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Anti-imperialism

May 1968 and the Vietnam War

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Looking at the picture that Vietnam presents in 2008 (rule of the bureaucracy, unrestrained corruption and worship of the dollar) it is difficult to imagine that 40 years earlier, the eyes of the young generation and of revolutionaries were turned towards this small country which was conducting an exemplary struggle against the American colossus. How could the intrepidity, the spirit of initiative and the proclamations of socialist faith which characterized the Vietnamese combatants lead to such a pitiful result?

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/rudidutschkekrivine-2.jpg>] Vietnam demo February '68 Berlin.

Admittedly, Vietnam won the war and its combat, incredibly difficult, played a crucial role in the flowering of the explosions of protest which took place in the world at the end of the 1960s. Contrary to the forecasts of Marxists (even Trotskyists), capitalism did not do too badly in the years after the Second World War, and thanks in particular to the arms race caused by the Cold War, it managed to transform technology, increase the productivity of labour, considerably improve the average standard of living in the developed countries, while unemployment remained very limited.

However the system of educating young people did not evolve correspondingly, and the dominant values remained those of the bourgeois society of the pre-war period. Student youth became rebellious. In the absence of big class struggles in the imperialist countries, it was the upsurge of the colonial revolution which inspired it, convinced it that Marxist ideas should not be rejected and that the USSR no longer had much to do with socialism.

After the victory of the Cuban Revolution on its doorstep, the United States pulled out all the stops to stop the contagion and to dam the rising revolutionary wave everywhere in the world, and in particular around China. During the 1960s there was a whole series of coups d'etat, more or less fomented by the CIA, (Indonesia, Congo, Brazil, Dominican Republic), and after the defeat of France in Indo-China, the Americans hastened to take the place it had left vacant in South Vietnam and to finance (and therefore control) the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem. By its terrorist and dictatorial methods this regime provoked the rise of a popular resistance which the local Communists organised through a National Liberation Front (NLF), established in 1960. In spite of the billions of US dollars that were liberally granted to him, Diem was so incapable and discredited that his American protectors organized his assassination on November 1, 1963. His replacements were no more fortunate in their war against the NLF, now largely supported by the North. Faced with the risk of a complete collapse of their ally and a takeover of the South by the Communists, President Johnson decided to intervene militarily.

Following a provocation at sea (the "Gulf of Tonkin incident"), in August 1964, the 7th US fleet started to bombard the North-Vietnamese coast. Then swarms of B-52s (the biggest bombers of that time) left their bases in South Vietnam to bomb the North, getting closer and closer to Hanoi. At the same time tens of thousands of US infantrymen arrived in the South. Their numbers were to increase to half a million.

The American war was truly criminal and proves once again that you can have a relatively democratic regime on the domestic level and behave in an inhuman and terrorist way with respect to people considered as "inferiors": massacres, napalm, anti-personnel fragmentation bombs, defoliants, were very widely used, while the majority of the buildings in the North were razed to the ground (except for those in Hanoi).

In the face of this, the way in which the Vietnamese people, strictly organised by the Communist Party (whose official name was Party of the Workers of Vietnam), were able to resist the escalating aggression and finally make it inoperative, gave an amazing example which inspired not only other national liberation movements but also sectors of youth and of the workers' movement in the developed countries.

Here I want to recount some personal memories. In November 1966 there was held the first meeting of the International Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal, otherwise known as the Russell Tribunal, from the name of the famous English philosopher, Bertrand Russell, who agreed to sponsor it. Its goal was "to establish without fear or favour of anyone the whole truth about this war". Twenty-six witnesses from various countries were sent to Vietnam. As a surgeon, I was able to stay from February 17 to March 23, 1967 in North Vietnam. Then, with my colleague Dr. Marcel-Francis Kahn and the film maker Roger Pic, from 16 to 30 September, 1967 in the liberated zones of the South, not far from Tay Ninh. As I was still a member of French Communist Party (PCF), (although I was already a Trotskyist...) and as the PCF was judged very severely by the Vietnamese Communists because of its half-hearted support for their struggle (and for only paying lip-service to support for the Russell Tribunal), the Vietnamese who were in charge gave me an unhoped-for chance: to take me down below the 17th parallel (the line of demarcation between North and South). From this enthralling expedition I drew two dominant impressions.

First of all, the brutality of the US bombardments knew no limits. After having left the capital, I was able to see that until we reached the 17th parallel, not a single building had been spared by the United States Air Force. In particular, I was able to investigate the use of fragmentation bombs and napalm, as well as the bombardments of hospitals. I was taken to all the provincial hospitals and to several district hospitals. They were all marked with big Red Crosses and were generally located outside the towns. All of them had been bombarded on several occasions and razed to the ground and I brought back tiling from an operating theatre that was covered with puddles of napalm. The same applied to schools and houses. In the South we questioned many witnesses who told us in detail about the shelling, bombardments and defoliations carried out by the Americans and their protégés.

But at the same time we were able to witness the formidable élan of the population to resist and drive out the invader. I was able to observe admiringly how life was organized underground in the most bombarded zones of the North: the schoolchildren studied in the trenches, their heads covered with straw hats thickly woven to protect them from the fragmentation bombs; the decentralized hospitals functioned in basements and the underground operating rooms were lit up with bicycle headlights; the stores and the meeting rooms were underground. We circulated at night in the command car and, just like all the lorries using the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" to reach the South, the only light we had was one small bulb fixed under the engine.

On each side of the road there were white sticks every ten metres, and the lamp made it possible to see that we remained between the sticks, therefore on the road. There were teams who took care that this road remained usable. A popular mobilization was essential to lead to such a result. The more so as it was also necessary to check at regular intervals the lanterns which were also placed along the road. When the banana leaf which covered them was replaced by a red leaf, that meant that there were planes overhead (which we could not hear because of the noise of the car engine) and that we had to stop and extinguish the small bulb under the engine. It was often the young girls of the villages who looked after these lanterns. In every domain the entire population was mobilized in this way, and in spite of their overwhelming technical superiority, the Americans had met their match.

A journalist from Le Monde who had first of all been on an American aircraft carrier said me one day at this period: "When they sent me afterwards to North Vietnam, I went there with the idea that they had had it. You cannot imagine the arsenal of technical means and sophisticated apparatuses that are at the disposal of the American army. But after staying here for some time, I changed my opinion. It is the entire population that fights, that is organised and motivated. Against that, the Americans will be powerless".

May 1968 in France was sparked off by the Vietnam War. On March 18, 1968, a hundred militants had attacked the Parisian office of American Express in the Opera district (breaking the windows, burning the American flag). The police arrested Xavier Langlade, the person in charge of the defence guard of the JCR (Revolutionary Communist Youth), who was a student at the Nanterre campus. Arrests of high-school students took place in the following days. Nanterre erupted. The students demanded their release and occupied the high-rise building which dominates the campus.

The arrested students were released, but the agitation was no longer to be stopped and it spread from Nanterre to the Latin Quarter. It should be mentioned that previously there had already been many anti-war demonstrations in Belgium, in Germany, in Japan and especially in the USA, where the losses of the American army gave future conscripts no desire to fight. In France several movements organised by what were then called the "grouplets" developed actions that were sometimes spectacular, with the slogan "The NLF will win!" which contrasted with the timid "Peace in Vietnam!" of the PCF, lost in the meanderings of peaceful coexistence. The Trotskyists took an active part in the National Vietnam Committee (CVN), in the movement "A Billion for Vietnam", in the Franco-Vietnamese Medical Association. The Maoists organised the Rank-and-File Vietnam Committees (CVB). Everyone contributed to making people aware that the generalized and organized fight of a whole people can drive back an adversary a hundred times better armed. In 1975 Saigon fell to the People's Army and then Vietnam was reunified. What followed turned out to give decidedly less cause for enthusiasm.

In the years of the fight against the war, the slogan: "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh! Che, Che, Guevara!" was taken up and chanted during all the demonstrations, to the great displeasure of the Vietnamese Trotskyists who were, certainly, present in all the campaigning committees but, knowing how the Vietnamese Communist Party (PCV) had systematically exterminated the Trotskyists in 1945, wanted a more critical support.

And, in fact, we saw that after having victoriously concluded its exemplary struggle, the PCV very quickly set itself to building a society in every way comparable to those of its counterparts of "really existing socialism", with its single party, its bureaucrats at every level, its "special" stores and hospitals, its hundreds of thousands of political prisoners "to be re-educated", its omnipresent political police. The NLF and the Alliance of Democratic Forces, which had insisted for years on their willingness to open out to the "third force" [Vietnamese who were neither for the Americans nor the Communists] and their desire to establish a multi-party democratic regime, found themselves put on the sidelines. Practically all the key positions were occupied by "Northerners" or by people who only owed their power to the confidence that they inspired in the "deciders" from the North and not to the local population.

Disappointment resulted in the exodus of the "boat people" but it also affected many "friends of Vietnam" who had entertained many illusions during the war. To understand the extent of their bitterness it is enough to refer to the Memoirs of Laurent Schwartz [1] who was one of the principal organizers of the CVN and of the Russell Tribunal and who had the opportunity in 1968 to meet Ho Chi Minh, Pham Van Dong and to give a lecture to the trade-union and political cadres of Hanoi: "The Vietnamese officials knew very well that I had been a Trotskyist, they put that aside; as for me, I was not unaware that they were Stalinists and didn't have too many illusions about the political regime which would be established after the war; all the same, I hoped for something better than what happened".

How should we interpret such a fiasco?

The explanation is not simple and gave place, at the time, to sharp controversies in the Fourth International. The majority considered that the PCV was, certainly, of Stalinist formation and therefore had strong tendencies towards bureaucratization, but it remained resolutely optimistic because of the exemplary combat which the PCV was leading. For the majority, what we were faced with was a partially empirical revolutionary leadership, capable of evolving under the influence of the mobilization of a politicized population, as the broad democracy at the base, in contradiction with the vertical centralism, testified . [2] This point of view was opposed, for a whole period, by a minority (primarily in the United States) for whom the PCV was just a nationalist party with a peasant base, equipped with a petty-bourgeois Stalinist programme of revolution by stages (first of all the bourgeois revolution...).

Only the pressure of the masses had forced it to go beyond the limits that it had set. The Vietnamese Trotskyist Group in France saw things differently again, and, a posteriori, its point of view appears as the most lucid. Admittedly, the PCV had been formed in the Stalinist mould of the Third International, like its Chinese counterpart, but like the latter, it always knew how to manoeuvre to defend its national interests without upsetting its superiors too much. It

was erroneous to present it as a petty-bourgeois party pressured into action by the masses in revolt. This pressure existed neither in 1941, when a few dozen hunted militants took the daring decision to begin the armed struggle and created the Viet Minh, nor in the 1960s when the North was devastated by bombing and the South strangled by the US army, the police and the mercenaries of the puppet regime. The PCV knew how to be a fighting leadership, linked to the masses, fiercely determined to win power and to keep it. But to do what? As the Mexican Zapatistas of Chiapas have pointed out, the leaders of a victorious armed struggle are not the most fitted to build a democratic civil society in times of peace. All the more so since the Stalinist gangrene was already corroding North Vietnam at the height of its exemplary struggle.

How can I describe my bitterness when I learned in 1991, on reading Georges Boudarel's book [3] that in the middle of the escalation of the war, in 1967, while I was in the midst of this heroic population, the leadership of the PCV threw in prison, without any trial, between one and two hundred old militants, at the time of the "Hoang Minh Chinh affair", accused of Khrushchevite "anti-party revisionism".

Chinh spent 16 years of various internments without any decision by a court and was under house arrest until his death in February 2008. He has still not been rehabilitated. It was subsequently learned that Ho Chi Minh's own secretary (from 1945 to 1954) was part of the same batch, without the honest Uncle lifting his little finger to save him . [4]

So what we were dealing with was a bureaucratized workers' party, certainly of Stalinist formation, but differing from the standard Stalinist parties (such as the PCF) in the sense that it placed its own interests before those of the USSR. It could brilliantly lead a war of national liberation (like its Soviet counterpart during the Second World War) but proved itself incapable of breaking from the Stalino-Maoist mould to build a new society in times of peace.

At present Vietnam is following in an overall sense the evolution of China and the cult of the dollar has replaced that of Stalin, but political power is still firmly in the hands of the cadres of the PCV.

It is fortunate that in May 1968 even those who were most pessimistic had not imagined such a trajectory...

[1] 1. Laurent Schwartz, Un mathématicien aux prises avec le siècle, Editions Odile Jacob, Paris 1997.

[2] 2. Pierre Rousset, Le Parti communiste vietnamien, François Maspero, Paris, 1973 (second edition, Paris1975).

[3] 3. Georges Boudarel, Cent fleurs écloses dans la nuit du Vietnam (communisme et dissidence - 1954-1956), Editions Jacques Bertoin, Paris1991.

[4] 4. Chroniques Vietnamiennes, published by the Vietnamese Trotskyist Group, (part of the LCR) - special issue, autumn 1997.