

Vietnam: Stalinism versus revolutionary socialism

By Richard Stephenson

'... As regards the Trotskyists: no alliances, no concessions are possible. We must do our utmost to unmask them as agents of the fascists. They must be annihilated on the political level ...'

Ho Chi Minh, Report to the Comintern, July 1939

THIS ARTICLE is an attempt to show how the present policy of peasant guerrilla warfare/ 'national-democratic' struggle replaced the internationalist proletarian fight in Vietnam. Such an exposé cannot be made unless we trace, step by step, the development of the two major tendencies, Trotskyist and Stalinist, as they ran side by side until the conflict between them was resolved in a singularly bloody and treacherous manner in the years of 1945 and 1946.

In order to set the scene, we must briefly describe the political and economic situation of Vietnam. Over this period it was plundered and ruled by French imperialism, which propped up feudal and reactionary forms to keep the country in a perpetual state of backwardness and underdevelopment. The feeble national bourgeoisie, threatened on its right by imperialism and on its left by a highly class-conscious and combative working class, showed that at all crucial turning points it was ready to throw in its lot with French colonial rule to preserve its class forms. Over 90 per cent of the population were peasants – not able to set up their own class rule, but a powerful driving force behind a movement capable of assuring them of their ownership of the land they tilled. Thus the question of working class power was already posed – the Vietnamese 'national bourgeoisie' being far too weak to carry through the national bourgeois revolt against colonialism, realising that they needed the French administration to safeguard their property against the working class and poor peasantry. The question of Vietnamese national independence was thus inextricably bound up with the progress of the workers' revolt against capitalism.

This perspective, which was that of the Russian Revolution of 1917, was being abandoned by the Communist International at the time when the Vietnamese Communist Party was in the process of formation. Instead, a theory of 'stages' for the underdeveloped countries was being rationalised: that firstly there must be a bourgeois/democratic revolution, in which the working class must subordinate its own struggle to that of the 'national bourgeoisie', and then – some time in the indeterminate future – there must be a workers' socialist revolution as a second stage. The purely utopian nature of this perspective was proved in the blood of thousands of workers, when in China the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang of Chiang Kai-shek, after using the pressure of the workers for a time, turned on them on behalf of imperialism and murdered them in large numbers in the years of 1927 et seq.

It was at this very period in the life of the international communist movement that the leadership of the future Indochinese Communist Party was formed and educated. The first step was the formation, by Ho Chi Minh, of the Revolutionary Annamite Youth (Thanh Nien) in June 1925 in Canton. In agreement with the 'stages' theory of revolution, this was not conceived of as a workers', or communist, party, but as a 'nationalist party with socialist tendencies'. But at the first conference of Thanh Nien in Hong Kong on May Day 1929, two of the delegates from Tonkin (the northern province around Hanoi) and one from Annam (the central, coastal province) demanded that Thanh Nien reconstitute itself as a real communist party. When the leadership refused, they left, taking with them a majority of the Tonkin organisation and part of that of Annam, and set up the first Indochinese Communist Party. A delegate was sent to Cochin China (the southern province around Saigon), and the party made rapid progress.

A good indication of the character of Thanh Nien was included in a statement put out by the dissidents describing it as '... a nationalist grouping with socialist tendencies, a grouping of charlatans calling for the national revolution and the world revolution, which never directed its efforts towards the proletarian masses, which never joined the Third International, the only body of the world revolution, but on the contrary

FIRST published as a *Chartist* pamphlet in 1972, this article was among the first in the English language to truthfully outline the struggle between Stalinism and Trotskyism in Vietnam. Today, as outposts of 'class struggle Stalinism' attempt to regroup around a pro-Cuban or pro-Vietnamese axis, it remains a valuable and concise corrective to many on the left who have portrayed Ho Chi Minh's Vietnamese Communist Party as a non-Stalinist revolutionary movement. It should be supplemented by more recent accounts, including *Stalinism and Trotskyism in Vietnam* (Spartacist League, 1976) and *Vietnam and Trotskyism* (Communist League of Australia, 1987), as well as by Anh Van and Jacqueline Roussel's *National Movements and Class Struggle in Vietnam* (WRP, 1987) and *Revolutionary History*, Vol.3, No.2, Autumn 1990, 'Vietnam: Workers' Revolution and National Independence'.

asked for the admission of its members to the Third Congress of the Chinese Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang), i.e., a reactionary and anti-proletarian party'.

Under the pressure of the new dissident party, Thanh Nien was forced to change its name to the Annamite Communist Party. As a third group broke away from a right-wing nationalist party and formed itself into the Revolutionary Party of New Annam, there were thus three different communist parties in Vietnam by 1930.



Ta Thu Thau

At this point Ho Chi Minh took a hand. In March 1930, he called a conference in Hong Kong, reuniting all the factions which came out of the original Thanh Nien, a step that was followed in October by the foundation of the Indochinese Communist Party, which affiliated to the Third (Communist) International, and soon gained wide support.

Repression from the French administration was severe, but the new party even weathered the arrest of the whole of its Central Committee in June 1931. The policy of Thanh Nien, which had appealed merely to sentiments of Annamite solidarity, and had made no division between bourgeois and proletariat in the 'national revolution', the 'first stage', was turned round through 180 degrees by the new party. This was the time when the official Communist International had laid aside its policy of open collaboration with the capitalist class, and had begun its lunatic sectarian 'Third Period' binge. This consisted in the West of commencing 'proletarian' insurrections without the support of the majority of the working class, attacking social democrats as 'social fascists', and in the East of founding peasant 'soviets' without any working class support and not even based on the whole of the peasantry. Oblivious to what was, after all, a common interest that the 'national bourgeoisie' had with imperialism, the communists denounced this class for treachery to the cause of national independence, and in Vietnam launched peasant soviets at Ha Tinh and Nghe An, where the land was divided up and the landowners were expropriated. This was of course put down in blood by the French administration and

a real reign of terror spread over all the country involving millions.

It was in this period that the Marxist movement was born in Vietnam. Opposition groups of a more or less 'left' character had taken shape in 1931: the Left Opposition (Ta Doi Lap), the October Left Opposition (Ta Doi Lap Thang Muoi), and Indochinese Communism (Dong Duong Cong San). But in the first months of 1932, Ta Thu Thau founded, in Cochin China, the first Trotskyist fraction. This remarkable man, an ex-leader of the Canton Commune, had come to a Trotskyist position whilst working with the Ligue Communiste Internationaliste in France, until he was expelled from the country.

The repression fell on the newly-founded Trotskyist organisation as well as everyone else; on August 9, 1932, practically the whole group was rounded up, and brought to trial and condemned on May Day 1933. This was at a time when the whole movement was at a fearfully low ebb, having been almost obliterated by the fury of French reaction.

However, when two of the Trotskyists were set at (provisional) liberty in January 1933, and made contact with some free Stalinists and other 'non-party' persons, a new revival opened up. The south, Cochin China, became the key point of the national and working class struggle, and there were opportunities for legal activity not accorded elsewhere. Because of the relatively large European population in and around Saigon, a certain freedom was given by the authorities to propaganda appearing in French, though of course most of the population was cut off from reading it.

The Trotskyists and Stalinists founded a legal United Front movement, called *La Lutte* (Struggle), which had as its aim the affirmation of the independent historical interest of the working class and the oppressed peasantry, and bringing home the reality of the class struggle to as wide layers of the population as was possible. In May 1933, a list was put up for election to the municipal council of Saigon, totally independent of the bourgeoisie, consisting of two intellectual workers, two trading employees, and four manual workers. On the first ballot the workers' list (so lao dong) won an overwhelming majority, and this whipped up a campaign of furious bourgeois hostility and intimidation, which did not, however, prevent two of the list (Nguyen Van Tao and Tran Van Thach) from being returned on the second round also. The United Front newspaper, *La Lutte*, could not appear in Annamite, but this did not prevent the propaganda having a terrific effect. Campaigns were carried on against torture in the police stations, the penal servitude regime, the brutalities in the concentration camps, and the ferocious repression of the workers and peasantry. Meanwhile, on the municipal council the front's delegates used their position to stand out in the debate in defence of the exploited, over questions of amnesty, municipal franchise, unemployment – and they denounced the capitalist system in crushing terms. Yet whilst the Trotskyists and Stalinists thus appeared in a 'United Front' on the legal plane, they carried on their illegal activity separately.

Another organisation developed illegally which also supported the Trotskyist position. From 1931 to 1936 it edited a clandestine paper called *Thang Muoi* (October), and then a legal weekly paper called *Le Militant* in 1937, which was banned by the authorities almost straight away. In 1938, *Thang Muoi* appeared again as a semi-legal paper and in 1939, a legal paper, *Tia Sang* (Spark), came out, which went daily.

Whilst these groups were developing in Cochin China, the 'Third Period' lunatic sectarian policy of the Communist International now gave way to that of the 'Popular Front' class-collaborationist line. In this phase the communist parties dropped the attempt to fight for social



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revolution, and joined with the social democracy and so-called 'democratic' bourgeois parties in a supposed alliance against fascism. In reality this meant binding the workers' organisations to the bourgeois democratic parties, thus watering down their class politics to fall in line with a section of the capitalists that had no real intention of fighting the fascists to the death.

The lesson came home in Vietnam in the clearest possible way, since a Popular Front government actually came to power in France, supported by the Communist Party. In Vietnamese terms, a Popular Front meant dropping the prosecution of the class struggle and reconciling the working class and peasantry with the colonial administration. Since the Stalinists had control of the paper *La Lutte*, they began a campaign of support to the French Popular Front and agitation for their own. They tried to present the appointment of a Socialist to the French Ministry of the Colonies as a step forward for Vietnam. They tried to join with all the bourgeois nationalist elements in Vietnam that they had denounced as corrupt and prevaricating in the years 1933-34.

The Trotskyists in the United Front patiently carried on criticism of this line, demonstrating with the aid of events the correctness of their position. They pointed out that the Stalinist Popular Front policy in Vietnamese terms meant support for the French government and its colonialist regime. Divergencies between Trotskyist and Stalinist widened in the front when the Trotskyists launched the slogan of Action Committees, which spread from Saigon all over Cochin China. Hundreds of these were formed as instruments of class struggle, where the workers put forward their wage demands and discussed their tasks. The Stalinists were forced into an impossible position when the governor brutally suppressed the committees.

As a result of this work the Trotskyists took control of the paper *La Lutte* in 1937, when Ta Thu Thau announced his return to the editorial board in an article entitled 'Popular Front of Betrayal', which immediately gained him a two-year jail sentence. Never has the profound political difference between Popular Front and United Front strategy been more clearly set before the whole working class than in those years. The Stalinists were unable to reply politically, but did so by slander, accusing the Trotskyist militants of being agents of colonialism, at a time when this same colonialism was throwing them into prisons and concentration camps in large numbers. Yet no-one dared slander Ta Thu Thau, who was too well known and respected among the workers and peasants to be given the classic Moscow treatment.

Workers News
SUPPLEMENT

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The Trotskyists, rapidly gaining strength for their principled class stand, left to the Stalinists the responsibility for splitting the United Front of *La Lutte*, as all the time the Stalinists were being forced to take part in the movement of strikes, wage demands, reduction of working hours and winning of the right of trade union recognition. By its position, *La Lutte* gained mass support, and three more delegates were put up and elected to the Saigon municipal council – Ta Thu Thau, Nguyen Van Tao and Duong Bach Mai.

On June 14, 1937, the last meeting took place between the Trotskyists and Stalinists in the United Front. Ta Thu Thau, after a long discussion, put forward a resolution on the Popular Front which put the Stalinists on the spot, and they refused to vote. The Trotskyists were thus able to show how the Stalinists had broken the United Front in order to lean on the exploiters and imperialists. The Trotskyist membership rose to 5,000, and their influence in the working class rocketed. In 1937, the French employers had been forced to negotiate with the workers' rank-and-file organisations, led by the Trotskyists. Their trade union influence grew; thus in 1938 their candidate for the taxi drivers' union won with a crushing majority.

La Lutte continued to appear, and in 1939 an Annamite version also appeared, called *Tranh Dau*.

The struggle between the two tendencies in the workers' movement led to a crushing defeat for the Stalinists, who were blindly following the policies of the French Communist Party. Thus 'national defence' of France of course meant continuation of colonial exploitation in Vietnam. When the question of voting for the imposition of taxes for 'national defence' came up on the Saigon municipal council, the Stalinists voted for them along with the reactionaries, with the Trotskyists in opposition. This won for the Trotskyists the jubilant support of all the oppressed masses in Cochinchina. On April 30, 1939, Ta Thu Thau and Tran Van Thach were elected to the [colonial] council with an 80 per cent vote, whilst the Stalinists and the governmental parties shared the rest, even though the election took place on a restricted suffrage and many workers could not vote. The Stalinist party split wide open and much of its working class base joined the parties of the Fourth International.

Trotsky was watching the whole progress of events from Coyoacan. Holding up this example for the workers of the colonial world, he wrote:

'In a number of colonial and semi-colonial countries sections of the Fourth International already exist and are making successful progress. First place among them is unquestionably held by our section in French Indochina, which is conducting an irreconcilable struggle against French imperialism and "People's Front" mystifications. "The Stalinist leaders," it is stated in the newspaper of the Saigon workers, *La Lutte (The Struggle)*, of April 7, 1939, "have taken yet another step on the road of betrayal. Throwing off their masks as revolutionists, they have become champions of imperialism and openly speak out against emancipation of the oppressed colonial peoples." Owing to their bold revolutionary politics, the Saigon proletarians, members of the Fourth International, scored a brilliant victory over the bloc of the ruling party and the Stalinists at the elections to the colonial council held in April of this year.'

(India Faced with Imperialist War, July 25, 1939, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1939-40*, pp.33-34.)

In September 1939, a massive repression began due to the outbreak of war. Ta Thu Thau was tried in Saigon and sentenced to imprisonment; he escaped to Singapore, where he was caught by the British authorities and handed back to the French. They put him once more in the terrible concentration camp of Poulo Condor, where he was savagely tortured, so that when he was freed at the end of the Japanese occupation he was half paralysed. Tran Van Thach was also put in Poulo Condor.

In August 1940, Japan began its occupation of Indochina, still under the nominal control of the Vichy administration. The national and workers' struggle continued under conditions of savage repression, and in May 1941 the Vietminh was formed by the two communist parties (Trotskyist and Stalinist), two nationalist parties (petty-bourgeois and the left wing of the 'liberal bourgeoisie'), with the adherence of women's, peasants', workers', soldiers' and youth organisations. Its programme was one of democratic freedoms, and nominally it opposed agrarian reform for the peasantry. However, as its programme included confiscation of the property of Japanese, French and Indochinese 'fascists', and church property, this was in effect an agrarian programme, since all the possessing classes had lined up with the invaders. Typically, during the period 1941-42, Ho Chi Minh spent much of his time on translation work, in particular producing an Indochinese version of Stalin's notorious 'Short Course' *History of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks)*, with its vile slanders against the Left Opposition and wilful distortion of the

histories of Lenin and Trotsky. He was jailed shortly after by the Chinese.

The war drew to its close. On March 9, 1945, the Japanese finally eliminated the nominal French administration and established their own in full, but by August 10, 1945, they had been forced to surrender.

Vietnam was now at the height of a revolutionary ferment. On August 19, 1945, the Saigon workers founded 'People's Committees' to replace the collapsed administration. On August 21, the right-wing groups in their 'United National Front' organised a demonstration demanding independence in order to head off the movement. The Trotskyists of the International Communist League joined in the march with banners demanding 'Land to the peasants, Nationalisation of industry under workers' control'. Several tens of thousands of workers joined in behind their banners, and at the end of the day a provisional Central Committee was set up for the People's Committees, with a workers' guard for the Saigon-Cholon area under the leadership of Nguyen Hai Au.

Realising the implications of this, the Stalinists in the Vietminh forced the United National Front to fuse with them on August 23, and two days later they set up a government by coup with the right-wing nationalists. At five in the morning all the government positions were taken over without the population realising it. 'The Vietminh came to power with all the leading classes of society behind it and with the whole bourgeois state apparatus,' commented a leading Vietnamese Trotskyist.

The first utterances of the new Vietminh nationalist regime were ominous. 'Those who incite the peasants to take over the estates will be severely and mercilessly punished,' said Nguyen Van Tao, Minister of the Interior, on August 27, and on September 1 the government issued a declaration aimed at the Trotskyists: 'Those who incite the people to take up arms will be considered as saboteurs and provocateurs, enemies of national independence. Our democratic liberties will be guaranteed by the democratic allies.'

In the first week of September 1945, attacks were made on demonstrations and in reaction People's Committees spread all over Vietnam, in particular in the south around Saigon. They declared themselves the only revolutionary power, and federated on a national level. In reply, the Vietminh ordered the dissolution of all armed groups except its own 'Republican Guard'.

The Trotskyists of the International Communist League argued for a measure of critical support to the Vietminh government, and those of the *Tia Sang* distributed leaflets calling for the formation of workers' defence committees, arming the people and the creation of a popular assembly. Prominent amongst the militias was that of the workers of the Go Vap tramway depot, about 8 kilometres from Saigon. It was 60-strong and backed up by another 400 workers, who had earlier forced trades union recognition from the Japanese during the war. Though affiliated to the Southern CGT under Stalinist influence, they pointedly refused to fly the new nationalist flag of the Vietminh and instead chose to fly the red flag of international socialism over their depot! The militias appealed to the workers of Saigon-Cholon to arm themselves ready for the inevitable clash with British and French imperialism.

On September 12, the People's Committees and the ICL denounced the Vietminh for its policy of disarming the masses and its fake appeals for 'calm' in the face of the French reoccupation.

The response of the Stalinists was swift. On September 14 at four-thirty in the evening, the police chief, Duong Bach Mai, sent an armed detachment to surround the centre of the People's Committees, whose assembly was in full session. They disarmed those present, sacked the building, tore down the red flags and burnt all the papers. The leaders of the various committees were seized and then imprisoned on the orders of Ho Chi Minh.

Meanwhile, French imperialism was preparing to reoccupy Vietnam, for which purpose it needed the help of the British army and even rearm Japanese prisoners of war. The Stalinists, though ready to smash the workers' militias, quaked in front of the French. On September 16, they announced their readiness to negotiate with De Gaulle on the basis of the reincorporation of Indochina into the 'French Union'.

General Gracey, the British commander, proclaimed martial law. On the night of September 22-23, French and British troops took over all the strategic positions in Saigon without any resistance from the Vietminh. After yet another appeal for calm, Ho Chi Minh's cohorts disappeared into the countryside.

Although they had been disarmed and demoralised by the Vietminh, the workers of Saigon responded with an immediate insurrection. The working class living areas and suburbs were quickly taken over by the revolutionaries, who also besieged the imperialist troops con-



General Leclerc (right), commander of the French troops assigned to reoccupy Vietnam, is greeted by British army officers including General Gracey (centre right) as he arrives at Tan Son Nhut airfield, Saigon, on October 5, 1945

trolling the centre. There were guerrilla attacks on the port, and warehouses were set on fire. Trees were cut down, cars and lorries were turned over, and barricades erected. On the 24th, the revolutionary groups led a march up the Boulevard de la Somme and burned down the market place.

The Vietminh quickly recommenced negotiations with the French, to head off the workers' revolutionary movement. On October 1, they negotiated a truce with General Gracey, but this only gave the French time to bring up more troops. On the 5th, General Leclerc landed with reinforcements. The Vietnamese Communist Party went even further in its subservience and capitulation, dissolving itself in November 1945 into its 'National Front'.

Meanwhile, the working class movement, and with it its Trotskyist leadership, was being physically destroyed by the imperialists. The tramway depot militia led by Nguyen Hai Au (a Trotskyist from the north, where he had written a social novel) cut its way out to the Plaine des Jones, where 20 of the detachment, and its leader, were killed in battle with the French on January 13, 1946. Three others were murdered by the Vietminh.

The Stalinist leaders now took this opportunity to fulfil Ho Chi Minh's promise to Stalin in July 1939, i.e., to liquidate the Trotskyists. Whilst the *La Lutte* group were holding a meeting to co-ordinate the armed struggle against the French on the Gia Dinh front, they were surrounded by the Vietminh in a temple in the Thu Duc area. They were arrested, interned at Ben Suc (province of Thu Dau Mot), and all shot. Amongst them perished Tran Van Thach, who had only been released from Poulo Condor concentration camp some weeks before. Ta Thu Thau had gone off to Tonkin to organise assistance for the famine-stricken areas, and was arrested in central Annam on his return, allegedly on the orders of Tran Van Giau, an old graduate of Stalin's school in Moscow. He was put on 'trial' before 'Popular Committees', and

thrice declared innocent. In order to avoid a further debacle he was shot a few days later.

A few months after (July 1946), Ho Chi Minh was in France busy embracing over-decorated French generals. Tearing himself away for a minute at a garden party in the 'Bagatelle rose-garden', he passed brief comment on 'Ta Thu Thau's unfortunate demise. 'He was a great patriot and we mourn him,' he said, but added significantly, 'All those who do not follow the line which I have laid down will be broken.'

After settling with the leadership of the working class movement, whilst leaving the French to smash the rank and file, the Vietminh negotiated yet another agreement with the occupying forces on March 6, 1946. This recognised the independence of Vietnam under the French Union, but the French only used it as a cover to bring up yet more reinforcements. General Leclerc landed with 13,000 troops in the north with no resistance from the Vietminh. Admiral D'Argenlieu occupied Cochinchina, and whilst Ho Chi Minh was in France negotiating a settlement (May-September) the French were busy occupying the highlands. Although an armistice was concluded on September 14, a month later (November 23, 1946) it was broken by the cruiser *Suffren* opening fire on the port of Haiphong, where 6,000 lost their lives. On December 19 and 20 the French commenced disarming the Vietminh militia, which to preserve itself retreated into the jungle and began guerrilla warfare. Its programme – as outlined in that of the present 'National Liberation Front' and the 'Provisional Revolutionary Government' – remains in great part bourgeois nationalist, even though the Vietnamese bourgeoisie hardly exists.

Thus perished the leadership of the Vietnamese Fourth Internationalists. But the day is not too far hence when the Vietnamese workers, having driven out the US imperialists, will settle accounts with the Vietnamese Stalinists, for between them and revolutionary socialism stands a river of blood and a mountain of betrayals.