilian military dictatorship; torture.

Entre a revolução e os direitos humanos: os testemunhos dos exilados brasileiros no Tribunal Russell II

Resumo:

Trata-se de estudo sobre os testemunhos proferidos no Tribunal Russell II, realizado em Roma em 1974, com o objetivo de denunciar as ditaduras latino-americanas. O evento contou com a participação de exilados que haviam sido presos e torturados no Brasil e integravam organizações clandestinas de oposição à ditadura militar brasileira. O artigo analisa seus depoimentos com base em documentos publicados pelo Projeto Marcas da Memória da Comissão da Anistia ou consultados na Fundação Basso (Itália), no Arquivo Nacional (Brasil) e em registros dispersos. Aponta para a expressão do sofrimento na esfera pública como principal vetor de transformação dos repertórios de ação política à época, na encruzilhada entre os ideais da esquerda revolucionária e os dos direitos humanos. Nesse processo, tensionaram-se tanto as suposições do aspecto puramente individual do sofrimento quanto seu caráter comunicável ou indizível, formas de silenciamento de sua dimensão política.

Palavras-chave: testemunho; exílio; Tribunal Russell; ditadura militar brasileira; tortura.

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Introduction

Our approach to being interviewed was fairly well defined. Don't try to elicit any kind of compassion from torture. Nobody was an **innocent victim** of anything. A **revolutionary war** was under way and, within it, it was essential to make its **socialist objectives** clear. Our politics was typical of the period. It was only some years later that we discovered the **systematic denunciation of torture** and began to engage with **European democratic forces**. (Gabeira, 1980, p. 15, our emphases)

The above epigraph is from the book *O Crepúsculo do Macho* (The Twilight of the Macho) by Fernando Gabeira (Gabeira, 1980). One of three works written by the author shortly after the promulgation of the 1979 Amnesty Law,¹ at the book's core is a reflection on the experience of living in exile during Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985). In this work, after recalling his experiences of imprisonment, torture, exile and the return to Brazil, Gabeira hints at a shift in his framework of reference from the revolutionary ideals that drove the fight against the dictatorship towards the grammar of human rights. His earlier self-image, forged by the decision to commit to the armed struggle, in which *nobody was an innocent victim of anything*, was changed by the singular experience of living in exile. This experience brought with it the figure of the exile, someone who, with his or her personal testimony, was able to demand democracy from abroad as part of a new repertoire of political action.

Far from an isolated case, this contact with the humanitarian lexicon can be identified as a wide-ranging phenomenon whose protagonists included people forced to leave Brazil during the dictatorship after being imprisoned and tortured. Prominent among them were activists for whom the socialist revolution, pursued through the tactics of the armed struggle, was of paramount value.² However, rather than involving a straightforward conversion to human rights, the exile of these self-appointed revolutionaries, many of them banished from Brazilian territory, entailed a complex process of articulation. In the international setting, a new phase emerged involving the contamination and mixture of repertoires from Marxist, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist vocabularies in a process of "confrontation, shock and osmosis" (Monina, 2021, p. 166).

As Rollemberg (1999) already pointed out in her pioneering historiographical study on exile during the Brazilian dictatorship, living in exile, with its inevitable openness to the world, led to a crisis in social identity, enabling the reconfiguration of political projects within a new field of possibilities. The anthropological notion of *metamorphosis*, as elaborated by Velho (2003), is mobilized by Rollemberg to think about the practical and

¹ The other two books were *O Que É Isso Companheiro?* published in 1979 (What's Happening Comrade? released as a film, *Four Days in September*, in 1997) and *Entradas e Bandeiras* (Entrances and Flags) published in 1981. For an analysis of all three works, see Waizbort (2013) who emphasizes their importance in the constitution of a collective memory between generations. He also examines the extraordinary success of the trilogy in Brazil at the time when they were written, describing the works as "a period document of huge historical intensity," given the climate conducive to change, not just political but cultural, "in which the pressure dammed up during the *anos de chumbo*, the 'Years of Lead,' began to be released" (p. 43).

² Even before the dictatorship was installed, the Peasant Leagues had already opted for armed struggle in Brazil in the wake of the 1959 Cuban Revolution. After the 1964 civil-military coup, a series of clandestine organizations emerged in the country using diverse tactics of revolutionary violence. All of these groups had been defeated by the mid-1970s, alienated from the demands of society (Aarão Reis, 1990) and the possibilities of representing the working class politically (Ridenti, 1993).

subjective transformations in various areas of the everyday lives of exiles, including the political militancy forged in the armed struggle.

Azevedo and Sanjurjo (2013), in another seminal study, this time in the field of Brazilian anthropology, suggest conceiving of exile as a situation of liminality, in Turner's (1974) sense. This process involved the suspension of the previous social positions of the exiled subjects, who ended up occupying an indefinite place where earlier categories no longer clearly applied. The authors also highlight Pollak's reflection on the processes of readapting social identities in the face of limit situations (1989, 1992) such as banishment and exile.

Here we can also turn to Das's reflections. The author suggests that *critical events* are marked by the need to create new models of understanding and action (Das, 1995), emphasizing the ways in which the extraordinary is incorporated into the ordinary (Das, 2006). Her focus is not on the historical reconstruction of moments of devastation but on understanding what happens to subjects themselves and their relations to the world they inhabit after such experiences.

In various ways, therefore, anthropological reflection can help us observe how disruptive happenings are always accompanied by ulterior forms of action that are contingent and absent from the earlier repertoire. What transformations occurred from the experiential viewpoint of the exiles themselves? In particular, we explore the trajectories of militants who, forced to leave Brazil during the dictatorship, found themselves at the intersection highlighted above between the languages of revolution and human rights, in a context of mixed and overlapping – rather than mutually exclusive – repertoires.

Pursuing this line of inquiry, we pay special attention to the public expression of suffering as a vector of transformation. More than a just a shift in vocabulary, as commonly emphasized, it was a political rearticulation of word, body and emotion.³ While in the personal account of Brazil's revolutionary war quoted in the epigraph, suffering was an implicit consequence of political action to be either ignored or downplayed in the face of the primordial task of confronting and opposing the dictatorial regime, in the context of exile analysed here, it formed the raw material to be emphasized in the denunciations made in an international political context.

As Das (2006) suggests, the words that emerge from the destruction of the world are not simple narrations. This is because violence is not only narrated but above all shown. Words are also gestures, expressed in the body. For this reason the author criticizes the idea that violence is inexpressible. Pain does not destroy communication but “it makes a claim on the other – asking for acknowledgment that may be given or denied” (Das, 2006, p. 40).

Exploring public performances in which the word is convoked to be heard, our hypothesis is that the enunciations of torture, based on the testimonial expression of the exiles, was one of the guiding threads for the emergence of a new emotional grammar located at the intersection of *revolution* and *human rights*, breaking the silencing imposed by both the military regime and the moral codes of the activists. The expression of feelings of pain extended beyond individual bodies, becoming inscribed in a symbolic order and rendering intelligible what they were attempting to express socially, as shown in Mauss's classic lesson (1979).

Even at the height of the dictatorship, there were denunciations of torture in Brazil, made in spaces where some resistance was possible, like the letters and manifestos written from prisons (Pedretti, 2024) and the publication of books in the country (Maués, 2009).⁴ Accounts of torture were a fundamental axis of these texts, as Ginzburg (2004) emphasized in his analysis of the literature from the period. This was a combat writing in the context of strong repression, an instrument of struggle and resistance (Sarti, 2019).

Our argument in this text, however, is that the scenario of exile not only allowed a different repercussion and circulation of denunciations in international reports and official forums, but it also gave them a new

³ In this reflection, we have in mind various works, produced in Brazil and abroad, which have pointed to a transformation of languages, occurring especially at the end of the 1970s, that allowed the transnational reception and circulation of the human rights vocabulary as a form of struggle against the Brazilian and Latin American dictatorships (Greco, 2003; Markarian, 2005; Crenzel, 2008; Moyn, 2010; Grimaldi, 2023; Pedretti, 2024).

⁴ The books include *Em Câmara Lenta* by Renato Tapajós (1977), *Tortura* by journalist Antonio Carlos Fon (1979), and *Cartas da prisão* by Frei Betto (1977), as well as the aforementioned bestseller *O que é isso companheiro?* by Fernando Gabeira (1979), among others.

dimension through the privileged relationship between the transformation of language and the expression of suffering – or indeed suffering itself as a language (Lutz & Abu-Lughod, 1990), created in the new context of enunciation. A new meaning for the practice of testimony was the nodal point of this phenomenon, registered through the enunciation and collectivization of the torments. We could say that this reflects the emerging expression of the kind of *moral sentiments* described by Fassin (2011). As an integral part of humanist rhetoric, these sentiments direct our attention towards the other through affects, values, sensitivity, altruism and compassion. In our view, the intrusion of *pathos* in the public sphere does not inevitably corresponds to a dilution of political meaning but to the form acquired by political discourse in such circumstances.

To address these questions, we analyse a particular event that took place precisely in the context of Brazilian exile and involved an articulation of testimonial expression and international public denunciation. This was the Bertrand Russell Tribunal II, a forum without any criminal jurisdiction, held in Italy and Belgium between 1974 and 1976 with the purpose of denouncing the Latin American dictatorships. The Brazilian regime was given particular prominence in the first session, held in Rome in 1974, including lectures and reports from jurists, doctors, theologians and social scientists.

The Russell Tribunal II (hereafter RT-II) featured a series of testimonies. In the Brazilian case, its protagonists were mostly people who, after the experience of imprisonment, were released as part of negotiations between clandestine organizations and the dictatorial government for the exchange of kidnapped ambassadors. Release of the imprisoned activists was followed by their banishment from national territory, beginning a cycle of exile through various countries.⁵

In this text, we analyse these testimonies, seeking to comprehend the public expression of suffering that marked them, the primary emblem of this pain being their torture by state agents. This objective in mind, rather than examine the individual and informational aspects of the testimonies (Duarte & Dullo, 2017), we focus on the social, historical and relational conditions of enunciation (Pollak & Heinich, 1986; Pollak, 1989; Sarti, 2020). Similarly to Jelin (2017), Ross (2002) and Vianna & Farias (2011) in their investigations, we ask: Who is speaking? How are they speaking? When, where and to whom are they speaking? What is spoken and what is silenced? To what and to whom are they responding? What affects are mobilized and dramatized?

Discussing the question of testimony based on the experience of Auschwitz, Agamben (2000) highlights the tension between a sacralizing perspective, which denies the possibility of comprehending this type of narrative, and another that seeks the truth behind it. Both approaches ignore the fact that testimony contains a lacuna, since the witness is the survivor, someone who can speak after the fact. In this sense, working with testimonies means asking what remains of what was lived as a trace or a ‘remnant,’ in the author’s terminology, in the sense that experience falls short of its meaning, leaving it open to resignification. The aim here, therefore, is not to reiterate the denunciation of dictatorial repression, simply reproducing the viewpoint of activists, nor to investigate the facts underlying the narratives in a positivist historical undertaking. Rather, our objective is to understand the conditions for the emergence, development, form and repercussions of the enunciations that occurred in the case under discussion, acknowledging what was said and unsaid, exploring the circumstances involved and seeking to comprehend the sensibilities mobilized during and by the event.

From a methodological point of view, the research makes use of the transcript of oral testimonies, concentrating especially on the first session of the Russell Tribunal II. The material was published in book form in Italy, the venue of this edition, organized by Salvatore Senese and Linda Bimbi (RT-II, 1975). In contrast to its international impact, though, the content of the RT-II was only belatedly published and absorbed in Brazil.

⁵ In total, 130 political prisoners were banished from Brazil during the dictatorship as part of the exchanges made for kidnapped ambassadors. Among them, 15 were exchanged for the US ambassador on 9 September 1969, 5 for the Japanese consul on 14 March 1970, 40 for the German ambassador on 15 June 1970, and 70 for the Swiss ambassador on 13 January 1971. Those banished would only be able to return to the country after the 1979 Amnesty Law (Greco, 2003). Initially the principal destinations were Mexico, Algeria and Chile.

At the time when the tribunal was held, within the broader scope of denying or providing false information on torture and killings, the validity of the tribunal's actions was questioned by the Brazilian government and media, who pejoratively associated it with international communism.⁶

It was only in 2014, as part of the Marks of Memory project, that a collection of four books was published on the Russell Tribunal II, thanks to a cooperation agreement between the Citizenship and Human Rights Centre of the Federal University of Paraíba and the Historical Archive of the Fondazione Lelio e Lisli Basso (FLLB), based in Rome, Italy (Tosi & Ferreira, 2014a; 2014b; 2014c; 2014d). These books were published in a new context that saw the proliferation of public memory policies in Brazil between the second Lula administration (2006-2010) and the administration of President Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016). The books present a broad selection of dozens of testimonies given in the three sessions of the RT-II, as well as documents compiled and produced by its members. This material is the initial source of the research, complemented by an in-situ period of study at the Basso Foundation itself, in Rome, where documentaries, visual and audiovisual materials are also found, along with complete archives relating to the testimonies.⁷ Additionally, documents from other archives like the National Archives were used, as well as books, biographies and interviews with the event's participants and organizers.

The genesis of the Russell Tribunal II in the era of dictatorships

From the moment of the 1964 military coup and the installation of the dictatorship in Brazil, there were denunciations of violations perpetrated by state agents against opponents. These were made through manifestos, reports or letters written from prison (Badan Ribeiro, 2022), albeit with limited domestic or international repercussions. As we observed earlier, some of these opponents had been forced to leave the country. Rollemberg (1999) shows how the profile of exiles initially included individuals notorious for their political activities – members of unions and political parties, or people directly involved in the reformist projects of the ousted president João Goulart, himself in exile at the time. From 1968, however, with repression worsening under the draconian Institutional Act 5 (AI-5), a new profile emerged among the exiles, characterized especially by younger men and women who, after participating in the student movement, joined various clandestine organizations and were imprisoned, tortured and banished from the country as a result.

During this second moment, the connection between the experience of exile and the proliferation of testimonies intensified. This was when the proposal for the Russell Tribunal II emerged. The first had originally been devised by the British philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell and the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre at a meeting in London in 1966. It was held in 1967 in Stockholm, Sweden, and Roskilde, Denmark, as a public, non-state initiative, based on the recognition of the inadequacies of international criminal law and the need for denunciation presented by moral authorities. This first tribunal focused especially on crimes perpetrated in the Vietnam War, drawing together documents and testimonies on the role of the United States in torture and the use of illegal weapons. Held in the era of the counterculture, decolonization and the civil rights movement, on the eve of the May 1968 protests, the event can be considered one of the forerunners of the tribunals of opinion after the Second World War (Filippi, 2012).

The Russell Tribunal II started to be organized in Santiago, Chile, a country then governed by the democratic socialism of Salvador Allende and the epicentre of Brazilians exiles at the time. Between the late 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the Committee for the Denunciation of Repression in Brazil (*Comitê de Denúncia da Repressão no Brasil*: CDBR), composed precisely of exiled nationals, asked the Italian senator Lelio Basso to hold a tribunal

⁶ On this point, see the dossiers produced by the Security and Information Division of the Brazilian Foreign Affairs Ministry, available in the National Archives (BR DFANBSB Z4.DHU.o.1), from 1973 onwards.

⁷ The research was funded by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), including processes 2021/04529-2 (Post-Doctorate Scholarship at the Federal University of São Paulo with supervision of Cynthia Sarti, co-author of the article and the research) and 2022/07107-4 (internship scholarship in research abroad at Università Degli Studi Roma Tre, Italy, with supervision of Giancarlo Monina).

on the crimes being committed by the Brazilian state. Basso, renowned for fighting fascism in his home country, had participated in the first Russell Tribunal, where he had stood out for his activities in the “transnational field of the left” (Azevedo, 2012), as it existed at the time. The Italian politician was in Santiago at that moment to learn more about the experience of democratic socialism (Filippi, 2012). This collaboration led to the formation of the Planning Committee for the Bertrand Russell Tribunal II Campaign, incorporating representatives of the exiles, as well as socialist, communist, Catholic and human rights organizations from various countries.

Negotiations over the new tribunal took place shortly before the coup d'état that brought General Augusto Pinochet to power in 1973, making realization of the event in Chile, as planned, impossible. Allende's fall led to a new outflow of exiles – which included not only Chileans but also those banished or who had fled from other Latin America dictatorships to seek refuge in Chile, Brazilians among them – to various countries in the Americas (Argentina, Mexico, Cuba), Africa (Algeria, Mozambique) and Europe (France, Portugal, Sweden, England, Belgium, Italy, among others). Given the leading role of Lelio Basso and his allies, the tribunal ended up being organized in Europe and ran to three sessions⁸.

While the initial idea has been to focus on Brazil, after the Chilean coup the forum also expanded to include denunciations of other Latin American regimes. The Brazilian dictatorship was particularly highlighted in the first and most prominent session, held in Rome, along with the Chilean, Uruguayan and Bolivian cases. The dictators Médici, Pinochet, Banzer Suárez and Bordaberry, invited to defend themselves against the accusations by telegram, never responded to the convocation (Monina, 2021). In the event, the absence of criminal intent also contributed to a certain lack of impartiality, as the focus was primarily on the complaint itself. From our perspective, this is exactly what allowed the expression of suffering to emerge in the public sphere.

Traces and memories of the Russell Tribunal II

The main historiographical reflections on the subject of Brazilian exile (Rollemberg, 1999, Chirio, 2005; Quadrat, 2011; Green, 2010; Napolitano, 2014; Cruz, 2016 etc.) have emphasized the individual or group trajectories of the exiles and their collective experiences of engagement, solidarity and transculturation, focusing on different groups and destination countries. Although mentioned, the RT-II is not the topic of any specific analysis.

The exceptions refer to the tribunal's researchers and agents of memory themselves. Ferreira (2016), one of the organizers of the collection relating to the RT-II published through the Marks of Memory project (Tosi & Ferreira, 2014a; 2014b; 2014c; 2014d), wrote one of the few works containing a preliminary analysis of the testimonies. The work of Filippi (2012) is a lecture given at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB) marking the occasion of the reception of the RT-II documentary archive by the Brazilian state. From the Italian intellectual field, the historian Giancarlo Monina, coordinator of the section of historical studies of the Basso Foundation, published works on Lelio Basso (Monina, 2016), the repercussions of the collaboration between Marks of Memory and the Basso Foundation in Italy (Monina, 2013), as well as a book specifically dealing with the Russell Tribunal II and the Latin American military regimes, including the Brazilian dictatorship (Monina, 2021).

In interview, the Italian-Brazilian political scientist Tullo Vigevani (2023), one of the witnesses at the RT-II and an interlocutor in our research, suggested that Italy's marginal place among the European democracies of the 1970s was a possible factor explaining the low level of interest shown in the event.⁹ Indeed, the Italian connections did not attract the attention of countries like Chile and France, which quantitatively received a larger number of exiles. Italy was going through the so-called *anni di piombo*, the Years of Lead, a period of

8 The first, entitled “Denunciations of Human Rights violations in Brazil, Chile, Bolivia and Uruguay,” was held in Rome between 30 March and 6 April 1974; the second, “Responsibility of the multinationals in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Bolivia and Porto Rico,” took place in Brussels from 11 to 18 January 1975; and the third, “Cultural repression in Latin America,” was again held in Rome from 10 to 17 January 1976.

9 Interview conducted by Felipe Magaldi in Rome, 21 December 2023.

political violence in the country, even under democratic governance, and did not offer exiles refugee status, unlike countries such as Sweden and Belgium. The “historical compromise” proposed by Enrico Berlinguer from 1973 was an attempt to form a coalition between the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the Christian Democrats (DC) to stabilize the country. However, this attempt would later collapse due to opposition from more conservative sectors and the kidnapping and assassination of Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades in 1978, which deepened the political and social crisis in the country.

From our perspective, it is important to consider some additional factors relating not just to academic production on the topic of the military dictatorship but also the direction of the Brazilian transition within the regional framework of the Southern Cone.¹⁰ While the 1979 Amnesty Law allowed exiles to return, it also featured impunity for those responsible for committing crimes and the absence of public policies to deal with the legacy of the dictatorship. The first state reparation initiatives, which only emerged from the mid-1990s, focused on economic compensations for relatives of those killed and disappeared, pushing the question of responsibility and testimony into the background. Initially, this situation continued even after the creation of the Amnesty Commission between 2001 and 2002, with an expansion of compensation payments for those whose professional and educational life had been interrupted during the dictatorship (Mezarobba, 2010).

With the end of the Southern Cone dictatorships, the agenda of redemocratization was marked by the reception of the *transitional justice* paradigm. From the perspective of this markedly normative and evaluative theoretical-practical field, developed to offer tools to address the consequences of authoritarian governments or armed conflicts (Teitel, 2003), the Brazilian transition is frequently seen as retrograde and deficient, especially when compared to neighbouring countries. The Argentinian case in particular stands out as exemplary since it established policies for investigating the facts, combined with punishment for those responsible, soon after the end of the last dictatorship (1976-1983). After its laws of impunity and pardons, the country was thus able to return to the path of justice in the 2000s, establishing a process for judging crimes against humanity (Hollanda, 2018; Magaldi, 2023a). From this point of view, events of public denunciation like the RT-II, which were held without any penal consequences and through the agency of civil society, tended to receive little attention, presumably because they were seen as relatively ineffective from the prevailing normative viewpoint.

Nonetheless, as Agamben (2000) provocatively observed with regard to the Nuremberg Trials, however necessary legal proceedings may be, they do not exhaust the problem. On the contrary, they may help spread the idea that everything is resolved since the evidence has been established and the sentences passed. This approach, intended to measure efficacies and propose solutions that reflect other realities, tends to obscure concrete processes of memory construction that, as Jelin (2003) suggests, take into account struggles that not only involve legal and state aspects but also moral aspects, blurring the boundaries between these dimensions and putting its own definition in question. Memories, the author writes, are not just an attempt to combat forgetting and silencing: they also have an affirmative dimension as a stage on which rival memories compete. It is a question, therefore, of paying attention not only to what could have been but was not done, but also to what can be and was indeed achieved.

Publication of the RT-II material in Brazil, four decades after the event took place, was made possible thanks to the configuration of memory policies in Brazil during President Lula’s second term of office (2007-2011), when important changes were introduced to the state bodies responsible for implementing them, including the entry of new political actors into the government. Journalist Paulo Vanucchi, who had been a militant in the National Liberation Alliance (*Aliança Libertadora Nacional*: ALN) and a political prisoner during the dictatorship, was appointed head of the Special Secretariat for Human Rights of the Presidency of the Republic (2005-2010). During the re-democratization process, Vanucchi had been an advisor to various trade union and church organizations, including the nascent Workers’ Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*: PT). As well as a former political prisoner, Vanucchi

¹⁰ By Southern Cone, we refer to a region marked not just by geographic proximity but also by the similarity of historical processes and the concrete circulation of its political actors, as Jelin (2017) proposes. This definition includes Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Paraguay.

had also worked on the book *Brasil: nunca mais* (Brazil: Never Again) in the 1980s (Arquidiocese de São Paulo, 1985). In 2007, the book-report *Direito à memória e à verdade* (Right to Memory and Truth) was also released with his support, the outcome of 12 years of work of the Special Commission on Political Assassinations and Disappearances (*Comissão Especial de Mortos e Desaparecidos Políticos*: CEMDP). This was the first official document of the Brazilian state to present the testimonial narratives of the victims and recognize the rights violations perpetrated under the dictatorship.¹¹ The launch was held at the headquarters of the National Human Rights Program III (*Programa Nacional de Direitos Humanos – III*: PNDH-3), which included the right to memory and truth as one of its directives.

In 2007, the jurist and law professor Paulo Abrão was appointed president of the Amnesty Commission of the Ministry of Justice, then headed by Tarso Genro. Younger and not a member of the generation directly “affected” by the dictatorship, Abrão, who remained in the post until 2010, demonstrated a notable interest in international human rights law and the debates on transitional justice (Hollanda, 2019). During this period, the jurist stated that, from 2007, “the Amnesty Commission took a particular hermeneutic turn” (Abrão & Torelly, 2012, p. 30). Abrão was referring to the Commission’s projects dedicated to the educational, symbolic, moral and psychological aspects of memory, truth and reparation, without excluding the fight for justice.

The Amnesty Caravans project (2008) consisted of roving public sessions to assess amnesty requests throughout Brazil, followed by educational and cultural activities (Rosito & Damo, 2014). The Clinics of Testimony project, launched in 2013 by the Amnesty Commission of the Ministry of Justice, was a pioneer in implementing a public policy for psychological reparation for those affected by state violence during the dictatorship. The project sought to provide individual and collective psychotherapeutic care to survivors and their families. It also included training for mental health professionals to work in this area of human rights (Magaldi, 2022).

The Marks of Memory project, in particular, sought to recuperate the memory of the dictatorship’s victims by building collections of oral and audiovisual sources. It was precisely in this context that the material relating to the RT-II was published in Brazil, the same year that the National Truth Commission report was concluded (2014), during the administration of President Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), herself a former political prisoner. The period was a fertile one for interest in testimonial expression and for its articulation with public memory policies.

Analysing this material from today’s standpoint means valuing this legacy but also situating it historically as part of the genealogy of the so-called ‘testimonies’ of the Brazilian military dictatorship. This is a long-term process that traversed the regime itself and continues to the present day with the experiences of imprisonment, torture and exile still echoing in books, archives, documents and institutions, leaving traces far beyond the events themselves (Sarti, 2020). It is specific sets of circumstances – such as the one that enabled the Marks of Memory project – that make it possible, or not, to publicize these testimonies years after they were originally made (Pollak, 1989).

The era of the witness and the victim

The end of the Second World War and the subsequent trial of the Nazi leaders for *crimes against humanity* at the Nuremberg Trials (1946-1949) are often cited as the inaugural landmark in twentieth-century human rights, concomitant with the issuing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). As Moyn (2010) showed, though, it was later, from the end of the 1970s, that humanitarian language began to spread globally with human rights as the “last utopia” following the collapse of the socialist and communist utopias, whether these were nationalist or internationalist in scope.

In the historical context of the collapse of the bipolar system of the Cold War, decolonization and the emergence of a global civil society, human rights became a grammar not only of nation states but also of social

¹¹ The state’s responsibility for the unlawful actions of its security agents had been recognized during the government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002), by Law 9,140, or the Law of the Disappeared, issued on 4 December 1995, although independently of any court ruling and without publicizing the testimonies.

movements, political parties, non-governmental civil associations and religious and philanthropic organizations. This was neither a linear nor a progressive process but rather a complex articulation, full of tensions, disputes, contradictions and limitations. One of these questions concerns precisely how distinct rights interconnect, especially after losing their universalist reference point and becoming defined in terms of specific identities.

In this context, the ways of conceptualizing the conflicts between nations, ethnic groups or between the national state and its own civilians were transformed. War was no longer seen solely as a conflict between states but also as violence against civilians, a “state violence”. The “voice of the victims”, which previously mattered little or was the target of stigma, began to acquire public prominence, frequently accompanied by the psychoanalytic or psychiatric idea of trauma and the practice of witnessing.

Various factors were decisive in what some authors call a generalized anthropological rupture (Wieviorka, 2005) or a moral conversion of sensibilities (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009), but the diffusion of human rights in particular was fundamental to this process. The victim’s testimony and their social recognition in terms of rights shaped the very notion of violence (Sarti, 2011), while victimhood was transfigured into the contemporary mode par excellence of subjectively positioning the self in response to violence (Koltai, 2002). Organizations like Amnesty International, founded in 1961, publicized specific cases of suffering, including political imprisonments, and placed huge emphasis on the mobilization of moral sentiments like solidarity and compassion. These values, previously religious, came to be presented in a secular and modernizing version in the field of public denunciation (Fassin, 2004).

Testimonial expression began to have worldwide repercussions following events such as the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. Transmitted on radio and television, his trial recorded the accounts of Holocaust survivors in a legal setting, including scenes with a strong emotional impact. Wieviorka (1998) argues that this event inaugurated the ‘age of testimony’ in contemporary history, which began to encourage accounts from diverse victims of violence previously silenced. For Felman (2003), while the Nuremberg Trials concentrated on the military history of the war, it was the Eichmann trial that gave rise to the narrative of victims’ suffering and enabled the penetration of trauma into the world of law.¹²

The Russell Tribunal II can be included among these transformations. While the first tribunal, concentrating on the Vietnam War, had already placed genocide at the centre of international attention, the second, focused on Latin America, incorporated *human rights violations* as its principal theme (Monina, 2021). We confirmed this view by studying the documents relating to the organization of the first session of the TR-II, selected in our research at the Basso Foundation. The archive contains references to the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, and their violation by the Brazilian dictatorship, including the right to life, freedom and personal safety (Article 3) and the ban on torture and on cruel and inhuman treatment (Article 5). The inventory includes lists with concrete examples of these rights violations, accompanied by documents and testimonies. In one of these documents, we read: “The Tribunal’s principal mission is to hold the crimes of the Brazilian dictatorship accountable in terms of international law”.¹³ The archive also contains reference dossiers produced by various organizations committed to human rights such as Amnesty International, the World Council of Churches, the International League for Human Rights, the Justice and Peace Commission and the Brazilian Bar Association.

We also ask to what extent human rights were incorporated into the language of those who testified at the tribunal itself. Here we need to bear in mind that the testimonies were given by activists from Marxist revolutionary movements in the Brazilian and Latin American community of exiles. Their previous activities in combatting the dictatorship were informed by socialist principles and thus alien to humanitarian ideology,

¹² At the same time, the famous “literature of testimony” of the Holocaust was gaining in impact, with Primo Levi as its clearest and most widely known expression.

¹³ ITA FLLB TBRII 02 01 011. “Materiale sul Brasile (preparazione I Sessione),” docc. 9

as evidenced by the refusal of militants to identify with the category of victim in the face of a political choice, like the armed struggle, for which they assumed full responsibility (Sarti, 2021). Exile, by nature involving an openness to the world and to new languages and experiences (Saïd, 2003), became a strategic locus for the transformation of language and a tense and complex laboratory for new paradigms of international activism.

As Monina (2021) argues, the RT-II did not imply a simple global shift of the ideological matrix of the left, disillusioned with socialist internationalism, towards a neutral and depoliticized language. At the tribunal, the language of human rights was characterized by the concrete struggle against the dictatorship, becoming the shared space for a clearly politicized proposal. In our view, the expression of suffering intrinsic to the description of torture had a fundamental place in this proposal.

The witnesses and their testimonies

The first session of the tribunal was held in Rome over a period of eight days, running from 30 March to 6 April 1974. Taking place in the auditorium of the *Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche*, next to the *Università di Roma La Sapienza*, the event was organized in thirteen hearings, which included the act of accusation, reports from the scientific commission, and dozens of testimonies from Brazilians, Chileans, Bolivians and Uruguayans.¹⁴ These testimonies covered a range of themes, among which we can highlight: the circumstances and causes of imprisonment; descriptions of the tortures inflicted; relations with the press, the Church, political activism and collective subjects (workers, peasants, students, and so on); family relations; international relations; revolution; human rights; and the experience of exile itself. The first two points appear in all the testimonies and comprise their main axis.

The organization of the RT-II involved looking for potential witnesses among the community of exiles. Invitations started to be sent out in September 1973, initially to Brazilians and subsequently to other Latin Americans. The contacts were the result of various intermediations in the religious and secular networks of solidarity behind the event. The choice of witnesses was based on their availability and on geographic, social, political, cultural, religious, gender and generational representativeness, as well as the kind of repression suffered. Some witnesses had to forego attending at the last minute due to bureaucratic problems, such as the lack of a visa (Monina, 2021). An initial list of names, also contained in the Basso Foundation inventory, includes prospective witnesses who did not attend the event in person, such as the militants Gregório Bezerra, Francisco Julião and José Serra and the Dominican friar known as Frei Tito,¹⁵ which suggests the difficulties of finding participants who were available at that moment of violence and banishment. There are also around one hundred written testimonies, including some made anonymously,¹⁶ which suggests that not everyone was willing to expose themselves by appearing in person or by name.

The book *Brasil, violação dos direitos humanos - Tribunal Russell II* (Tosi & Ferreira, 2014) contains an initial selection of around a dozen testimonies from Brazilians, taken from the Basso Foundation inventory. In particular, the chapters “Testimonies relating to Ettore Biocca’s report Torture and Strategy of Terror in Brazil and panel questions to these witnesses” and “Legal aspects of the military dictatorship established in Brazil on 31 March 1964” were a starting point for our research. Based on this material, extracted from the inquiries of physician and anthropologist Ettore Biocca and the jurist and magistrate Salvatore Senese respectively, it was possible

¹⁴ Our analysis was based on a digitized version of the *Fundo Tribunal Russell II* on Repression in Brazil and Latin America, available for consultation on the computer system of the foundation’s library in the historical centre of Rome, focusing specifically on the Brazilian cases. With the institution’s permission, a copy of part of this documentation, which contains transcribed and typed testimonies, was transferred to the personal computer of Felipe Magaldi, enabling continuation of the analysis offsite.

¹⁵ ITA FLLB TBRII 02 01 011. “Materiale sul Brasile (preparazione I Sessione),” docc. 9

¹⁶ ITA FLLB TBRII 02 01 019. “Brasile. Schede torturati,” cc. 618

to delineate a partial and preliminary social profile of the event.¹⁷ Although data relating to the person's name, profession and age appears in the testimonies, we had to search for complementary information (membership of the clandestine organization, circumstance of exile and destination country) in external sources, widely available in historiographical articles, in the media, on the internet or in later testimonies. We return to this point later.

Table 1 - Profile of the witnesses.

Name of witness	Profession and age	Organization	Circumstance of exile	Destination country
Carmela Pezzuti	Public worker - 50 years old	Comando de Libertação Nacional (COLINA); Vanguarda Popular Revolucionária (VPR)	Banished on 13 January 1971, along with another 70 prisoners, in exchange for the release of the Swiss ambassador Giovanni Enrico Bucher, kidnapped in September 1970.	Chile Italy France
Nancy Mangabeira Unger	Student - 25 years old	Partido Comunista Brasileiro Revolucionário (PCBR)	Ibid.	Chile France
René de Carvalho	Student - 25 years old	Partido Comunista Brasileiro Revolucionário (PCBR)	Ibid.	Chile France
Wellington Diniz	Filmmaker - 32 years old	Ação Popular (AP); Comando de Libertação Nacional (COLINA); Vanguarda Armada Revolucionária Palmares (VAR-Palmares)	Ibid.	Chile Mexico Belgium Angola
Marco Antonio Moro	Lawyer - 37 years old	Partido Comunista Brasileiro (PCB); Ação Libertadora Nacional (ALN)	Ibid.	Chile Belgium
Dulce Maia	Social worker - 35 years old	Vanguarda Popular Revolucionária (VPR)	Banished from the country in June 1970 as one of the 40 political prisoners exchanged for the German ambassador Ehrenfried von Holleben.	Algeria Cuba Chile Belgium Portugal Guinea-Bissau
Fernando Gabeira	Journalist - 33 years old	Movimento Revolucionário 8 (MR-8)	Ibid.	Algeria Cuba Chile Sweden
Rolando Frati	Trade unionist - 60 years old	Agrupamento Comunista de São Paulo Aliança Libertadora Nacional (ALN)	Banished from the country in 1969 as one of the 15 political prisoners exchanged for the American ambassador Burke Elbrick.	Mexico Italy
Tullo Vigevani	Journalist - 31 years old	Partido Operário Revolucionário Trokista (POR-T)	Left the country in 1972 via a safe-conduct mediated by the Italian Consulate in São Paulo.	Italy
Maria do Socorro Vigevani	Housewife - 27 years old	-	Ibid.	Italy

Source: the authors.

In this sample, the gender parity is clear (4 women, 6 men). In terms of generation, the average age of the witnesses was 30.5 years, with just two witnesses aged 50 or over. This confirms the presence of two

¹⁷ These are the testimonies that were given orally and signed during the event. The anonymous testimonies were read by panel members in their reports.

generations of Brazilian exiles, the more experienced group and those who joined clandestine groups as students at university, as well as a certain balance in the composition of the testimonies. All the witnesses came from the south-east region of Brazil (Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo or Minas Gerais) and were literate, even those who had no university education, closely associated with the urban middle class. This reveals the RT-II's construction of a profile that in the future would be socially recognized as the prototypical "victim" of the military dictatorship – to the detriment of those populations who, as well as being marked by their subalternity, did not always pursue a political project in explicit opposition to the regime (peasants, indigenous people, quilombola communities, the black population and so on) yet were nevertheless also directly affected by the military dictatorship (Leite Lopes et al., 2024). Hence, although the testimonies also mentioned these collectives, the voices invited to testify also reveal the limited possibilities at that time for subalterns to speak for themselves (Spivak, 1988).

What most witnesses had in common was involvement in some kind of clandestine left-wing organization, as well as banishment from Brazil after negotiations leading to the release of kidnapped ambassadors, their initial destination being Chile, Algeria or Mexico.¹⁸

The Italian republic, at the time without any official policy for taking in refugees, was the main country of destination for those who, Italian by birth or descent, possessed or would claim an Italian passport.¹⁹ These were Carmela Pezzuti and Rolando Frati (children of Italians), Tullo Vigevani (born in Italy) and Maria do Socorro Vigevani, the latter's wife. The remaining witnesses were invited from other European countries where they were living in exile as refugees and to which they returned after the RT-II: Fernando Gabeira in Sweden, Marco Antonio Moro, Wellington Diniz and Dulce Maia in Belgium, and Nancy Unger and René de Carvalho in France.

Ross's (2002) analysis of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa shows how testimony in tribunals – whether judicial or not – reflects a prior agenda and framing and further demonstrates how the testimony given responds to this agenda. As Vianna and Farias (2011) argue, testimony involves a certain presentation of the self (Goffman, 1974) since the construction of the public presentation gives legitimacy to the testimony. In the case explored here, we can observe a certain script whose main objective was to denounce the arbitrary acts committed by the Brazilian state, based on the exposure of its torture practices.

One of the first points to draw our attention when analysing the testimonies,²⁰ as already suggested in the table above, is the nebulous – rather than underground – place of the "revolution": that is, the political ideology of the Marxist left in whose name opposition to the military dictatorship was organized. At one level, it is implicit, especially when it came to banishment from the national territory. As Dulce Maia explains, she was "imprisoned because she was a revolutionary militant" and was released after a kidnapping and sent to Algeria. Carmela Pezzuti also describes the kidnapping of the German ambassador as a "revolutionary action" that led to her release along with her children. Rolando Frati, banished to Mexico following the kidnapping of the American ambassador and his exchange, asked the tribunal for a valid travel document for himself and other "Latin American revolutionaries".

At the same time, though, there is a striking absence of explicit references to clandestine organizations and the membership of the witnesses. The latter are introduced by the rapporteurs mainly by age and profession, not their militant activity. Following the presentation of the witness, a description of the causes and circumstances

18 An exception was the couple Tullo Vigevani and Maria do Socorro Vigevani, who left Brazil via a safe-conduct mediated by the Italian Consulate in São Paulo, obtained on the basis of Tullo's Italian citizenship. It is also worth emphasizing that Maria do Socorro participated in some political training activities with workers but informally, unlike her partner. Tullo, who had graduated in engineering from the São Paulo Polytechnic School, was a member of the Trotskyist Workers' Party, one of the few organizations that did not use the armed struggle as a strategy/form of opposition.

19 Brazil is the country with the largest absolute number of Italian descendants in the world – approximately 25 million. The transmission of Italian citizenship by blood – *jus sanguinis* – is a principle present since the creation of the Italian state. At a legal level, it was reaffirmed in 1912 during the period of mass migration and later in 1992 when the law currently in force was passed. It contrasts with *jus solis*, adopted in countries like Brazil and others – especially in the Americas – that grants citizenship to people born in their territory (Zanini, 2014; Beneduzi, 2019).

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of imprisonment was provided. Some testimonies simply detailed the scenes of the day of arrest without explaining or mentioning the circumstances of the incarceration. Others emphasized their work.

Wellington Diniz, for example, stated that “in reality, I was imprisoned because of my professional activity.” He explained that he was a television operator for the channel TV Itacolomi in Belo Horizonte and had made a film on student protests. In the film, he had shown a DOPS officer shooting at students. The report was broadcast and the next day he was dismissed from the television channel by its senior management and subsequently arrested. The testimony does not mention his participation – later publicly acknowledged – in armed raids on banks and barracks to supply weapons and money to clandestine organizations like the National Liberation Command (*Comando de Libertação Nacional*: COLINA), the Armed Revolutionary Vanguard-Palmares (*Vanguarda Armada Revolucionária-Palmares*: VAR-Palmares) and the Popular Revolutionary Vanguard (*Vanguarda Popular Revolucionária*: VPR).

Tullo Vigevani, for his part, described his imprisonment through an account of his family history. An Italian citizen, his parents – Jewish in origin – migrated to Brazil in 1951 when he was eight years old. He studied in Brazil and entered the São Paulo Polytechnic School in 1961. Between 1961 and 1964, he participated “in the struggles of the student movement and the Brazilian people against backward socioeconomic structures.” Without mentioning specific groups – like the Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers’ Party (*Partido Operário Revolucionário Trotskista*: POR-T) in which he was an activist, as he explained in an interview with Felipe Magaldi, almost fifty years after the event (Vigevani, 2023)²¹ – questions were asked about the consequences of these struggles in terms of reforms, better educational conditions and helping other sectors of the population.

During his testimony, Fernando Gabeira, a journalist from Minas Gerais and a militant in Revolutionary Movement 8 (*Movimento Revolucionário n. 8*: MR8) in Rio de Janeiro, was explicitly asked by the theologian Georges Casalis what he thought about the existence of violence on both sides, including the kidnapping of ambassadors by armed combatants. In his reply Gabeira justified the “ideological actions” that had led Brazilian comrades to engage in such practices. Faced with the impossibility of *habeas corpus*, a decision had to be taken: “it was a race to save their lives. It was a violence against the ambassador’s personal freedom, for sure, but a violence to save human lives.” He concludes with a reflection on “revolutionary violence”, contextualized in its specific historical conditions, as a form of “self-defence” and “transformative violence”.

In her analysis of the RT-II, Rollemberg (1999) had already highlighted the fact that “the testimonies presented before the tribunal leave it fairly unclear what type of combat had been waged in Brazil” (p. 237). The questions from the panel avoided delving into the subject of guerrilla warfare. The reference to the kidnappings appears and vanishes quickly. The reasons for imprisonment are left hazy. “What the witness and the panel members seek to emphasize is the violation of human rights” (p. 238). In her analysis, she recognizes that it would not be easy to admit participation in the armed struggle given the adverse context of the exiles who frequently lacked any kind of official documents.

In our own analysis, we have considered the tension of speaking out in public, very often for the first time, the consequences of which were unpredictable; the uncertainty of the possibility of returning to Brazil; and the worry about family members who remained in the country who might be persecuted and tortured at any moment. As Ross (2002) wondered in relation to women’s testimonies to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, what does it mean to be asked to speak or listen in a context that has only recently and very tentatively become receptive to such public affirmations of acknowledgment?

In making these observations, we do not mean that the unsaid should have been said. On the contrary, the unsaid says much about the transformation of repertoires in the scenario of exile. Returning to Das (2006), silenced words are not just an underground memory waiting to be unearthed. They may be on the surface

²¹ Interview conducted by Felipe Magaldi in São Paulo, 3 December 2022.

through gestures or in the form of a language imbued with foreign hues. This is why we prefer the idea of something nebulous to the metaphor of the underground.

It is not rare to encounter some hesitation in the testimonies. Some witnesses, although present, did not wish to speak in their own name. Such was the case of Denise Crispim, an activist imprisoned when she was pregnant and who gave birth in a military hospital. She was the companion of Eduardo Leite, nicknamed “Bacuri”, a member of the VPR and the ALN. The scene of her testimony appears in the documentary *Amerika: processo ai governi della tortura*, also consulted in the Basso Foundation’s historical archive.²² The film provides us with images unavailable in the typed testimonies. In it a panel member declares: “The floor goes to Denise Crispim. The witness feels unable to speak and prefers to have her testimony read out by someone else.” In the scene, Denise stands still, looking dazed, sometimes lost, while Ettore Biocca reads her testimony. The camera switches between filming the slight movements of her downcast face and the audience.

While the causes and circumstances of imprisonment appear nebulous in the testimonies, the same cannot be said of the descriptions of torture. Whether physical or psychological, individual or collective, these practices were described in extensive detail in the RT-II sessions in all the testimonies we analysed. The witnesses describe death threats, participation as experimental subjects in torture classes and gratuitous beatings, as well as other forms of violence. Electric shocks to the sexual organs appear in the testimonies of both men and women. The possibility of rape is mentioned briefly in the testimonies of some women, demonstrating how the violence was gendered.

The testimonies were not made without difficulties, as several witnesses acknowledge: “it’s painful to repeat what happened,” said Marco Antonio Moro when recounting how he was kicked and punched on his arrival at the DOPS/SP after arrest. “I think it’s pointless describing here the torture, other witnesses have already done so,” Wellington Diniz announced evasively at first, although he eventually provided a broad description of the collective torture. “Much has been said about the torture,” stated Rolando Frati, who added that he had never lost his lucidness or control in the face of the violence. The intermediate zone between the hero and the victim figures appears here.

Nor was it easy to read these testimonies as researchers. We frequently found it impossible to continue the research because of the emotional impact of the horrific descriptions. Gagnebin (2006) refers to the third element that constitutes the witness, someone who, extraneous to the scene of violence, is willing to listen to the account of the other’s unbearable pain, thereby rupturing the dyad of victim and torturer. The figure of the witness thus exists when, beyond the relation of violence between the victim and the tormentor who silences them, it is possible to find a place where the pain can be told and someone else is there to listen, a possibility opened, or foreclosed, by historical circumstances (Sarti, 2020). As anthropologists, we place ourselves here as this outside element, fifty years after the events.

The transcription of the testimonies, the basis of our documentary research, condenses into words and onto paper performative acts that were the product of an entire bodily grammar of affects, an outcome of dramatized emotion and prior relationships that give meaning to participation in the struggle (Vianna & Farias, 2011). The testimony given by Carmela Pezzuti, for example, refers to the repression suffered by her two sons, also activists:

My sons, along with other comrades, were subjected to ‘torture classes.’ The classroom was a kind of amphitheatre with around 70 young officers from the three armed forces and a table with all the torture instruments laid out. First the officers entered, then our comrades. They used every kind of torture: bound upside down on a pole [*pau de arara*], electric shocks, spanking, drowning, a special instrument for pulling out fingernails... The scene was so traumatic that the younger officers had to leave the room to vomit. My children were tortured for nine months. All

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this suffering, this arbitrariness to which I was victim, which I had to watch, convinced me that my sons' struggle was just. There really was a need to fight against this state of affairs in Brazil.²³

Expanding our research beyond the documents in the Basso Foundation archive, we find the book *Companheira Carmela: a história de luta de Carmela*, written by Mauricio Paiva (1996), Carmela's comrade in the struggle, in close collaboration with the protagonist, a decade after the end of the dictatorship. The narrative guides the reader through the main stages of her life chronologically. Carmela Pezzuti was a public worker from Minas Gerais, divorced, with no background in politics. She began to become interested in activism when her sons, Angelo and Murilo, took part in the student movement at the Federal University of Minas Gerais and held meetings of the clandestine COLINA group. At the suggestion of one of the group's members, she was invited by her own children to join the militant organization, contributing, if not with the direct use of arms, with intelligence and information activities, as well as economic resources (Magaldi, 2023b). In her testimony to the RT-II, she also referred to the political activity of her children as a reason for her own imprisonment. She said that she was arrested "because I am the mother of two young men who belonged, at that time, to a large revolutionary movement in Brazil against the military dictatorship." Her participation at the Russell Tribunal II is described as follows:

Carmela, standing up, began her testimony timidly. But someone noticed her discomfort and quietly brought her a chair. Once seated and after presenting herself, Carmela slowly began to tell the huge audience about her sons' ordeal and her own suffering in the prisons of Brazil's military dictatorship. As she proceeded with her account, she observed many of the people seated in the first rows of chairs wiping away tears. She went into detail in describing the horrors committed in the Brazilian prisons. And she concluded her remarks by turning her thoughts to comrades who, in Brazil and Chile, were still suffering similar horrific treatment in the prisons, calling for effective action to be taken in solidarity with them and, in particular, with her comrade Inês Etienne, whom she described as one of the most tragic cases of torture in our country. Her testimony caused such a strong impression that, in presenting a program on the tribunal on Dutch TV, the reporter remarked that Mrs Pezzuti is the most striking example of humility, courage and combativeness that he (the presenter) had seen at the Russell Tribunal. (Paiva, 1996, p. 173)

In our research at the National Archives, we also found records of the central role played by the expression of suffering (and the emotional reaction of the public) in the testimonies. On this point, our attention was drawn to a document from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs containing news articles from the Italian press. It includes the transcript of a report published in the newspaper *Il Giorno* on 26 April 1974.²⁴ The text highlights the fact that while the first Russell Tribunal, held to investigate the crimes committed in the Vietnam War, received a lot of criticism, the second tribunal was subject to even more criticism due to an alleged excessive sentimentality in the testimonies. The report concedes, however, that the protest in the form of a court of opinion could serve some purpose in international politics: it allowed those fighting against dictatorships in Latin America to feel less alone. We can speculate that the state monitors were interested in the report precisely because of its critical content, which could be used in their own country, Brazil, in the event of any positive repercussions in the national press:

It will be said that it is an intellectual game, a theatre rehearsal, a utopia, naive complacency, pointless sentimentalism, that the words will not even be able to inflict a scratch on the decisions of the states, the coldest of cold monsters, as de Gaulle called them. The fact that the trial is taking place in Rome, the most sceptical city of a sceptical nation, makes matters worse still (...). There remains the fact that, as experience shows, protest has some use in the era of international politics (...)

²³ ITA FLLB TBRII 03 01 02 004. Brasile, docc. 32

²⁴ BR DFANBSB Z4.DHU.o.1.

The descriptions of torture – the *sentimentalism* in which they were steeped, to quote from the newspaper – did not imply the simple identification of the witnesses with victimhood, if we understand this condition in its passive sense, eluding the subject’s responsibility. All the testimonies contain a reflection on torture that centres on the relationship between the body and politics. The denunciation of the systematic nature of the torture involved, as something that exists not just to obtain information but also to spread terror in a generalized way, is another striking feature of the testimonies. Fernando Gabeira provides an overview of torture practices in Brazil, mentioning the torture schools in the military barracks. Carmela Pezzuti recognizes that “torture is an instrument of the system itself to remain in power.” For Rolando Frati, “torture is a system that maintains a fascist military dictatorship.”

René de Carvalho was the son of Renée and Apolônio de Carvalho, the latter an internationalist communist activist who fought in Brazil, in the Spanish Civil War and in the French Resistance. Alongside his father and brother, René was a member of the revolutionary Brazilian Communist Party (*Partido Comunista Brasileiro*: PCBR), set up by dissidents from the PCB during the military dictatorship. His testimony sums up the relationship between body and power to which we refer:

We were not simply victims of irrationality. In reality, every process is programmed. Mass torture may well imply paranoid aspects, but we don’t believe this to be its main characteristic: we were victims, in truth, of an organized system and torture represents one of its most evident, most prominent, points of sensitivity, characterizing a view of a system that has its own well-defined rationality.²⁵

Final remarks

The testimonies of the Russell Tribunal II were situated at a complex intersection between revolutionary ideologies – an integral part of the political education of the witnesses – and humanitarian ideologies – which were then starting to be adopted and circulated as the language available for listening. On one hand, the RT-II witnesses did not speak directly about “human rights”, although this repertoire was an explicit part of the organization of the event itself. On the other, although there were references to revolution, the armed organizations themselves were seldom named, though their actions were always justified as a necessary response to repression.

What emerges as a mediating element between these different languages is the public expression of suffering. This reveals a transformation in the viewpoint of those who took part in the militancy, a commitment involving their bodies, affects and words. This process exposed the limits to the idea of a purely individual aspect of suffering and the presumption of its incommunicable or unspeakable – both of which are shown to be forms of silencing its political dimension.

In the RT-II testimonies, we can observe how pain and politics mutually constitute each other, a process in which the very notion of an *innocent victim* – to return to the opening epigraph of Gabeira – was questioned through the recognition of the connection, present in the testimonies themselves, between violence and power. In this sense, we agree with Felman (2003) when she argues that the testimonial repetition of suffering does not just repeat the victim’s history, it is also capable of recreating it.

On the other hand, we can point to the limitations of testimony when we think about the selection of those who are invited to speak and those who are not. Asad (2003) showed how the repudiation of torture has been manifested, through the language of human rights, as part of a modern project to eliminate pain in modern liberal societies. Rather than eliminating suffering, however, this project has helped generate vicious

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dynamics that oscillate between secrecy and the public exposure of torture. In this process, certain types of violence become more tolerable than others, depending on the bodies and nation states involved. In the case of the RT-II witnesses, most of them were white and linked to the urban middle class, recognized as the target not of any ordinary violence but of a *political* violence.

Following amnesty in 1979, the majority of those living in exile returned to Brazil, rebuilding their lives as democratic politicians, educators, environmentalists and human rights activists. Events like the Russell Tribunal II allow us to understand how the practice of testimony became a way to denounce the different forms of violence perpetrated by the dictatorship, emerging as a prominent method of confrontation from the 1970s onwards.

Even before the development of public policies on memory and truth, the literary and audiovisual arts were already exploring the idea of testimony as a form of denunciation and an expression of pain. In the transition to democracy, reports compiled by civil society, such as *Brasil: Nunca Mais* (Arquidiocese de São Paulo, 1985), recorded accounts of torture and named the victims. Social movements like the Torture Never Again Group (*Grupo Tortura Nunca Mais*) provided clinical-legal teams to assist those affected and helped publicize their experiences. Testimony was strongly present in the work of the National Truth Commission (*Comissão Nacional da Verdade*, 2012-2014), as well as the aforementioned projects of the Amnesty Commission, which organized hearings in which the voices of those affected were invited and heard – and thus elaborated.

The RT-II and its testimonies of exile is part of this repertoire. Examining testimony for its presence and power – and not just its excesses (Sarlo, 2005) or its absences in terms of criminal justice (Seligmann-Silva, 2010) – can offer a line of flight for the melancholic leitmotif of academic research and contemporary activism on memory, truth, justice and reparation.

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Felipe Magaldi

Graduate Program in Social Sciences, Federal University of São Paulo, São Paulo/SP, Brazil.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1905-5365>

femagaldi@gmail.com

Cynthia Sarti

Graduate Program in Social Sciences, Federal University of São Paulo, São Paulo/SP, Brazil.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6962-3527>

csarti@uol.com.br

Editors

Andrea de Souza Lobo (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7525-1953>)

Antonio Carlos de Souza Lima (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5260-236X>)