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Introduction

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, big demonstrations against the US war in Vietnam were a major route by which tens of thousands of young people came into revolutionary socialist politics.

It was not just that the demonstrations were big; or that the corruption and authoritarianism of the various tinpot dictators of South Vietnam, propped up entirely by US power, were disgusting; or that millions of young people in the USA hated being conscripted to fight in Vietnam; or that the brutality of the US war, epitomised by a US general's comment that he "had to destroy a city to save it", was horrifying.

All those things were true. But the demonstrators also felt that they were identifying with proof that courageous struggle by poor people, with small resources, could defeat the huge power of the world plutocracy.

A popular slogan on the demonstrations coupled applause for North Vietnamese dictator Ho Chi Minh with a celebration of militancy: "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh/ We shall fight and we shall win".

Although the dominant force in the Vietnamese struggle against the USA was the Vietnamese Communist Party, the demonstrations in the West were led by Trotskyists or Maoists. The Western CPs preferred tame pleading for "Peace in Vietnam". The anti-war movement encouraged many young people to dismiss and despise the CPs. Young people identifying with the Vietnamese struggle mostly considered themselves anti-Stalinist.

The war had started in 1960, as the US came to the aid of the shaky South Vietnamese regime set up after an agreement in 1954, at the end of a war led by the Vietnamese Communist Party against French imperialism, to divide the country between a CP-ruled North and a US-protected South.

Demonstrations started in 1965, when the USA started bombing North Vietnam and sending sizeable numbers of ground troops to the South. There would eventually be 500,000 US troops there.

In 1973 a peace deal was signed, calling for the withdrawal of US forces. After an uneasy lull, the Vietnamese CP forces swept through the South in 1975 and took power.

Only weeks before that, the Cambodian CP had taken power in neighbouring Cambodia, despite five years of heavy US bombing aimed at propping up a rickety pro-US regime there. (US commanders promised to bomb the country "into the Stone Age").

And then... Within four years the CP regime in Cambodia had killed about two million people, by forced evacuations from the cities, starvation and forced labour, and political mass murder.

The bloodshed was stemmed only by an invasion of Cambodia in 1979 by the Vietnamese government, which introduced a more "normal" Stalinist regime into Cambodia.

From Vietnam itself something over a million fled as "boat people", preferring to risk their lives in rickety boats on the ocean than to stay under the police state established after the CP victory.

Something like one million people had been jailed in Vietnam without formal charge or trials, and maybe over 150,000 people had died in "re-education camps".

Then in 1986 the Vietnamese CP government abandoned its "socialist" pretences and switched to a policy oriented to the capitalist world market and to drawing in foreign investment, while maintaining its Stalinist regime.

There is no way of exactly measuring the impact of these horrors on the left in the West which had been brought into politics through demonstrations over Vietnam. But after 1975 many thousands of would-be revolutionary activists scattered, lapsed into inactivity or moved to the right politically. The brutal exposure of the naivety and credulity of most of the left organisations cannot but have been a big factor in that.

The American author Susan Sontag's comment in 1982 sums it up: "Imagine, if you will, someone who read only the Reader's Digest [a notoriously crude, right-wing, 'Cold War' magazine] between 1950 and 1970, and someone in the same period who read only The Nation or the New Statesman [leftish news-magazines]. Which reader would have been better informed about the realities of Communism? The answer, I think, should give us pause".

Enthusiasm for the courage of the Vietnamese CP had been pretty much universal on the left. The Mandelita current called the Vietnamese CP "empirical revolutionaries". The SWP-UK, then called IS, theoretically held that North Vietnam was state-capitalist, but in practice was only slightly less enthusiastic than the Mandelites. The "state-capitalist" label meant only something like: "What can be achieved by struggle in Vietnam is good, but, because Vietnam is small and poor, limited. Proper socialism can be achieved only in richer countries".

Some "orthodox Trotskyists" said that the Vietnamese CP was Stalinist. This description, however, mostly meant not a denunciation of the regime which existed in North Vietnam and would exist in the South if the CP won as totalitarian and anti-worker, but rather a "theoretical" (and sectarian-pedantic-sounding) insistence that the Vietnamese CP could not be trusted to fight the Americans adequately and might compromise.

Could a hearing have been won for a stance of opposing the US war but simultaneously denouncing Vietnamese Stalinism as a regime of brutal oppression of the people by a small ruling group, and supporting Vietnamese workers and peasants against both the US and Stalinism?

Yes. After the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which even the British and Italian CPs condemned, and twelve years after Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956, awareness of the hideous nature of Stalinist rule was fairly widespread. The facts about the regime in North Vietnam were not difficult to find.

But nobody did it. We - the forerunners of AWL, then Workers' Fight - didn't do it.

Despite our sharp hostility to Stalinism in Russia and Eastern Europe, our mistaken "inherited" theoretical formula that the Stalinist states were "degenerated and deformed workers' states" misled us into thinking that revolutionary Stalinists fighting US imperialism - as the Vietnamese were clearly doing - must be achieving some sort of social progress.

And we allowed ourselves to be morally intimidated by the feeling that we owed solidarity to "revolutionary nationalists" fighting the allies of our own government, and must limit criticisms and warnings so that they did not complicate that solidarity too much.

Unlike others, we pointed out repeatedly that North Vietnam lacked any democracy, and that any socialist programme in Vietnam would find a resolute enemy, not a friend, in the CP. But we never drew adequate conclusions from that.

When we insisted that the Vietnamese CP was Stalinist, as we did, too often our exposition was blurred by the question-begging arguments about how fully revolutionary the Vietnamese CP was against the Americans. It was in fact very effectively revolutionary against the Americans; the point is that it was simultaneously counter-revolutionary against the working class.

Learning the lessons of the left's mistakes then is an important part of building an adequate left now.

Here is some of what we wrote at the time. The texts will indicate that we were more critical at the time than other would-be Trotskyists; the notes above show how thoroughly inadequate and timid our self-distancing from the general left "consensus" about Vietnam was.

The war is won

Workers' Fight 95, 3 May 1975

As the 'great crusade' to save Vietnam for imperialism ground to final defeat on April 30th, the USA was fittingly occupied with a squalid wrangle about whether they really wanted to have to accommodate the crooked bureaucrats and the police torturers who have been their instruments for the last twenty years.

Henry Kissinger, in his exasperated and despondent comments on the victory of the National Liberation Front, paid tribute to the tremendous international impact of the struggles in Indochina and the efforts of the solidarity movement.

All but explicitly he confirmed that Nixon had given Thieu a promise of renewed US intervention if the NLF seemed to be gaining; that new bombing raids had been considered; and that US domestic politics had ruled them out.

In the last eight weeks the state of South Vietnam — puffed up by the US with billions of dollars and the third largest air force in the world — has caved in faster than anyone thought likely, like a massive boil collapsing as the pus pours out. They had the money and the hardware, all right. But what they didn't have and couldn't buy was men and women with a determined will to fight.

Six out of seven of their C-130 transport planes stood out of order; \$175 million of their 1975 ammunition allocation remained unspent, as those who were fighting just to prop up

corruption, torture and exploitation simply stopped fighting. The computers had done their sums right — but it still added up to resounding defeat.

The rulers of the USA, the 'masters of war', stood by helpless, paralysed by the deep conflicts within their society for which the struggle of the Vietnamese has acted as catalyst.

The people of Vietnam fought to kick out US imperialism, to get the landlords and the corrupt bureaucrats off their backs, to reunify their country — they fought and they won. Instead of meeting suspicion and hatred wherever they went, they got help and support. Instead of wasting resources on tiger cage jails and 'strategic hamlet' concentration camps, they brought about land reform and augmented their resources by education and health services. Where imperialism could do nothing but destroy, they reconstructed, using even their enemies' own weapons — making clothing out of captured parachutes, boats from bomb casings. The junkies and prostitutes of 'of Saigon must have wondered about the 'freedom' they were losing, as they watched the liberation army driving in — men and women, living as equals.

The new regime in South Vietnam will not be a revolutionary workers' democracy. Far from it. Any forces in South Vietnam fighting for such a programme will find the regime an enemy rather than an ally.

Certainly such measures as a ban on publications other than the regime's (reported by the Cuban news agency) and a prohibition against "gathering information" (reported in the Morning Star) are not those of revolutionary socialism.

It was Che Guevara, fighting to extend the Cuban revolution through Latin America, who wrote "Create two, three, many Vietnams". The Moscow bureaucrats, however, terrified by victorious revolutionary struggle, set their aim as 'no more Vietnams'; with a sigh of relief they exclaim: "A most dangerous seat of international tension and military conflict has been liquidated". (Morning Star, 2.5.75) But on the contrary.

If the Vietnamese revolution cannot be a model for us, it can be an inspiration. And that inspiration will lead to a great deal more 'tension' and 'conflict' in the class struggle throughout the world, a period ten times more uncomfortable for the capitalists and bureaucrats. To us it falls to take the opportunities.

That much, at least, we owe to the unquenchable Vietnamese.

Vietnam: which class will hold power now?

Workers' Fight 94, 28 April 1975

Every major revolutionary victory in modern history has had world wide effects. In the 25 years following the outbreak of the great French Revolution in 1789, there were radical changes right across Continental Europe, and the English working class raised its head as a factor in political life for the first time.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was followed by working class revolutionary struggles, right across Europe, with the rule of workers' councils briefly established in Bavaria and in Hungary, and by a whole series of colonial revolts. The Cuban

revolution of 1959-61 changed the political face of Latin America.

The struggle in Indochina has already had such world-wide effects. For ten years now it has been a central issue in world politics. Through the movements that grew up in solidarity with it, it has greatly accelerated the growth of the revolutionary left, especially in western Europe, and it has dealt serious blows to the social stability of the capitalist order in the USA.

The present defeats for the greatest imperialist war effort ever cannot fail to inspire fresh struggles throughout the capitalist world. But inspiration is not enough: theoretical clarity, an analysis which draws out lessons, a critical assessment, are also necessary. The Cuban revolution encouraged thousands of people in Latin America to take up the revolutionary struggle; but a false and superficial set of conclusions drawn from the Cuban revolution (particularly by Regis Debray), glorifying isolated rural guerrilla warfare, led many of them to defeat and death.

In last week's WORKERS FIGHT, we described how the military strategy of the US had grotesquely distorted the society of Vietnam. The Vietnamese bourgeoisie, never very solidly rooted in production, has become simply that class which received the lavish outflowings of the US treasury. Separated from its political power and its connection with the state machine, its social roots amount to very little.

The peasantry of Vietnam is far removed from being a conservative class of petty proprietors, each one earnestly attached to his little plot of land. His little plot of land has been scorched by bombs from American B-52s, and the peasant himself has been driven into a 'strategic hamlet', into a refugee camp, or into swelling the armies of unemployed in the cities.

The working class of Vietnam, beginning to develop in the 1920s, was neither very large nor very well defined before the start of the 30 years of war. In 1955, figures estimated the number of industrial workers in South Vietnam at 50,000. The number has grown slightly since, as a certain proportion of the US aid has percolated through to industrial development; and the number of people who, at one point or other during the course of a year, are industrial workers is probably considerably larger than the number in jobs at any particular time.

Nevertheless, the working class is not large, and it shades off into a vast army of non-productive state employees (about one and a half million) and an equally vast army of unemployed.

Whatever the complexities of the struggles to come, a few points are clear already.

FIRSTLY, that the victory of the liberation forces will bring — and has brought in the areas where it has already triumphed — immense advances for the people of Indochina. The social priorities of the US-supported regimes, even before the degradation and corruption and savagery of the past ten years, were summed up in the sort of figures cited in Bernard Fall's book "The Two Vietnams": between 1957 and 1960, the South Vietnamese regime built 47,000 square metres of cinemas and dance halls, as against 6,500 metres of hospitals; 56,000 square metres of churches and pagodas, as against 3,500 square metres of rice mills; 425,000 metres of high-rent

dwelling — and 86,000 square metres of schools. In Laos in 1971, in the areas under government control, there was a literacy rate of 20%, and just 17 doctors.

Since the escalation of the war, the influence of the most advanced capitalist civilisation in Vietnam has produced an uprooted population and a devastated countryside.

The USA has sent in millions upon millions of dollars to shore up its puppet regimes. But rather than going to buy the "hearts and minds" of the population, an estimated 40% simply disappeared into the capacious bank accounts of those in power. Over the last two years, average real income per head has dropped by 45% in South Vietnam.

In the areas of south Vietnam under stable NLF control, however, every village has a primary school and a doctor.

The peasants have been relieved of the most crippling burdens imposed on them by the landlords and by the state.

North Vietnam has almost 100% literacy; every sizeable provincial centre has a hospital; no-one starves.

The SECOND point is, however, that though the victories of the liberation forces do promise real improvements for the workers as well as the peasants of Indochina, those forces cannot be considered as working-class political forces.

There have been some reports — not filled in with circumstantial detail — of popular uprisings accompanying the recent victories of the NLF, but it is quite clear that the orientation of the NLF is not towards the self-mobilisation of the working class as an independent class, leading the peasantry - but towards military-bureaucratic methods.

Some revolutionaries have suggested that the Vietnamese Communist Party, which leads the NLF, has made a decisive break from Stalinism, and must be considered as an effective revolutionary socialist party, even though confused and hindered by Stalinist hangovers. There is nothing unthinkable in principle in the idea of a Communist Party making a decisive shift from Stalinism to the left. It is certainly a fact that the Vietnamese Communist Party has quite a different outlook from the British or the French Communist parties, for example. Instead of finding a cosy niche for itself in the established system, it has a record of continued heroic struggle.

But the simple fact of militant struggle, important though it is, does not outweigh the rest of the VCP's record. Before 1930 the group round Ho Chi Minh followed a policy of attempting to build up influence gradually in a nationalist movement - in line with Stalinist policy of the time. Adapting to the Stalinist "third period" policy, they turned from that not only to forming an independent Communist Party, but to ultra-left adventures which were bloodily repressed, like the "peasant soviets" of 1932.

From 1936 the Communist Party followed the Popular Front policy and dropped the demand even for national independence. During the war, while opposing Vichy French imperialism, it allied with the Americans and with the Gaullist French. From 1943 to 1947 it again dropped its demand for national independence; in 1945/46, the VCP welcomed British troops in, tried to get an agreement with the French, and murdered Trotskyists and nationalists who fought against this policy. Only from 1952 did the VCP resume a policy of radical land reform.

In north Vietnam, capitalism and imperialism have been eliminated, and serious improvements secured for the people of the country. As a workers' state, it is bureaucratically deformed, with no workers' democracy, or, indeed, any sort of democracy except the most paternalistic. A brief 'hundred flowers' period in 1956 was met by swift repression.

When struggle began again in the south in 1958, the north was very slow to give aid. Their methods of negotiation have always been those of secret diplomacy. Even now, they support monarchist coalition regimes in Laos and Cambodia, and advocate coalition in South Vietnam. (The PRG is in fact itself a coalition government, though the bourgeois representatives in it are more a token of the VCP's willingness to make concessions to capitalist elements than a real social force).

None of this is cause for denying the importance of the victories of the Khmer Rouge and the NLF, or for failing to welcome those victories. It is, however, cause for a critical approach. The programme of the active democracy of workers' councils still remains to be fought for in Indochina — and the Communist Parties will fight not for, but against, that programme. Workers' democracy is not just some ideal, inessential finishing touch — it is vital for any concept of socialism beyond a miserable bureaucratic-reformist level.

Those, like the International Marxist Group (Red Weekly) who present the NLF and the Khmer Rouge as revolutionary proletarian forces (with perhaps various political weaknesses and confusions) are gravely abusing the elementary programme of workers' power. To say that one should not disdain to recognise a revolution because it doesn't fit the 'norms' is one thing; to chop those 'norms' down to miserable proportions for the sake of fitting the accomplished fact, is another.

The effect is that concepts simply lose all precise meaning. The NLF or the Khmer Rouge can be characterised as proletarian, working class forces neither on the reality of their politics, nor on the reality of their social base, but only through the most metaphysical constructions.

Curiously, it is not only in the IMG's paper, but also in IS's Socialist Worker that we find a quite uncritical assessment of the revolutionary victories in Indochina. Given that IS has the theory that countries like North Vietnam, or the Soviet Union, are "state capitalist", one would expect razor-sharp criticism of the aspirant 'state capitalist classes' of South Vietnam and Cambodia. Not a word of it! The term 'state capitalism' does not even appear in IS's reportage on Indochina.

To spell out a 'state capitalist' analysis would present some thorny theoretical problems. Should they logically, for example, understand the fundamental nature of the struggle in Indochina to be a clash between Russian "state capitalist" "imperialism" on one hand, and American imperialism on the other? That would mean socialists could not on principle support either side. (This was their position during the Korean war.) But in fact the real reasons for IS's approach are probably not those theoretical problems, which they could with ingenuity evade.

In the first place, IS simply doesn't care very much. The week of the victory in Cambodia, they gave it just eight obscure column inches on page 2. In fact they have a mechanistic fatalism about the struggle in the 'third world', which flows

logically from IS's 'state capitalist' theory — "well, it's as good as you can expect for Vietnam". Nor do they appreciate the impact of the revolutionary struggles in Indochina in the advanced capitalist countries.

But there is a second, cruder reason for IS to keep its theory to itself: a blunt description of North Vietnam as state capitalist would probably shock many of IS's newer members who, uneducated in IS's theory, hold to the dominant left wing view that it is some sort of socialist state. Rather than come out sharply and honestly with its arguments, IS prefers to drift with the tide — especially when there's a chance of doing a slick public relations job for "revolution".

But the task of Marxists is not to do a public relations job for revolutions elsewhere, but to think critically and to fight for solidarity. We do not give the PRG or the GRUNK our political confidence in any sense.

Nevertheless we support them unconditionally in their fight to free their countries from American imperialism and its client regimes. We should demand that the Labour Government recognises the PRG and the GRUNK and provides immediate aid without strings to assist in the reconstruction of their war-devastated countries.

"Trotskyism in Vietnam"

International Communist magazine, no.7, March 1978
[abridged here].

The following interview was obtained in Paris during the summer of 1977. In it the comrades of the Vietnamese Bolshevik-Leninist Group describe their politics and activity.

The VBLG is a direct successor of the Vietnamese Trotskyist groups which exerted considerable influence in the 1940s until they were almost annihilated physically by the Stalinists.

I-CL: Do you still have comrades in Vietnam?

VBLG: Yes, there are some comrades in Vietnam but communication is very difficult. The Vietnamese Communist Party knows that these comrades are Trotskyists but we don't know whether they have taken any measures against them or not.

At the time of the Paris Accords the Saigon comrades sent us a document in which they expressed a line close to that of the SWP [SWP-USA, then a Trotskyist group which argued that the Vietnamese Communist Party was Stalinist]. We wrote a reply.

I-CL: What is your other activity and perspectives?

VBLG: We have 15 to 20 comrades in France, mostly in Paris. We publish a review in Vietnamese, "The Observer", monthly. We have some relations with the LCR and the USFI and we try when we can to get contact with other Trotskyist organisations.

We translate key documents of Trotskyism into Vietnamese and try to get them into Vietnam and we do work in the Vietnamese community in France. But we are very isolated.

I-CL: You say that you find Pierre Rousset's analysis of the VCP opportunist and the SWP's analysis too mechanical. What is your analysis?

VBLG: There are two problems: the struggle for national independence and the struggle for socialism. The VCP is a party of Stalinist origin, and its methods of organisation are very Stalinist. But they have engaged a mass struggle against imperialism and acquired a certain degree of political independence from Russia and China. Thus they have been able to solve the problem of national independence. But not the problem of socialism, which requires the leading role of the working class.

The VCP uses the apparatus of the party to mobilise the masses on nationalist slogans.

Johnson [of the SWP-USA] said in discussion with us that the VCP could not even win national independence, but we contest that. Today the VCP talks of socialism — but they don't talk about the independent role of the working class. It is a similar development to China and Yugoslavia. The difference between us and Rousset is that we say that Stalinist parties can go further than anticipated, even to a break with the bourgeoisie (as Trotsky mentioned the possibility), but we deny that they can build socialism. The Vietnamese state is evolving towards a structure similar to Eastern Europe.

Up to 1954 the VCP followed a strictly Stalinist line, in our opinion. After the 20th Congress, the VCP sought a midway position between the USSR and China — acting in a nationalist sense, not a revolutionary sense. They still hold to 'socialism in one country'. We disagree with Rousset because he only sees the objective side of the matter, in which the VCP has played an internationalist role through the international impact of the struggle in Vietnam.

Subjectively the VCP have never been internationalists.

I-CL: What is your analysis of the process by which Vietnam became a deformed workers' state? You compared it to China: how do you situate yourselves in relation to the various Trotskyist analyses of China?

VBLG: China is a deformed workers' state. But unlike the Eastern European states it was created through mass armed struggle. The Communist Party of China has abandoned many traditional Stalinist concepts and thus conquered power, but they still remain Stalinist in their exercise of power. They are not Stalinist in that they did not subordinate themselves directly to the USSR.

After 1954 the VCP shifted from traditional Stalinist positions above all under the pressure of imperialism, fearing to lose their contact with the masses. They mobilise the masses, even including the working class — within bureaucratic limits, and not permitting the autonomy of the working class. Comrades who have been in Vietnam tell us that the VCP is now trying to base itself on the poorest elements in the villages — all within the limits of bureaucratic control. There is discontent among the petty bourgeoisie in Saigon who have found their privileges curtailed, who find for example that students from poor backgrounds have preference for entry to university over students from more prosperous backgrounds. This shows that Lutte Ouvriere is wrong. The VCP is not controlled by the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie.

The VCP's policy can work for a time. But problems will come up, for example over reunification. The Eurocommunism debate will have an impact in the VCP. There will be a crisis in the party sooner or later, but we can't

say when. There have always been two distinct tendencies in the party, in the South and in the North.

But we affirm — as against Rousset — that the VCP cannot transform itself. A political revolution is necessary.

A bureaucracy existed even during the war, though its privileges in absolute terms were slight. It will solidify with economic reconstruction. Rousset does not really recognise the existence of this bureaucracy as we have defined above.

I-CL: What appreciation did you have of the Cultural Revolution?

VBLG: It is difficult to get a clear picture. But it appears that it was an affair controlled from above, with bureaucratic methods. In a certain sense Mao was fighting against bureaucracy, but then Stalin also waged campaigns against bureaucracy from time to time.

I-CL: What is your analysis of Cambodia?

VBLG: It is difficult to get information. But it appears to be another case of the tragic results of the policy of 'socialism in one country'. They are trying to build a sort of agrarian socialism.

I-CL: What do you think is the class nature of Cambodia?

VBLG: We don't know because we cannot get information on that.

I-CL: Do any independent working class organisations still exist in South Vietnam? Are there any signs of independent working class activity (strikes etc.) there or in North Vietnam?

VBLG: Everything is under the control of the VCP. We know of no strikes. The population has a lot of confidence in the VCP, although there is some petty bourgeois opposition. The VCP puts out a lot of nationalist propaganda.

I-CL: What do you see as the tasks for Trotskyists in Vietnam?

VBLG: A revolutionary party is needed, but it does not exist. An ideological and political struggle is needed. But we have to recognise that we are starting from nothing. The VCP does not fear bourgeois or petty bourgeois parties, but it does fear those to its left.

"Stalinism in Vietnam"

Permanent Revolution magazine, no.2, May 1974

Review of 'Le Parti Communiste Vietnamien', by Pierre Rousset.

THE BASIC conclusion of this book is that the Vietnamese Communist Party [1] "belongs to that generation of Communist Parties that, before and after the Second World War, broke in practice with the international politics of the Soviet bureaucracy. In Greece, in Yugoslavia, in Vietnam... Of all these parties, the VCP is the one which has been furthest in the rediscovery of the principles of Marxism". (p. 98, Rousset's emphasis). The VCP's reorientation is seen as dating from about 1939.

For revolutionaries who have been active in support for the Vietnamese struggle, and who have drawn inspiration from its

heroism, Rousset's conclusion is attractive [2]. We shall argue, however, that it is not correct.

Rousset's method is fundamentally this: he gives a largely accurate account of the history of the struggle, and of the statements of the VCP leadership. Every militant action or statement that helps to prove his conclusion is played up and taken absolutely at face value; every rightist action is played down as an "ambiguity", an "opportunist lapse", a "moment of distortion", etc.

Let us take as an example the events of 1945-46. In March 1942 the Japanese seized Vietnam from the French. The VCP-led Vietminh developed guerrilla warfare against the Japanese. After the surrender of the Japanese in August 1945 they took power without much trouble.

They then welcomed British forces into Vietnam. The British declared Martial Law, rearmed the bulk of the 5.000 French troops who had been under Japanese internment, and, using the assistance of Japanese troops, restored a French colonial regime in Saigon.

"During the war", as Rousset points out (p. 43), "the Vietminh had often contacted the Gaullists and the American forces" [3].

The VCP now went to the point of dissolving itself in order to "destroy any misunderstanding, domestic or external, which might hinder the liberation of our country" (p.43). "In power, the Vietnamese government, with Ho Chi Minh as President, entered a long process of negotiations with France. The stated objective became: independence inside the French Union. On 6 March 1946, a preliminary agreement pending further negotiations was signed. The French government recognised the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a 'free state'. But the word 'independence' is not mentioned... and point 2 specifies that 'the government of Vietnam declares itself ready to welcome the French Army amicably..' (p.43-44). An agreement signed in September 1946 largely restated the March agreement, but in late 1946 war broke out, and continued until the Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Meanwhile the VCP had been set up anew in 1951.

The Vietminh's agreements with the French aroused considerable popular opposition. The Vietminh, in response, did not hesitate to murder several Trotskyists.

How does Rousset analyse these events? He quotes a Vietminh circular of August 1944: "Our impending uprising will be carried out in highly favourable conditions, without parallel in the history of our country. The occasion being propitious and the factors favourable, it would be unforgivable not to take advantage of them. It would be a crime against the history of our country" (p.40).

He calls this text "truly prophetic". Yet he maintains that the VCP did not subordinate its politics to alliances with French and American imperialism (pp.38, 43). He states that "In power 'by surprise' without having the political and military means to guarantee their survival, they (the VCP) are going to be led to seek compromises to gain time"(p.42). After quoting a speech by Giap after the March 1946 agreement, he comments "this speech... is convincing, at least as regards the need for the Vietminh to gain time. It does not, however, justify the opportunist lapses in the policy of the VCP at that time (abandonment of the radical land reform, dissolution of

the CP, assassination of the Trotskyists, extreme 'flexibility' of the negotiators with France)".

If the conditions of 1945-46 were "highly favourable", and we believe they were, surely it was imperialism that "gained time" more by the accords [4]. If the VCP were "truly prophetic", their power was surely not "by surprise"? Giap's speech was intended precisely to justify the "opportunist lapses" of the VCP, and if it is "convincing" it should convince us that those lapses were not lapses but correct tactics.

On the murders of the Trotskyists, Rousset writes that they "illustrate at least two things; the width of the political gulf then separating the Trotskyist groups from the VCP, the first probably underestimating the importance of the national question in the revolutionary mobilisation of the masses, the second profoundly underestimating the social question in the colonial revolution, including its early stages; and the existence, certainly reinforced in this period, of authentically Stalinist currents in the VCP, at least in their methods, if not in their political thought" (p.44-45).

The reference to the Trotskyists "underestimating the importance of the national question" is not backed up by any extended argument at all. It is sheer nonsense. At that very time the VCP were negotiating for peace within the French Union. In a statement of aims in July 1945, they proposed: "Independence shall be granted to this country in a minimum of five years and a maximum of ten". The murder of Ta Thu Thau, at least, was provoked by his outspoken opposition to allowing the British to take control in 1945. Was he "underestimating the national question"? And as Rousset himself makes clear, the assassinations were the responsibility of the whole VCP leadership, not just "currents".

Rousset's approach to the question of permanent revolution is similarly woolly.

He justifies his claim that "the Vietnamese leadership as a whole has assimilated the decisive implications of the permanent revolution for the colonial and semi-colonial countries" by long quotations from Vietnamese sources, summing up as follows: "the themes of 'skipping the stage of capitalist development', 'worker-peasant alliance', 'leadership of the party in the revolution, first factor of victory', are common to all the writings of the principal leaders of the VCP" (p. 98). But it is scarcely possible today for even the most right-wing Stalinists to flatly deny the possibility of socialist revolution in backward countries. They make verbal concessions to experiences like the Chinese and Cuban revolutions — without on that account abandoning their basic class-collaborationist policy. This can be seen in almost any Stalinist text, not only those of the Vietnamese. Let us take an example at random. Charles Bettelheim, a prominent French Stalinist, writes in his book "La construction du socialisme en Chine": "the Chinese revolution.. passed without interruption, that is, in the framework of a single process, from the stage of the new-democratic revolution to the stage of the socialist revolution" (p. 14).

"The leading role of the party which constitutes the vanguard of the working class and which, applying the lessons of Marxism-Leninism, realises the class alliances necessary for the seizure of power. The fundamental alliance, in a country where the peasantry predominates, is evidently that of the working class and the peasantry itself" (p.16).

Are we to believe that Bettelheim has assimilated the theory of permanent revolution? In fact, even the Chinese combined talk of 'uninterrupted' revolution based on the experience of their own revolution with the classical Stalinist stages theory in the 1960s. They talked of 'uninterrupted revolution', but nevertheless, where they had influence, as with the mass Indonesian Communist Party before the massacre of 1965, used it in favour of the type of Stalinist "stages of revolution" policy that had led to the defeat of Chinese Communism in 1927. Rousset in fact quotes Vietnamese texts with quite clear "stages" formulations. But he explains this as merely "Stalino-Maoist terminology"! His argument appears to be that the VCP has shown in action that it understands permanent revolution, but is using the terminology of national unity and class-collaboration as 'soft soap' to extend its popular base (see p.106-7).

Similarly Ernest Mandel has argued that "A 'policy' is not a set of words on paper, but a line one follows in action. The bloc of four classes meant the subordination of the C.P. to the Kuomintang. the subordination of the workers to the bourgeois army (which hastened to disarm and kill the workers), the refusal to touch the property of the landlords, urban capitalists and rich peasants in the countryside, for fear of upsetting the (bourgeois) army" (International Vol 1 no.2, p.24).

"Because for us the Yugoslav, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean revolutions are distorted socialist revolutions (i.e. led by bureaucratically distorted working class parties) we prefer not to call the parties which led these revolutions 'Stalinist' parties" (ibid. p.25) [5]

Since the VCP fights heroically, it cannot be Stalinist (see Rousset p. 136) [6]. But this is as if one were to declare that all men have two legs, and then, on meeting a man with one leg, to refuse to recognise him as a man.

Partial or episodic going beyond its programme is not unknown for an opportunist party, particularly in a situation like Vietnam with virtually the whole nation transformed into a mass of dispossessed people. Reformism means subservience to bourgeois law, and confining working-class political action to elections. In July 1972 Labour leaders such as Wedgwood Benn applauded working class action against bourgeois law. In March 1920, the leader of the German TUC, Karl Legien, who had been a fierce opponent of the general strike in the Second International debates on the question, called a general strike against a right-wing putsch. (Meanwhile the German CP, under ultra-left influence, initially opposed the strike).

Were Legien, or Benn, no longer reformists? Petty bourgeois nationalism means illusions in, and subservience to, 'neo colonial' solutions. The Irish Republican Army fought fiercely against the 'neocolonial' solution accepted by the Free Staters in the early 1920s. Both wings of the IRA today have more advanced programmes and vastly more proletarian composition than the VCP, but Rousset and Mandel would surely agree that the IRA, despite its heroic struggle, is nevertheless a petty bourgeois nationalist tendency.

The overall record of the VCP in action does show the marks of Stalinism. Its attitude in 1945-46, described above; its excessive concessions in 1954, while hailing the Geneva agreement as a great victory; its bureaucratic practices in North Vietnam; its neglect of work in the towns; the failure of

North Vietnam to come to the aid of resistance in the South until 1960, and the scantiness of their aid until 1965; its support for Sihanouk in Cambodia; its practice of secret diplomacy; its description of the 1972 truce as a great victory; and its support for the coalition in Laos.

Rousset's argument, then, is characterised by extreme woolliness and lack of critical sharpness. It is a product — an extreme product — of the decomposition and blunting of Marxist concepts in the period since the post World War 2 crisis of Trotskyism developed.

NOTES (1) For convenience I use the name Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) throughout although in fact the party has had different names. (Today it is the Vietnamese Workers Party in the north. and the Popular Revolutionary Party in the south).

(2) The book reflects the line of the majority tendency of the Fourth International. The International Marxist Group. in Vol 1 No 8 of their magazine International, endorse Rousset's conclusions and promise to discuss the history of the VCP in a future issue of International.

(3) "As the American national anthem rang out that day (26 August 1945), Vo Nguyen Giap was observed saluting the Stars and Stripes with a clenched fist". Jean Lacouture, 'Ho Chi Minh', p.100

(4) I do not claim that victory would be certain if the VCP had fought in 1945-46. Victory is never certain. But surely it is better to fight even against the odds than to sacrifice principle. Ernest Mandel recognised this elsewhere: "Was Trotsky's struggle in the '20s then only a 'pose' for history's sake. in order to 'save the programme'? Let it be said in passing that even from that point of view it would have been completely justified". (New Left Review 47, p.45)

(5) Mandel does not seem to agree entirely with Rousset, however. On p.22 he characterises the VCP as "a far cry from revolutionary Marxism."

(6) It is ironic that at the same time as the IMG derive the non-stalinism of the VCP from its militancy, they are lecturing the British left on the theme that militancy in and of itself is no proof of revolutionary qualities. going so far as to say: "The most extreme and advanced methods of struggle have been undertaken by confused or even reactionary groups of workers and in particular 'mass mobilisations' are frequently used by reformists to divert the struggle. No. the essential point lies in how revolutionaries justify their struggle or, put in other terms, how partial parts of a programme relate to the whole programme."

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