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Vietnam: whose victory?

Bob Potter

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December 1973

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Solidarity (London) pamphlet about the origins and meaning of the Vietnam
War. Published in December 1973 (Solidarity pamphlet No. 43) it was the third
and last Solidarity pamphlet by Potter about Vietnam.

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Contents

Solidarity Preface	4
Foreword	6
Introduction	8
French colony	10
The early years of struggle	13
The vanguards arrive	15
Colonial Asia	20
The Pacific War	22
The conquest of power	25
The British in the South	29
The French counter-attack	41
The Geneva agreements	44
Bureaucratic state in the North	45
The Saigon regime in the South	47
American involvement	51
Business as usual - Peking style	58
Factions in the Communist camps	59

Britain and Vietnam	61
The broader background	62
Conclusions	65
Hobson's Choice	68
Solidarity Appendix	71

Solidarity Preface

Solidarity pamphlet no. 20, called *Vietnam*, was published in the autumn of 1965. It gave rise to a heated and prolonged controversy (see *Solidarity* vol. IV, nos. 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8) not least because of its statement that the Vietnamese were 'unconscious pawns in a worldwide struggle for domination' waged by the major economic powers. Some 3000 copies of this pamphlet were nevertheless sold, often under extremely difficult conditions, for instance in demonstrations dominated by the Stalinists or various Trotskyist groups, all proclaiming their support for the North Vietnamese regime.

In June 1967, in view of the escalation of the war and the continuing demand for basic background information. Bob Potter wrote several further sections and *Solidarity* produced 1500 copies of a new pamphlet (no. 25) entitled *The Rape of Vietnam*. The internationalist viewpoint advocated in this text, and in particular the exposure of the class nature of the regimes in both North and South Vietnam, led to *Solidarity's* continued 'isolation' on this issue. At this time practically every Marxist group — and not a few 'anarchist' ones — were calling for 'Victory to the Viet Cong'.

In October 1968 (in vol. V, no. 5 of *Solidarity*) we published some material (translated from *Informations Correspondence Ouvrieres*) dealing with the Saigon insurrection of 1945 and with how it had been put down by the Viet Minh. This was the first time this information had been brought to the radical movement in Britain and discussed there. Over the last two years we have received many requests for this article, the substance of which is now included in the present pamphlet.

In January 1971, the Philadelphia Solidarity Branch of the Socialist Reconstruction Movement (later to become the Philadelphia Solidarity Group) republished *The Rape of Vietnam* together with some of the articles and letters from back issues of our magazine (including the article on the Saigon insurrection) and some comments and material of their own. This pamphlet can still be obtained from Philadelphia *Solidarity* (GPO Box 13011, Philadelphia, Pa. 19101, USA).

As the war dragged on new layers of young people became involved in radical politics. Our pamphlet was soon out of print again. With the formal cessation of hostilities in 1973 we felt that the time was ripe to reassess the whole subject of the

crushed by the 'Party' ? Do the interests of the Party (a bureaucracy in embryo) ever coincide with those of 'the class' ? And even if the Party were vicariously to be voicing widely accepted aspirations, does it follow that a *socialist* revolutionary has to endorse such aspirations if he considers them wrong ? Should revolutionaries have supported the first and second World Wars, just because 'the class', in general, did ?

Bob Potter argues that 'there are no black and white situations in the real world'. True enough. But 'in the real world' there are many situations where genuine revolutionary activity is extremely difficult. That Vietnam is such a situation is no accident. It is a direct result of the ruthless repression of all independent forces, practiced by *both* sides, over a long period. In such a situation isolated revolutionaries who support either side gain no ability to influence events. They merely ensure that this repression continues. They also lose their own revolutionary credibility.

'Keeping one's mouth shut' in such circumstances may well be an individual solution, essential to personal survival, but it should not be elevated to the status of a political principle.

Support (however qualified) for organisations with reformist or state capitalist programmes, and 'keeping one's mouth shut' on the central political issues, are not libertarian methods. They are more akin to those of the Leninist sects, who advocate critical support for the TUC lefts, the IRA, etc., in the name of 'grappling with everyday life'. One is reminded of the IMG's participation in a Ho Chi Minh memorial meeting, during which they 'kept their mouths shut' about his role in the suppression of the Saigon Commune and in the murder of Ta Thu Tau.

What then could be done by a libertarian revolutionary group in Vietnam ? Probably very little. As in most places in the world today, the only meaningful activity would be the dissemination, however difficult, of libertarian ideas. That this course would expose the members of such an organisation to the probability of imprisonment (both North or South) is true, and perhaps the best testimony to the similarity of the two regimes. Similar conditions prevail, however, over much of the world. They would prevail here if the ruling class felt really threatened. They provide no justification for 'keeping one's mouth shut' — or for 'being involved' in some of the activities inspired by our class enemies — in Vietnam or anywhere else.

The pamphlet also contained the Solidarity text
Third Worldism or Socialism
and its original platform As We See It

The concept of the Stalinists as people ever ready to compromise with imperialism is part of Trotskyist mythology. There may have been some basis for this vision if one confined one's survey to the role of Stalinist parties in Western Europe, during a limited period of history. But following the Yugoslav experience of 1941-45, the Greek Civil War, the Malayan 'emergency' of 1947-50, the Prague events of 1948, the Cuban revolution, the more recent events in Syria, Aden, the Yemen, North Korea — and even Vietnam — such an analysis is no longer tenable. The Chinese revolution of 1948-49 should anyway have dealt it a death blow.

As a *tactic*, Stalinists may opt for 'peaceful coexistence'. Their *strategy*, however, is the conquest of state power with a view to creating a society in their own image.

What is basically wrong with the view that Stalinists 'believe in peaceful coexistence at every level' is that it is an extension of two faulty premises: firstly that the communist parties are mere border patrols of the Soviet Union; and secondly that the Soviet Union is ruled by a bureaucracy which was in some sense a historical accident, the product of the isolation of the revolution in a backward country. In fact the Russian bureaucracy represents a viable new form of class rule. If the bureaucracy was only a caste — and if the communist parties were nothing but the foreign mouthpieces of the caste — then the profoundly conservative nature of that caste would indeed make for everything being subordinated to its need for peaceful coexistence. This would indeed make the communist parties purely reformist parties. But if the bureaucracy is an emerging class, with a historical perspective of its own, and destined, in the absence of socialist revolution, to replace the bourgeoisie on a world scale, then we see no reason not to attribute to this new class what we readily attribute to all previous ruling classes in history, namely a readiness to fight for its class power by revolutionary means.

We do not agree with the argument put forward for limited involvement 'in some of the activities inspired by the NLF'. Bob Potter argues (see p. 23) that revolutionaries cannot 'opt out of a struggle, the terms of which have been determined by the class'. One is entitled to ask which class he means. Does he mean the peasantry (comprising of the population and, ipso facto, providing the bulk of the support for the Viet Cong) ? Or is he referring to the working class ? Are the interests of these classes identical ? And if they are, is their 'identity' located in national independence and agrarian reform imposed from above ? (As far as we are concerned, these are the tasks of the *bourgeois* revolution.) If this is the 'identity' postulated it is all the more necessary for revolutionaries to denounce it in the name of internationalism and of socialist self-management.

Moreover, how can it be asserted that a 'class' is still struggling for *its* interests when all autonomous organisations, whether peasant or proletarian, have been

Vietnam war, through which hundreds of thousands of young people had 'come to politics' in the West.

Vietnam: Whose Victory? contains a vast amount of factual material not present in the previous two pamphlets. The political orientation is also somewhat different. In agreement with the author a number of ambiguous formulations have been altered — and some which we now consider to have been wrong have been dropped altogether. Our original assessment of the war (as an inter-imperialist conflict) remains fully vindicated. Bob Potter's proposition that 'revolutionary socialists must support the struggle of the South Vietnamese against the old feudal regime — but they must also support the North Vietnamese against the Ho regime' remains as true today as ever it did during Ho Chi Minh's life and during the long years of the war itself.

On one or two points there is an honest divergence of opinion between the author and *Solidarity* (London). We have published Bob Potter's text in full, together with a brief appendix in which we explain where and why we disagree. We feel that this is a more fruitful way of encouraging a comradely discussion and of reaching clarification than the monolithic practice of only publishing texts with which every one of us agrees.

Foreword

It is significant that in spite of the mass interest aroused by the Vietnam war, the 'traditional' revolutionary movement has produced such a paucity of useful information about it. The miserably few books and pamphlets that have appeared are either Stalinist or liberal, and full of national drivel or emotional appeals for medical aid on behalf of the 'heroic Vietnamese people'. There is never an attempt at factual social analysis, and certainly never a line that calls for the victory of the social revolution throughout Vietnam. Indeed, any writer who made such a call would immediately be denounced as a 'splitter' or 'traitor'. If he lived in a communist-controlled area of Vietnam he would certainly be shot.

Although the anti-Vietnam war campaign has at times involved many hundreds of thousands of people, they have largely been intellectuals and students expressing a liberal philosophy. At no time has the working class anywhere seen anything in this struggle with which to identify. Indeed, in the final stages of the war, when the air offensive against Hanoi reached its peak, the main protests that poured into the White House came not even from liberal students but from the bourgeois heads of state of practically every western capitalist country.

It was as if at least some students were learning what workers had instinctively known for years, namely that the jockeying for power between the various Vietnamese bureaucrats, North and South, and their search for 'recognition' by and even 'partnership' with imperialism (all in the name of 'national' revolution) had absolutely nothing to do with the problems of ordinary people.

Sensing a demand from the libertarian left for a detailed documentation of the political history of Vietnam over the past three decades, we were tempted to simply reproduce *The Rape of Vietnam*, adding perhaps a few paragraphs to cover the five years that have elapsed since the pamphlet was first produced. The temptation arose partly from the very human desire to play 'we told you so'. Our documentation of the history of US involvement has now been widely vindicated by the disclosures known as *The Pentagon Papers*. Our pamphlet's basic premises have been proven true : we said that the big imperialist powers (the USA, the USSR, and China) were looking for a Korea-type carve up; we said that the war was incongruous with 20th century imperialism, and that the more intelligent sections

Solidarity Appendix

While we agree with most of Bob Potter's analysis of the Vietnam war, we cannot endorse some of his conclusions, voiced in the section 'Hobson's Choice'. In particular we do not agree (a) with his assessment of the nature of Stalinism, and (b) with his views as to what might have been tactically necessary for revolutionaries in Vietnam.

We cannot agree with the assessment of the communist parties as organisations 'genuinely believing in peaceful coexistence at all levels' (i.e. as basically reformist organisations) that are only 'forced to struggle' as a result of 'pressure from below' in order to 'keep some credibility with the masses' and in order not to be 'left behind'. Nor do we believe that communists will only leap onto the bandwagon of developing mass movements in order, opportunistically, to lead them 'back into respectable paths', i.e. back into the framework of bourgeois society. We believe such an analysis of communist party policies not only to be wrong politically (and unsupported by the available evidence) but also very dangerous for libertarian revolutionaries.

We see the communist parties as one of the ideological expressions and material embodiments (together with many other self-professed Marxist tendencies) of those forces seeking, on an international scale, to transcend private capitalism in order to institute regimes of total bureaucratic state capitalism, along Russian, Chinese or Cuban lines. These parties, in other words, are the political midwives of state capitalist societies. We see the bureaucracy as a new type of ruling class. As all previous ruling classes, the bureaucracy is prepared to struggle for power by revolutionary means. That the objectives of the bureaucracy are profoundly hostile to those of libertarian revolution there can be no doubt. In this limited sense Bob is right in saying that their ideology is 'profoundly counter-revolutionary' (reactionary would be a better term). But the Stalinists are not counter-revolutionary in the sense of wanting to preserve the status quo. They are revolutionary counter-revolutionaries, i.e. they are quite prepared to transgress the boundaries of bourgeois 'democracy' and bourgeois 'legality' in order to institute their own new form of class society.

the experience'. We hope that workers can learn from examples such as Vietnam that nationalist struggles have nothing to do with socialism.

The dissemination of information is one of the major tasks of a revolutionary. It is not a question of trying to limit political activity to pamphlet-writing, although this is the initial activity that can get people thinking (and we hope, acting) for themselves. There is a direct relationship between the 'revolutionary organisation', how it 'builds' and entrenches itself, and the kind of regime it 'supports' and 'establishes'. This should be crystal clear from our pamphlet, if we go no further than the twists and turns through which we have followed communist policy, and the organisations and states it has created in its own image.

The revolutionary organisation must, and by definition will, prefigure the society it will help to create. We are for the classless society, the society where people themselves take the decisions on matters which really concern them, where every cook really participates in the management of society.

We do not offer this pamphlet as a 'revolutionary handbook' but rather in the hope that the perceptive reader will see the similarity between the struggles of the Vietnamese workers and his own day-to-day battles with 'his' ruling class. We hope the conclusions he draws will be a positive contribution to the construction of the new society.

of the ruling class knew this. When we said it we stood largely alone. Now, five years later, few would dispute this analysis.

Above all, we said that the really important decisions would be taken outside Vietnam, and that the actions of the Vietnamese peasants and workers would be of little relevance in the deciding of the 'peace' and 'war' question. Can anybody question this now? Can anybody claim that the peasants and workers were consulted about what was being decided in the Paris negotiations? Does anybody really believe there are no secret protocols, agreed between the US and Hanoi, the details of which we may only learn fifty years hence?

Since the *Rape of Vietnam* a tremendous amount of new information has become available, and it was felt essential to re-write the pamphlet completely. We feel that the material dealing with the 1945 *British* occupation of South Vietnam (which really provided the blueprint for future French and American actions) and the joint British-Viet Minh suppression of the Saigon Commune are particularly valuable additions. *The Pentagon Papers* have also been used extensively to add the dot and comma to much of what was already known. It is unique in history to have access to so many 'official' documents while the issues with which they deal are very much alive. We make no apology for labouring the information in these documents, for in spite of their publication the contents are little known, and official American and British pronouncements on Vietnam are made as though the papers did not exist. They are essential reading for anyone wanting an inside view of the workings of the top bureaucracy of one of the world's leading imperialisms.

Unfortunately, rather less material has come to light concerning the outrages perpetrated by the bureaucratic regime in the North or concerning its manipulation by the ruling classes of Russia and China. Where reliable new information of this type has become available we have done our best to present it. A paucity of data about political and economic facts is, of course, itself a fact of considerable social significance — a point that will not be missed by the discerning reader. We feel it necessary to utter this word of caution early on in the text lest our account appear one-sided, i.e. more critical of one imperialism than of another, or of one ruling class than of another. As revolutionary socialists our viewpoint is strictly internationalist. America, Russia and China are all class societies (as are the regimes in North and South Vietnam). In such societies there is no identity of interests between rulers and ruled — and our solidarity is always with the oppressed. For revolutionaries, there and elsewhere, the main enemy is always in one's own country.

Introduction

It is only in the context of the world situation — a world where the giant economic powers, the USA, the USSR, and China are struggling for world supremacy that it is possible to understand what has been happening in Vietnam during the past two or three decades. These powers (and their allies) met face to face in Vietnam, and the hundreds of thousands of people killed and mutilated in that country were the pawns in this world-wide struggle.

That the American ruling class has been forced to opt out in *direct* military terms in no way invalidates this fact. It means simply that US foreign policy has changed. It has changed firstly because military victory proved impossible, secondly because Washington hopes that their puppet government in Saigon can manage to 'go it alone', and thirdly (and most importantly) because the more intelligent members of the American ruling class came to realise that the communists in Vietnam (or in China and Russia for that matter) *do not* represent any fundamental threat to American interests.

The Kissinger 'peace agreement' has silenced the big guns. But the *real problems* facing the peasants and workers in both North and South Vietnam remain to be solved. The nature of these problems will become evident as we trace the history of Vietnam and examine the roles played by the various imperialist powers and by various 'vanguard' leaderships, claiming to speak on behalf of the workers and peasants of Vietnam.

More than 85% of Vietnam's population are peasants. As far as they were concerned they were initially involved in a peasant war. The greatest differentiations in land ownership have always existed in the South and this explains why the struggle was sharpest there. The division of the large estates and the 'solution' of the agrarian problem are of course key questions for any *bourgeois* revolution. The attitude of the Northern regime to this question should be seen in this light. American intervention by supporting the landlord class tended to 'freeze' the pattern of land tenure in the South, thereby delaying the solution to the agrarian problem. This question was, however, from an early stage to be submerged in the wider question of inter-imperialist rivalries. It was these rivalries that gave impetus to the move-

revolutionary movement.¹ There are no 'black and white' situations in the real world, and those who argue from either extreme — 'support the Viet Cong' or 'you can do nothing' — demonstrate their inability to grapple with everyday life, *as it is*. In fact both positions are identical in that they are defeatism based on an assumed Viet Cong omnipotence.

The ending of American military involvement will obviously ease the situation for Vietnamese revolutionaries. The ruling class finds it easier to crush resistance during a state of war. World capitalist and communist determination to end the 'Cold War' will do much to cut the ground from under Thieu's feet. In this sense, and in this sense alone, the ceasefire agreement can give positive help to a genuinely revolutionary movement.

For us in *Britain* the situation has always been quite different. We have never been militarily involved in the struggle. Suspicion of political opposition does not, for us, carry an automatic death sentence. There is no necessity whatsoever for us to have anything to do with any of the contending bureaucracies or their representatives. Indeed, the constant exposing of the class character of the Russian, Chinese and North Vietnamese regimes, and the systematic documentation of the anti-working class, opportunist policies of the various communist front organisations everywhere must be one of our most important day-to-day activities.

At the same time, it is for the revolutionary to pose the real issues. Why have we troubled to publish this pamphlet? Not just to sling mud at all the participants in the thieves' kitchen, but in the hope that an accurate documentation of exactly what has happened in thirty years of bloodshed might help the perceptive reader to understand how the differing combatants have cynically used the hopes and aspirations of the peasants and workers to establish themselves as a viable bureaucracy. We do not believe it is necessary to take people again and again 'through

¹ This is not a utopian position. History shows a number of examples of the vindication of revolutionaries who refused to align themselves with one or other alien power or hostile class. In September 1915, at Zimmerwald in Switzerland, three dozen revolutionaries from 11 countries, belligerent and neutral, assembled and denounced the imperialist nature of the war, calling on working people 'to put an end to the slaughter'. This must have sounded 'utopian' and 'absurd' to the hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of 'aligned' socialists of that time.

Europe at that time was in the grip of mass chauvinism and war hysteria of a kind rarely seen before in history. Yet, a mere two years later, in October 1917, it was precisely the Zimmerwald position that was to triumph. The Russian workers and peasants aimed their guns at their own oppressors and began to lay what might have been the foundations of a new society.

Those who seek a new social order in Vietnam should look neither East nor West, neither to Saigon nor to Hanoi but, like our Zimmerwald comrades, to the autonomous action of the masses themselves.

Hobson's Choice

To choose sides in Vietnam is to place oneself in the tutelage of one or another bureaucratic apparatus. This is not to say that one can 'stand aside' and be 'uninvolved'. Time and again the communists have been forced to struggle by pressures from below. Generally it has been when they have had no alternative if they were to keep some credibility with the masses. We have mentioned several such instances (the period immediately following the Saigon Commune, the period following the American build-up, and so on). Communists always behave like this.

Fundamentally, their ideology is counter-revolutionary. They genuinely believe in 'peaceful co-existence' at every level, although there are times when they see the danger of being 'left behind' by the movement and so leap onto the bandwagon hoping to capture it and lead it back into 'respectable' paths. This is an international phenomenon — 'opportunism' is not confined to communists in Vietnam !

Just because the communist front organisation, for whatever tactical and sectional reasons, is at times forced to struggle, even if only to 'represent' itself as the 'leader' of that struggle, the revolutionary must not desert that struggle. To do so is to opt out of a struggle the terms of which have been determined by the class. To opt out is tantamount to asserting that the terms of the struggle have been decided by the 'party' and not the 'class'. Such a decision in these circumstances would be totally reactionary.

In these situations (and they are not so unlike or unrelated to those encountered by British workers, in the day-to-day struggle against the boss at the point of production) and under the circumstances we have considered in this pamphlet, revolutionaries in Vietnam may well have little alternative but to be involved in *some* of the activities 'inspired' by the NLF, and directed against the Thieu regime (or, before the 'ceasefire' against American imperialism). This does not in any way imply any support for the Viet Cong.

We are not trying to minimise the difficulty (and frustration) of this position for a revolutionary. There is no elementary handbook that tells him how to behave in every situation. On many occasions he will need to keep his mouth shut, in other situations he may be able to stimulate the beginnings of a new genuinely

ment for 'national liberation', again a key question for bourgeois revolutions, but an absolutely utopian perspective in the era of international state capitalism.

For a long while it suited the foreign policies of Russia and China to support the movement for 'national liberation' as it suited American foreign policy to oppose it. These facts dominated the situation more than any actions of the Vietnamese themselves. Without Russian and Chinese aid, the North Vietnamese could not have survived the American intervention. In turn, the Viet Cong depended upon the North for its ultimate survival.

American involvement in Vietnam created world-wide opposition. We were involved in this movement in a very specific way, participating in many demonstrations and activities, but always with a view to denouncing the type of politics which dominated it. We had no illusions about the Viet Cong. We recognised that it had some support among the peasantry, but also recognised that it was a popular front controlled by communists whose objective was the establishment of a bureaucratic, exploitative, class society in South Vietnam, similar to that existing in the North. We knew the Viet Cong had some pretty murky political ancestors and that its hands were bespattered with working class blood.

It would not be the first time in recent history that oppressive bureaucracies have been founded on the sacrifices of the oppressed. The ruling circles in Moscow, Peking and Hanoi manipulated the genuine opposition of the peasants to foreign domination and their genuine hunger for land as cynically¹ as ever in the past.

¹ Needless to say, at various times, both Moscow and Peking had their own particular lines. In the early stages of the war, for example, China's *People's Daily* accused Russia of dragging her feet on material aid to Hanoi. Pavlov, First Secretary of the Komsomol, replied that the USSR wished to send more but was hindered by China's refusal to allow transit. Russia and China *both* entered friendly negotiations with Nixon at times of intensified American attacks, yet a few years previously China's Chief of General Staff had belliciously declared 'We welcome the presence of more US forces for it will enable us to wipe out the root cause of the war', (quoted in the *Daily Worker*, August 2, 1965). North Vietnam has remained strictly neutral in the dispute. In fact this dispute was positively to Hanoi's advantage in the latter stages of the war when both master-swimmer Mao and degenerated-worker Brezhnev, wanted to ditch their 'ally' and make friends with Tricky Dicky instead. But neither dared default for fear that they would throw Hanoi into the arms of the other, to say nothing of exposing themselves before the entire world communist movement.

is an autonomous working class movement. That is why, when they so much as suspect such a movement, all else is forgotten in their stampede to crush it.²

French colony

Indochina (comprising Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) first became a French colony around 1870. The area had traditionally been one of Chinese influence, and there were frequent clashes between the two spoilers, but finally in 1885 by the Treaty of Tientsin China recognised France's undisputed possession.

For the West, Vietnam has always been the most important of the three countries. It was itself divided into the administrative regions of Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China. Vietnam is inhabited by Annamese, who constitute three-quarters of the population of Indochina.

By the beginning of the 20th century the French had succeeded in creating what was (in their terms) a reasonably satisfactory administrative unity. By the beginning of the Second World War the three territories enjoyed considerable *internal* autonomy, after the style of French colonies elsewhere. Obviously only French citizens participated in elections. Cochin China had its own governor, elected its own Colonial Council, and sent its representatives to the Chamber of Deputies in Paris. Annam remained under the rule of an emperor, but had its own elected Council of Ministers, presided over by a French 'resident superieur'; similarly with Tonkin. In these latter cases the Emperor selected a delegate to the Colonial Office in Paris. Hanoi, Haiphong, Da Nang and Saigon all had elected city councils.

The law, naturally, was French law. All the higher judiciary were French. Indochina was never a particularly efficient or profitable colony — indeed in the 1890s French legislators frequently complained that France spent 80 million francs in order to earn 95 million each year.¹ The colossal expenditure went to maintain an enormous civil service bureaucracy, numerically equal to the whole British administration in India (population of Indochina : 30 million; of India :

¹ During the 1900s, Indochina bought, on average, 100 million francs of French products, out of a French trade total of 20 billion francs. Ironically, the economic ties between the two countries reached their height *after* the signing of the 1954 Geneva Agreement. In 1957, after North Vietnam had been eradicating French influence for several years, and at a time when South Vietnam was free from direct political control from Paris, Vietnam as a whole was more dependent than ever on France's willingness to buy her overpriced (15% above average world market prices) goods.

² Even the Ceylonese uprising in April 1971 (which was not such a movement) provoked joint repression. Britain, the USA, the USSR, India and Pakistan, East and West Germany, Yugoslavia and Egypt all supplied weapons for the specific purpose of putting down the revolt. (See *Ceylon: the JVP Uprising of April 1971*, *Solidarity* Pamphlet no. 42.)

regime. They refused to involve themselves in a struggle which, in the final analysis, was concerned only with changing masters. In more general terms, their attitude to the Peking and Moscow regimes is that they differ from the West only in that 'work discipline' is much more ruthlessly enforced, and that the gulf between management and worker is, *in all respects*, much greater. The 'faithful' of the various communist factions are incapable of breaking out of their 'ideology' ('religion') and recognising these elementary facts.

In the last weeks of the war, when B52 bombers were 'carpetting' densely populated areas of Hanoi, it was left to the Western capitalist rulers to express concern. It was a 'neutral' Swedish ambassador who asked to delay taking up his post in Washington — not an iron curtain diplomat ! Not even a word of warning came from Peking or Moscow. One is tempted to ask : 'If this is how the communist bureaucrats shit on their own stooges in Hanoi, what can workers and peasants expect elsewhere ? Small wonder they find little inspiration in the pronouncements of Mao (who 'prefers' Nixon anyway) and Kosygin.

The Paris 'peace talks' were conducted in the strictest secrecy. The Vietnamese workers and peasants had no say in, or even knowledge of, what was being decided 'on their behalf. This carve-up called a 'peace treaty' by the gangsters devising it, the full terms and consequences of which will remain unknown for years to come, is described by imperialism as 'peace with honour' and by the communists as a 'victory for the democratic and peace-loving forces'.

Whether the 'peace' will stabilise into a Korea-type situation, or whether the war will be renewed in a new form is really irrelevant. Vietnam's destiny in the capitalist world of today remains tied to the conflicts of world capitalism. The real question, the question of the social revolution, remains to be fought in both parts of Vietnam.

In the North, the regime will now set about rebuilding and strengthening the 'socialist' state. Ironically, substantial aid will come from the United States. And why not ? The American rulers now realise that there are more ways than one to maintain their economic power and influence in the area. They know the Hanoi regime will effectively discipline its 'own' peasants and workers and that the communists can be relied on to do all they can to keep the 'peace agreement' and restrain any militants and recalitrants in the South.

Intelligent capitalist and communist bureaucrats are gradually learning that they have identical 'interests'. This enables Nixon, Mao and Brezhnev to pay lip service to opposing 'creeds', to arm opposing sides — be it in Vietnam or the Middle East — and yet be confident that all this will not disturb the 'good business relationships' being built up between them. Both know quite well that the only 'enemy' they have

325 million).

Year	Exports to France	Imports from France	Exports to USA	Imports from USA
1939	32.2%	55.7%	12.0%	4.2%
1957	50.8%	29.3%	13.7%	22.7%

(See *The Malayan Economic Review* , April 1961, pp. 55-80.)

To increase a national revenue always in the red, the French encouraged opium sales and made alcohol consumption compulsory. Both distilleries and poppy fields were government monopolies. On September 8th 1934 the semiofficial paper *Aurore d'Indochine* wrote :

'The administration had decided from today that all inhabitants must consume 7 litres of alcohol annually (...) the sum due for all alcohol delivered (i.e. to villages) whether sold or not, will be paid in full. The consumption of alcohol is obligatory in Tonkin and Annam and will soon be enforced in Cochin China.'

Industrial production was negligible — 96.5% of all exports consisted of raw materials. Raw latex was hardly worked on but exported as such at very low cost by the Michelin Rubber Trust. Although Indochina's soil was rich in coal and various metals there was only one smelting furnace in the whole country. Two-thirds of the coal was exported. Even rice was exported. French imperialism saw in the non-industrialisation of its colonies a guarantee of stability. It sought by all possible means to prevent the development of a numerous, concentrated and educated working class.

The pattern of land ownership was also very backward. Some 700 European settlers owned 20% of the cultivable land. Only half of this land was worked upon. The vast mass of poor peasants owned less than 5 acres and in the north often less than 1 acre. Irrigation was very primitive. Indochinese rice fields produced less than half the yield per acre being obtained in Japan. Even phosphate fertiliser was being exported.²

The average wage of workers in the Tonkin coal mines was less than half a piastre per day. Many of those working on rice plantations were paid in kind. Unemployment was rampant, and thousands of workers were employed only six months

² See *Mouvements Nationaux et lutte de Classe au Vietnam* by Ahn Van and Jacqueline Roussel.

of the year. Tenant farmers paid at least 40% of the rice crop to the landlord as rent.

Virtually all authorities agree that the living standards of the Indochinese people declined during the period of French rule. According to the Syndicate of French Exporters, the population increased by 80% between 1900 and 1937 while the total domestic rice consumption increased by only 23%.

The best that almost a century of French rule could offer as evidence of the 'humanitarian mission' of colonialism was 1 doctor per 38,500 inhabitants (compared with 1 per 2,500 people in France). The *Annuaire Statistique* for Indochina (1941-42) showed that for a population the size of Spain there were but four secondary schools. For every 100,000 inhabitants there were 25 children at primary school and 5 at secondary school.

Conclusions

Millions of people throughout the world have been involved in demonstrations 'against the war in Vietnam'. This movement was compounded of frustration, guilt, escapism, simple humanitarianism, a desire to 'do something' and an emotional (but unthought out) identification with the oppressed. Unfortunately these motivations can never provide a substitute for a proper understanding of the real forces involved in social conflict. In this pamphlet we have sought to show what these forces really were. The Vietnam war has been an inter-imperialist war. Saigon and Hanoi, pawns of the imperialist powers, represent class societies based on coercion and exploitation. The common people of Vietnam have gained nothing from the decades of slaughter.

In the west, students and intellectuals formed the backbone of a movement against the war, which had little impact on the working class. In fact, few issues in the last decades have provoked such a divergence of attitudes and opinions between rank and file workers and those intellectuals seeking to speak on their behalf. Is this really surprising ?

We have shown that all the various overt and covert organisations¹ used by the communists (the ICP, the Viet Minh, the NLF, the 'Provisional Government', even the official Hanoi government itself) have consistently advocated policies *against* workers' power and *against* peasant power. Opposition groupings have been slandered, and where possible murdered. What support they have elicited has been based on the crudest nationalist appeals. In communist-held areas 'neutrality' is a crime punishable by death.

The organised working class of the Western world was not born yesterday. They know that the boss-to-worker relationship remains unchanged in a communist

¹ Let's not get lost among the various organisations that have sprung into being over the years. Technically the Indochina Communist Party was dissolved in 1945 (in favour of the 'broad alliance') and was replaced by the Association for Marxist Studies. In early 1951 the Vietnamese Workers' Party (Lao Dong) was formed. The same man, Truong Chinh, was successively Secretary General of the ICP, Chairman of the Marxist Study Group, and Secretary General of the Lao Dong Party. (Incidentally, he was one of the scapegoats in the 1956 purge following the Nghe An uprising who publicly confessed to errors of 'left deviationism' in the forced collectivisation campaign and was sacked. But in less than a year he was back in favour, holding another senior government post.)

China 'would publish statements and call demonstrations to support it' and it was 'precisely that which vexes the imperialists'.

Not surprisingly, the Chinese leaders were delighted to learn that the American President would be happy to pay a friendly visit, intimating approval of Chinese admission to the United Nations and a dropping of the 'two-China' policy regarding Taiwan. Mao mentioned to Edgar Snow that he preferred 'men like Nixon to social democrats and revisionists : those who professed to be one thing but in power behaved quite otherwise'. 'Nixon might be deceitful but perhaps a little bit less than some others. Nixon resorted to tough tactics, but he also had some soft tactics. Yes, Nixon could just get on a plane and come.'

The net result of the Peking visit (and the Moscow one that followed it) was that Nixon felt that he could do whatever he liked to North Vietnam (short of open invasion or the use of atomic weapons) and rest assured there would be no repercussions from China or Russia. And the proof of the pudding being in the eating, the mass raids of December 1972 brought violent responses from most capitalist countries, a mild rebuke from China and virtual silence from Moscow.

The traditional left failed to grasp two main points. Firstly, American policy in Vietnam was not basic to, but rather contrary to, the newly developing form of capitalism. Secondly, those in power in Moscow and Peking were throughout ready to reach a 'detente' despite the noises emanating from Hanoi. The bureaucrats in Moscow and Washington were looking throughout for what eventually they got in the Kissinger agreement — a Korea-type carve-up. The flies in the ointment were the Saigon and Hanoi regimes, particularly the latter; with its many troops occupying 'Southern' territory — troops that the American found it impossible to dislodge militarily, and that Moscow couldn't dislodge by political pressures due to her own problems with the 'communist' world and Hanoi. It was these factors that combined to make the Northern government appear the 'victor', in capitalist military and political terms.

The early years of struggle

Vietnamese opposition to French rule is as old as French rule itself. The first important 'national' rising occurred in Tonkin, in 1908. Five years later there were more uprisings. In March 1913 six hundred peasants marched through the streets of Saigon demanding reforms. In April a mandarin noted for his French sympathies was assassinated in Tonkin province, and a bomb exploded in Hanoi, killing two French officers. A wave of arrests followed. Of 254 people thrown into prison, 64 were brought to trial and 7 executed. In 1916 some 300 activists made a determined but abortive attempt to liberate the inmates of Saigon Jail.

In the years that followed the resistance intensified, taking different forms in different areas. In the centre (Annam province) anger tended to be directed at the obvious targets — the Emperor, the aristocracy and the 'civil service' that surrounded him. Some of the earlier communist struggles took place in these areas, and were severely handicapped by ingrained 'peasant traditions'. Textbook Marxists were to find greater opportunities in Tonkin and Cochin China.

Of the total Vietnamese population of 17 million, 8 million lived in the north, the majority of them within a 60 mile radius of Hanoi. In this area an industrial complex developed, and with it a working class. Between 1922 and 1934, there were more than 100 strikes in Tonkin province.

A similar development had taken place in Saigon, where contact with the mercantile trading nations had destroyed the vestiges of feudalism even earlier. It would be a serious mistake however to forget that, as a whole, the country remained a peasant one. *By 1929 there were still only 221,000 workers (39% employed in industry, 37% on the plantations and 24% in mining). They represented a mere 1% of the total population.*

The land crisis had always been sharpest in the South. In 1930 some 70% of landowners in the *two* northern provinces held less than 1.5 acres each. In Cochin China this figure was only 34%. Of 6,530 landowners owning more than 125 acres, 6,300 lived in the south. 45% of the Mekong Delta was owned by 2% of all landowners. Of 244 landlords possessing more than 1,500 acres, *all* lived in the Mekong Delta. To this day (1973) some of the largest plantations in South Vietnam are still French owned.

Yet profound changes were taking place throughout the country. During the First World War the French had sent 43,000 Indochinese soldiers and 49,000 workers (out of a total labour force then numbering 62,000) to Europe. The men returned to Vietnam more westernised, and speeded up the demand among a growing 'elite' — educated in the French language and French culture — for a greater stake in 'their' country. The future revolutionary leaders were to come from this 'elite' and not from the rural areas, or for that matter from the ranks of the rapidly developing industrial labour force.

The survival of modern capitalism isn't conditional on the exploitation of 'oppressed' nations. Today modern capitalism is more total and all-embracing, drawing the ex-colonial countries into its own giant hierarchical structure, expanding its dominion over the world, including everyone at every level in every nation, manipulating each and all as worker and consumer alike. It creates in the colonial countries not only forms of social organisation which reflect its own structure and needs, but also a state of social, cultural, political and economic dependency which helps perpetuate its dominion. The relationship of modern France to modern Algeria is far more typical of modern capitalism than, say, the relationship of Portugal to Angola (or of the USA to South Vietnam).

Vietnam is not an isolated case. The most significant development in the merging colonial countries is that they are 'skipping' private capitalism and leaping straight into state capitalism, often under the auspices of a national 'communist' party using the Marxist rhetoric of 'developing the productive forces'. In these countries the imperialist domination preceding independence precluded the development of a national bourgeoisie. Recent history is full of examples of bureaucratic regimes claiming to represent the 'national aspirations' of the colonial people. Their leaders have generally enjoyed the fullest support of the traditional revolutionaries in the West. (To name a few : Kenyatta, Kaunda, Nkrumah, Castro, Ben Bella.) In the past we refused to support these people as we refused to support Ho Chi Minh (with even greater factual evidence behind us).

American policy in South East Asia has been, in this respect, increasingly out of step. It started in the tradition of the old imperialism and is now realised by the American rulers to be contrary to their own capitalist interests. It is only those mechanistic thinkers who see the capitalists as the perpetual puppets of history, incapable of acting in their own long-term interests, or of fundamentally changing their course, who will fail to see this change.

Richard Nixon's trip to Peking, which amounted to a de facto recognition of China, was only the ostensible end of a chain of thought which culminated in a total reassessment of American foreign policy in Asia.

The Chinese 'leadership' also seem to have learned a thing or two in the last few years and are now less likely than ever to believe their own rhetoric. Mao Tse-tung was never over-enthusiastic about involvement in the war. Speaking to Edgar Snow in 1965, he emphasised that China's armies would 'go beyond her borders to fight only if the United States attacked China', as the Chinese were 'very busy with their internal affairs'. According to Snow, who details this conversation in the posthumous *The Long Revolution*, whenever a 'liberation struggle' arose, Mao said

The broader background

That Nixon, Brezhnev and Mao are so obviously hitting it off these days must truly appear amazing to those who believe that Western capitalism and Eastern communism represent fundamentally different social systems. We challenge this assertion, and would point to the *basic similarity* in the social structure of these great powers. All are class societies. In each state, be it America, Russia or China, there are those who manage and those who obey. Their respective economies are based on the accumulation of capital, which is 'stored up', 'surplus', or 'unpaid' labour extracted from the workers (and/or peasants). In Marxist terminology these are all 'capitalist states'.

In the West, the state owns and/or controls an increasing proportion of the economic infrastructure; the role of the private capitalist is gradually lessening in significance.¹ In the East, meanwhile, the bureaucracy totally dominates production.

The basic similarity of the two systems is recognised by the more advanced sections of their respective ruling classes. It is unfortunately only the 'revolutionaries' and their fellow-travellers who still manage to delude themselves into seeing the communist world as in some way connected with workers' power.

Although the major world powers are fundamentally capitalist, capitalism has altered, and is constantly altering. One of these changes is the new relation of imperialism to the Third World.

In the days before the disintegration of the British Empire, it used to be argued by orthodox Marxist-Leninists that the relatively high living standards of the British working-class were possible only because of the super-exploitation of the colonial peonies. The old imperialisms needed their empires to dump their surplus commodities, to obtain cheap raw materials, or to export their surplus capital to. This exploitation was very real, but subsequent events have shown that capitalism can exist and in fact expand quite happily without colonies of this particular type. The examples of Britain, France, Holland and Belgium are there to prove it.

¹ This development was clearly foreseen by Marx himself in *Capital*. He anticipated the state taking over the role of 'capitalist', who is, anyway, only the 'personification of capital'.

The vanguards arrive

The name of Ho Chi Minh is inseparable from Vietnamese communism. As a young man he had travelled the world, staying a while in London. Unimpressed with British 'socialism' he gravitated to Paris where he became a founder member of the French Communist Party. Returning to Asia in 1925 he based himself in Canton, where he created the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League. The League propagated 'peasant Marxism' mostly in neighbouring Tonkin province. It arranged for suitable 'cadres' to be sent abroad for 'political training'. By May 1929, at the founding conference of the Indochina Communist Party (ICP), some 250 members had been on these courses, to Paris and Moscow, and at least 200 were back in activity in Vietnam.

The early '30s were years of mutinies, peasant uprisings and strikes. In 1930 alone there were 83 strikes with more than 27,000 participants. During the years 1930-31 membership of illegal trade unions rose from 6,000 to 64,000. A right-wing nationalist revolt in Tonkin, in February 1930, was ruthlessly crushed and all 13 leaders executed. Ho himself had spent the years 1927-30 in Moscow, and returned to find a faction-ridden party. He came down very firmly with the line that the party programme was one of 'bourgeois-democratic revolution'. But he lacked the authority to straitjacket the party along Stalinist lines. The peasants of Nghe An and Ha Tinh were in open revolt, and in several villages local 'soviets' were set up. The party endorsed their action (Ho voted *against* the uprising, but was a minority of one¹) hoping to use these soviets as bases for further control of the developing movement. The communists claimed 1,300 members and 10,000 affiliated followers in the two provinces. Communist party strength at the time lay predominantly in the peasant areas. The 42 party cells in 1928 were located as follows²:

¹ *From Colonialism to Communism, a Case History of Vietnam*, by Hoang Van Hi, p.52.

² *Vietnam: The Origins of Revolution*, by John T. McAlister, Jr., p.86.

Central Vietnam: Nghe An: 9
Ta Tinh: 8
Thanh Hoa: 7
Hue: 3
Quang Ngai: 3
South Vietnam: 7
North Vietnam: 5

The setting up of peasant soviets was viewed with disapproval in Moscow (and hence also by Ho). They could only be reminders of the disasters of a few years earlier in China³ (themselves largely consequences of Stalin's suicidal policy). The party attempted to involve workers, and tried to organise a match factory and railway repair shop in the provincial centre of Vinh and the nearby port of Ban Thuy, with a measure of success. Essentially, however, the movement remained a peasant revolt.

In a march on the provincial capital, 6,000 peasants lined the main road for over 4 kilometres. Their demands included the destruction of the district taxation records, reduction of the high 'salt tax', and incorporated the workers' demand for increased wages. The column was attacked by French aircraft, which killed 216 and wounded 126.

Where the party established 'soviets', it was largely due to the 'inadequacy' of the existing institutions and the unresponsiveness of the French authorities. Propaganda meetings were held in village halls, and defence militias, armed with sticks, knives and other primitive weapons formed in most villages. Everywhere the communists worked through the existing 'head' families who provided the 'natural' structure of communication and control.

Significantly throughout this period communist attacks were directed solely at the Vietnamese 'aristocracy' and 'civil service'. 'Even at the height of the disturbances, Europeans could circulate freely and unarmed in these provinces.'⁴ The shallowness and weakness of these 'soviets' was to be demonstrated when the

³ A similar situation had existed in China's Hunan province in the mid 1920s. The peasants themselves were setting up local councils or 'soviets', a policy which Stalin roundly condemned because it was not a communist controlled movement, and because he was still participating in Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang Government — two CP members were 'ministers' and Chiang was an 'honorary' member of the Communist International! Moscow could not agree to any 'opposition' authority being set up. Stalin's policy was to lead to the massacre of Chinese peasants and workers on a grand scale. Readers wanting further information on this period are referred to *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, by Harold R. Isaacs, ch.14.

⁴ *Indo-China in 1931-32*, by Roger Fry, p.7.

Britain and Vietnam

To say that successive British governments have arse-crawled behind American policy in Vietnam is to make no great revelation. Indeed, within the framework of the capitalist world, it couldn't have been otherwise.¹

British support for America's involvement in the war was often more than just 'moral' support. *The Sunday Times*, October 16, 1966, blew the gaff on the British Jungle Warfare School in Johore, South Malaya, where South Vietnamese were taught how to kill their countrymen at the expense of the British taxpayer. The school boasts that it has helped train some of Saigon's really 'top brass'. Some of the pupils were American servicemen — all eager to learn from the British experience in hunting down 'communists' in the Malayan jungles. Successive governments, Labour and Tory, built and guarded airfields in Siam which were used by US bombers and fighters attacking North Vietnam. At times RAF 'observers' were taken along for the ride.

Britain manufactures and sells napalm to the USA (remember how British napalm suddenly appeared on the scene to deal with the *Torrey Canyon* ?) It also manufactured poison gas which was used by the American forces to 'flush out' Viet Cong from their bunkers in South Vietnam. The Labour government sanctioned large consignments of military equipment to Ky. The Ford Company alone sent a thousand engines to Vietnam. There must be dozens of other examples that we don't know about! Edward Heath may well be more 'open' in his support for his US colleagues, but these are touchy matters even for a Tory Prime Minister to discuss in public.

¹ This is a fundamental yet elementary fact. Tory, Labour, Liberal or even communist governments can exist only as the 'personification' of the capitalist state, and can only continue to exist by remaining as such, with all that this implies in relation to other capitalist powers.

National Democratic and Peace Forces. On June 8, 1969, these four announced the formation of a 'Provisional Government' for South Vietnam.

Since the Tet offensive there had been a growing opposition to the official policy of negotiated settlement. This opposition had roots in the NLF, in the Hanoi Government itself (Le Duan, head of the Workers' Party of North Vietnam and an obvious non-combatant, is a well-known supporter of the 'struggle to the end' philosophy) and among rank-and-file North Vietnamese fighting in the South.

On November 10, 1972, while the Kissinger talks were in progress, the opposition struck. According to *Le Monde*, November 25, 1972, more than 1,000 troops under the command of North Vietnamese General Le Vinh Khoa attacked the camp of the leaders of the NLF and the PRG situated in Zone 4, north-west of, and close to Saigon. After two days of fighting the camp fell. The Central Committee members and ministers escaped. The Americans observed strict neutrality in this faction fight.

Within a matter of hours 'loyalist' troops who had been rushed to the area counterattacked with artillery. Two of the three 'rebel' battalions surrendered, the third fled. The successful counterattack was led by none other than General Tran Nam Trung, Minister of Defence in the PRG.

A tribunal was set up and the ringleaders tried. The three main defendants were : Tran Bach Dang (Presidium member of the CC of the NLF), Vo Chi Cong (President of the People's Revolutionary Party), and Vo Van Mon (member of the CC of the NLF). They were sentenced to 10 years, 20 years, and death respectively. Twenty other defendants received 5 years' imprisonment.

Immediate changes in the composition of the PRG followed, in which the People's Revolutionary Party was the main loser. A telegram from Pham Van Dong gave unconditional support for the sentences, and the changes. He promised additional measures to prevent North Vietnamese troops intervening in affairs of the South. And the Americans thought they had troubles with Thieu !

French authorities, after ignoring them for 18 months, decided to destroy them. Efficient and fast police operations rounded up the 'leadership' and 'soviet power' collapsed. That was in October 1931.

It was the first and last time that Ho lost control of a movement he had dominated. The events of October 1931 had tended to prove his prognosis correct. From now on he was to be undisputed head of the party in the northern provinces. In the south, in Cochin China, the leadership was entrusted to Tran Van Giau, one of the original 'Moscow-trained' cadres.

In 1932 a young communist, Ta Thu Thau, returned to Vietnam after several years of exile in Paris. There he had actively participated in the French Trotskyist movement. He returned home with the aim of building a 'left opposition' to Tran Van Giau's Stalinist party.

These years were particularly fertile ones for Trotskyism.

A militant working class had grown up with Saigon's industrialisation. This working class was singularly unimpressed with the official communist party line which, despite its Marxist jargon, was basically dedicated to organising peasants. Just a few months after his arrival, Ta Thu Thau was able to approach Tran Van Giau from a position of considerable strength, and propose a united front.

This proposal was as unpopular among the orthodox Trotskyists, as it was to the communist party. Breakaway Trotskyists formed the International Communist League. These more orthodox Trotskyists were mostly from the northern provinces, where they had plenty of scope for activities directed against Ho's 'peasant communism'. The situation was quite different in Cochin China where Tran Van Giau realising the strength of Ta Thu Thau's 'opposition', agreed to go along with the united front.

In late 1932 a joint paper *La Lutte* was published. The following year a joint slate of Stalinist and Trotskyist candidates was presented for the Colonial Council elections.⁵ Two Trotskyists and one Stalinist were elected.

In August 1935, the Seventh Congress of the Comintern took place and with it a switch in the Moscow line. Collaboration with the Western 'democracies' and the 'progressive capitalists' became the order of the day. Obediently the ICP Central Committee dropped the slogan 'Down with French Imperialism' from its programme. The campaign against Indochina's feudal rulers and even the demand for national independence were abandoned. In spite of this Stalinists and Trotskyists continued to work together in Saigon for a short period in joint 'action

⁵ The ICP stood for the 'dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry'. The 'official' Trotskyist Party, for the 'dictatorship of the proletariat in alliance with the peasantry'.

committees'. But the Stalinists soon broke up into a number of warring factions. For several years this was to leave the Trotskyists the dominant group.

PREPARING THE NOOSE

Ta Thu Thau, as is well known, was murdered by the Stalinists in 1945. His repeated earlier capitulations to them had not earned him their gratitude.

In the elections to the Saigon Municipal Council, in May 1935, one of the candidates was Duong Bach Mai, a leading Stalinist. Ta Thu Thau had considerable difficulty in convincing the activists around *La Lutte* that they should support Duong Bach Mai as a candidate, since they regarded him as too reformist. Ta Thu Thau felt that the united front had to be maintained at all costs and spoke on behalf of Duong Bach Mai, describing him as 'the most capable representative of the Vietnamese Stalinists'. Duong Bach Mai was duly elected. His later actions are described on p.13.

F.N. Trager, 'Marxism in South East Asia', Stanford University Press (1960) p. 139.

In June 1936, with the election of Leon Blum's popular front government in France, the situation altered. Under orders from Paris and Moscow, the ICP factions severed all relations with the Trotskyists. The 'progressive capitalists' installed in Paris lived up to their characterisation by the Stalinists. In 1937 they introduced 8-hour day legislation.⁶ In appreciation of Stalin's friendliness they declared a general amnesty. In Vietnam this meant the release from prison of a number of leading Stalinists, including Pham Van Dong, then editor of Ho's party paper, and Tran Van Giau. De facto, the ICP became 'legal'.

An intensified struggle against 'Trotskyism' was launched. This was no accident. The opting out of the class struggle by the ICP had left the field wide open for Ta Thu Thau and his followers. In 1937 the Stalinists were ousted from *La Lutte* and a new line in the paper violently attacked the 'treason' of the popular front policy. Trotskyist membership grew to 5,000. Ta Thu Thau was arrested and spent two years in the concentration camp island of Pulo-Condor, during which time he was twice elected to the Saigon Town Council. In local Saigon elections the

⁶ At this time 'independent' Japan had no work limit for men, working women and youths were limited to 11 hours a day. Indian workers worked a 12-hour day. In China and Thailand there were no restrictions at all to the working day.

Factions in the Communist camps

One of the greatest 'achievements' of the state capitalist bureaucracies has been the myth of 'unity' which they have successfully propagated about themselves and their followers to the outside world. That differences of opinion (i.e. interest) exist between Peking and Moscow, or Hanoi and Moscow, or Peking and Hanoi, is now an open secret. But the legend of the 'one point of view' in Hanoi itself, or between Hanoi and the NLF, or inside the NLF itself, is still very much alive. Of course this naive view of the world is the bread and butter of their shared ideology.

Reference has already been made to the conflict of interest between the leaders in Hanoi, wishing to dedicate their undivided energies to the reconstruction of 'their' country, and the 'comrades' in the South who, in pursuing the struggle, threatened to 'rock the boat'. On this occasion the problem was solved for them. US determination (need) to wage war against the North forced Hanoi to respond and send troops into the South.

The overwhelming and massive build up by the Americans in 1965 staggered the Hanoi regime and provoked (or enhanced) divisions on the question of peace or war. Ho Chi Minh personally made overtures to the US through the Italian Foreign Office for an indefinite extension of the Christmas and Tet truces, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. Johnson was convinced he could win. Once again the decision had been determined by events. In the February 1966 issue of the Hanoi monthly theoretical journal *Huc Tap*, Le Due Tho referred scathingly to those 'comrades' who had given way to 'pacifism and pessimism'. This was reinforced in even stronger terms by an article in the July edition of the same paper, where none less than Nguyen Chi Thanh admitted that the 'ideological wavering caused by the US build-up' had greatly affected morale.

A few words of explanation are necessary to help one through the maze of front organisations floating about the South and to understand subsequent tensions between them. The National Liberation Front had originally been formed in May 1960 from three South Vietnamese parties united in their opposition to Diem: the Democratic Party, the Radical Socialist and Progressive Party, and the People's Revolutionary Party. During the Tet offensive they were joined by the Alliance of

Business as usual - Peking style

One of the most effective weapons in the arsenal of anti-war propaganda has always been the exposure of the high profits being reaped by those who do well out of getting ordinary people to butcher one another. While the workers died on the field of battle, shares leaped ahead on the Stock Exchange. What came as a staggering revelation to the starry-eyed Stalinists, Trotskyists and Maoists was the exposure by Dennis Bloodworth in *The Observer*, December 18, 1966, of trafficking in steel between China and the US through Singapore. Earlier that year the transactions had reached a climax when China sold the US some £357,000 worth of round and flat steel for use in the construction of new air and army bases in South Vietnam. The Chinese were paid through banks in Hong Kong.

This was a vital transaction for the US. Only Peking had been able to meet the specifications, quantities, and the six-week delivery dates demanded by the military purchasing officers. Once the immediate crisis had passed (and the Japanese and Belgian suppliers had caught up with mounting American demands) US officials returned to tighter controls — which did not allow trading with 'Red China' !

It was further suggested that cement manufactured in Haiphong (North Vietnam's main port under frequent American bombardment) may also have reached construction bases in South Vietnam. Certainly during 1966 big deliveries of cement from Haiphong reached Singapore, coinciding with big bulk sales of cement from Singapore to Saigon.

That the consignments were the same was never conclusively established. In terms of marketing this isn't really relevant. It doesn't matter whether one specific bag or another finished up in Saigon. The general directions of the traffic are, however, very revealing. Morality can never be a factor in the functioning of the world capitalist economy ('free' or 'communist'). For them, the trading of 'principles' has always been the principle of trade. In the East, no less than in the West, the highest value is still the exchange value.

Trotskyists at times commanded up to 80% of the votes. But the ICP line was that of their 'comrades' elsewhere in the world, and Ho Chi Mirth proudly reported to the Comintern in July 1939 :

'As regards the Trotskyists — no alliances and no concessions. They must be unmasked as the stooges of the fascists, which they are.'

Almost as Ho was speaking the Trotskyists marked up their greatest triumph, sweeping the Saigon elections and driving the remaining two communists Tau and Mai out of office.

The popular front days came to an end. In September 1939 France banned the Communist Party at home and abroad. The Stalinist honeymoon with French imperialism thereby also came to an end. In a statement issued on November 13, 1939 the ICP tried to reconcile the irreconcilable.

It denounced France's 'imperialist' war against Nazi Germany, but at the same time asked its supporters to struggle against Japan (which at that time threatened Russian positions in the Far East) :

'Our party finds it to be a matter of life and death (...) to struggle against the imperialist war and policy of thievery and massacre of French imperialism (...) while at the same time struggling against the aggressive aims of Japanese fascism.'

IN STALIN'S DAY...

Many Maoists today believe that all was well as long as Stalin was at the helm. They should study what happened at the height of the Franco-Soviet pact.

In 1937, at the Arles Congress of the French Communist Party, Thorez summed up the colonial policy of the Party. He claimed that the interests of the colonial people lay in a union 'free, trusting and paternal' with democratic France. To forge this union was 'the mission of France all over the world'

G. Walter, 'Histoire du Parti Communiste Francais', p. 377.

Colonial Asia

The French exploitation of Indochina was only a small part of the whole sweep of colonialism in South East Asia. At that time India, China, Burma, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaya and Indonesia were all under direct Western domination.

Japan, being the first Asian power to industrialise, was to provide the first challenge to the old imperialisms. As late as 1870 all technical innovations (save those dealing with the theatre !) were banned in Japan. A mere 35 years later a modern Japanese army and navy were decisively to maul Czarist Russia in 1905. One of the victors in the First World War, the only Asian nation to be a party to the Washington Naval Conference, Japan had entered the big leagues as a major capitalist power. The origins of the Second World War (in the Pacific) lie in the dependence of Japan on uninterrupted imports of oil, iron ore and coal (Japan being poor in natural raw materials), in her need to seek colonial markets and in her need to expand and consolidate her spheres of interest.

Japan's expansionist drive coincided with the determined push of American imperialism into the Pacific area. Like Japan, America had arrived late on the scene. Her first conquest came in 1898 when under cover of the 'Maine' incident and the resultant Spanish-American war, US forces overran the Philippine Islands. At the Treaty of Paris the McKinley government took over the islands in return for a \$20 million payment to Spain. For the next 4 years some 60,000 US troops were busy crushing a native movement for independence.

As US domination spread into Samoa and Hawaii, the Japanese were busy gobbling up Korea and Manchuria. The Washington Conference of 1921-22 was the last serious attempt to reach a *modus vivendi*. In effect America made a deal with Japan whereby Japanese hegemony over Manchuria would be recognised in return for an agreement not to invade China. (Along with Britain, France and other European powers, the US was happily sharing the loot derived from the intensive exploitation of China.)

In September 1931 the Japanese launched an attack on northern China, and later landed 70,000 troops at Shanghai, leaving the Kuomintang government no alternative but to surrender Manchuria. In 1934 the Japanese claimed all China to be part of their sphere of influence. In 1936 the Japanese demanded joint

be signed in virtually a matter of hours for Nixon to sweep the polls in a landslide victory. But Nixon was now to have trouble with Thieu (who publicly declared he was for continuing the war and invading the North), rather like Moscow's 'trouble' with Hanoi. The terms of the ceasefire might be good enough for the US, but they weren't good enough for Thieu ! One month later, in December 1972, the US launched 12 days of the most intensive bombing against Hanoi. More than 40,000 tons of bombs were showered on heavily populated areas in the capital (areas with up to 12,000 people to the square mile). It was an open secret that it was politically-motivated bombing (the US had much better, safer, and more accurate aircraft than B52s had they really been interested only in 'taking-out' military targets). The bombing was a final attempt to placate Thieu by winning 'concessions' from Hanoi. Not surprisingly, it failed.

The bombing brought an unprecedented wave of protest from *the rulers* of virtually every country in the world (Britain being a notable exception), combined with a particularly uneasy American Congress at home (with senators 2:1 against the bombing) threatening to legislate an end to further financing of the war-making, sent Kissinger back to Paris under orders to sign an agreement of some sort somehow. The terms signed, on January 17, 1973, were essentially those offered by Hanoi the previous October.

wage controls on the Nixon Administration. In addition, spending on many badly needed domestic projects — schools, hospitals, sewage plants, and mass-transit systems, had to be deferred.

It has been calculated that every enemy soldier cost the US tax-payer no less than \$500,000 to kill. To the generals in the field money was, of course, no object :

'While travelling in North Vietnam I was shown a bridge, still standing uneasily, that was attacked daily from 1965 until the termination of regular bombing, with 99 American jets lost — the cost in planes lost alone must be in the order of \$500 million, to destroy one bridge.'¹⁶

Of course all military expenditure wasn't for bombs. \$25 million went to build a Pentagon in Vietnam for the use of 68 American generals. \$18 million went to construct two dairies for supplying milk, cheese and ice cream to the troops. \$40 million went for a year's stock of chemicals to defoliate trees. The 'moment of truth' for both US military commanders and, more important, the American public, came on January 30, 1968, when the Viet Cong launched their 'Tet' offensive throughout the South, simultaneously attacking more than 80 centres.

Several provincial capitals were taken and held. The Viet Cong in Hue resisted American counter-attack for 26 days then retreated after massacring some 2,000 inhabitants. Even the US Embassy in Saigon and the Chinese quarter of Cholon were occupied by the Viet Cong. The US command had lost its 'credibility', and a disillusioned Johnson was soon to announce the removal of General Westmoreland, the opening of peace negotiations, restricted bombing, and his decision to stand down at the next Presidential election.

The American Presidential election of November 1968 brought Richard Nixon to power, the latest in the long line of 'peace candidates'. His declared policy was to end American involvement, withdraw land-troops, and 'Vietnamise' the war. In practice he sought military victory based on US air and naval strength from afar. Four more years of intensified killing brought this victory no closer, and by November 1972 mass resentment against the war had reached such an intensity that Nixon's mouth-piece, Kissinger, had only to claim that a 'peace treaty' could

In addition, the US would continue supply South Vietnam with nearly all its defence needs, including aircraft, tanks and guns (...)'.

(Analysis of US War Spending, *Time*, November 6, 1972.)

The same article points out (perhaps for the benefit of those who expect the American economy to collapse with the outbreak of peace) : 'Few big companies depend upon Vietnam for as much as 1% of their revenues.'

¹⁶ *At War With Asia*, by Noam Chomsky, p.61.

Japanese-Kuomintang military attacks on Maoist-controlled areas. They also demanded that the 5 Northern Chinese provinces be granted 'autonomy' as Japanese puppet regimes. The rejection of these demands by the Kuomintang made the Sino-Japanese war of 1937 inevitable.

A major clash between Japan and the US was equally inevitable. American economic expansion in the Pacific area had steadily increased after the mid 1920s. Between 1931 and 1937 Asia took the following shares of American exports :

Machinery:	15%
Copper	26%
Iron and Steel	33%
Paper	40%

More specifically, between 1932 and 1938 the US consistently held first place in China's foreign trade. (In 1935, for example, America's share amounted to \$102 million while Japan's was only \$80 million.)

The Pacific War

The image of a good-natured, peace-seeking US State Department being caught unawares at Pearl Harbour by a cunning conspiracy of Japanese war lords is the stuff of propaganda. It has not the remotest relationship to the facts. By 1940 the US president and his closest advisers had decided that the Japanese must be pushed back, even if it meant going to war. They had also decided that following the defeat of Japan, the USA was to become 'the' Asian power, at the expense of the older imperialisms in general and of France in particular. Indochina was a particularly juicy plum waiting to be picked !

At Teheran and Yalta Roosevelt openly proposed that France's rule in Indochina should be replaced by some sort of international trusteeship. Stalin agreed with the suggestion, which was vetoed by Churchill.

The first effects of this new American policy had appeared in June 1940, when the French Governor, Admiral Decoux, urgently attempted to acquire aircraft and equipment from the US for use against the impending Japanese attack. The equipment had already been paid for, but Washington stepped in and refused delivery. Decoux was virtually forced to accept Japanese demands for 'facilities' in the Bay of Tonkin.

In August 1941 Roosevelt and Churchill met aboard the cruiser *Augusta* for the Atlantic Conference. There they issued the Atlantic Charter, pledging themselves to peaceful aims, no territorial aggrandisement, fair labour laws, the right of all peoples to choose their own government, and other items of high-sounding double-talk. What they didn't declare was their deal for a joint war against Japan. Winston Churchill, never one for subtleties, let slip to the House of Commons six months later that after meeting FDR he was reassured that 'the United States, even if not herself attacked, would come into the war in the Far East'. Indochina was to be the scene of Japan's last move before the holocaust began.

In July 1941, the Japanese occupied air bases in South Vietnam. The Americans replied with an embargo on petroleum shipped to Japan, and a freezing of all Japanese assets in the US. At the eleventh hour, only a few days before Pearl Harbour, Roosevelt offered Japan a non-aggression guarantee in exchange for a Japanese evacuation of Indochina.

and walk away. "It is none of my business", one American told me as his troops were working over a captured Viet Cong in black pyjamas — the normal Viet Cong uniform.

'Inevitably innocent peasants are kneed in the groin, drowned in vats of water, or die of loss of blood after "interrogation"; but you cannot identify Viet Cong from peasants unless they admit it — and Viet Cong don't help by talking (...) Most men don't talk under torture. Women **never** do.'

In the above quoted incident the Americans were referred to as those who 'turn their backs and walk away'. Just three years later, on March 16, 1968, Lieutenant William Calley and his now infamous 'Charlie Company' moved into the hamlet of My Lai in the village of Son My. The Americans had been told there might be Viet Cong in the area, but in fact the hamlet contained an estimated 500 civilians, mostly old people, women and children. Although not a single shot was fired at them, the Americans moved systematically through the hamlet killing every person they found. Most of the younger women were raped before being shot. For hours the killing continued. An estimated 400-430 Vietnamese villagers were killed.

In a semi-official account of the massacre, Richard Hammer's book, *One Morning in the War*, establishes that My Lai was unfortunately *not* an isolated incident, that it differed from the day-to-day normal conduct of 'Charlie Company' only in that many more people were killed and in that it was eventually (after 18 months of obstruction by the military) the subject of an official investigation and trial.

My Lai brought home to many the logical outcome of capitalist barbarism, of training people to kill, and of sending them to fight for interests which are not their own. 55 It is hardly surprising that the American campaign to 'win the hearts' of the peasants showed little result.

At home, the increasing numbers of US casualties (56,000 killed, 303,000 wounded), the capture of downed pilots, coupled with the ever increasing cost of the war added to growing public disillusion and dissatisfaction. In the eight years 1964-72 no less than \$108 billion went in direct spending. In 1969, at the height of the war, the direct cost was \$21.5 billion.¹⁵ This led to huge budget deficits and punishing inflation, which imposed the 1970 recession and the consequent rigid

¹⁵ US big business certainly does not view an outbreak of peace in Vietnam as at all damaging to their interests. On the contrary, 'peace' is looked forward to 'as an essential step to winning' future projects. Says John C. Bierwirth, Vice-President of the Grumman Corporation : 'Once the present expenditures for daily combat support are behind us, the military will begin to improve current aircraft.

Within two years (August 1967) there would be 525,000 US troops in South Vietnam, 54,000 Allied troops, and a South Vietnamese army of 600,000. They would have the strongest naval force in history patrolling the waters of North and South Vietnam, and by 1973, with all Northern ports and harbours mined, would have dropped in excess of ten million tons of bombs in Indochina,¹³ (the total tonnage of bombs dropped during the Second World War and Korea by all combatants was 3.1 million tons.).

The reasons for America's inability to win are not hard to find. The overwhelming majority of villages in the South have been completely devastated. At least 50% of the bomb tonnage dropped is of an anti-personnel nature, napalm or delayed action fragmentation bombs. Thousands of square miles of forest have been defoliated, thousands of square miles of arable land and crops, North and South, deliberately destroyed.

It was a war where 'body count' and 'kill ratio' defined a victory. Every day, without exception, we were told the exact number of combatants killed. American operations were named 'search and destroy' and were described much as hunting expeditions. Thousands of innocent bystanders were included in the US statistics as 'dead VC'.

A very typical press report from the early period of US involvement came from the *Sunday Mirror* on April 4, 1965 :

'In a Viet Cong-controlled area every young man of military age is assumed to be a Viet Cong soldier who has thrown away his weapon just before capture.

Most areas of South Vietnam (three-quarters of the country) are now Viet Cong-controlled.¹⁴ Therefore most men in the countryside by that yardstick should be presumed to be Viet Cong soldiers or sympathisers. That is correct.

'Vietnamese troops always beat up or torture prisoners. They think nothing of it. It is normal procedure (...) American advisers having nothing to do with dunking men head first into water tanks or slicing them up with knives. When this starts the Americans turn their backs

¹³ In the B52 raids on Hanoi in December 1972, the US was to drop more tonnage *per day* than fell on the United Kingdom *throughout* World War II.

¹⁴ One basic fact should be made clear. 90% of the people of South Vietnam live on one-fifth of the land. Thus the statement that the Viet Cong control three-quarters (or sometimes four-fifths) of the country is meaningless. About four-fifths of the countryside is almost uninhabitable with less than 20 persons per square kilometre.

Between 1942 and 1945 the struggle between American and Japanese imperialism was ferociously fought out throughout the whole Pacific area. In this pamphlet however we can only deal with these events inasmuch as they involved the struggle for the control of Indochina.

Throughout the period of the European war the French troops in Indochina had been 'recognised as the legal authority' by the Japanese government. The Nazi defeat in France in 1944 and 1945 inspired these French troops in Indochina to drive the Japanese from the colony. The Japanese struck back. In March 1945 they launched a full-scale offensive against the French garrisons. The American Air Force was operating in the area and urgent appeals were sent to it by the French for help — appeals pointedly ignored by the American command. The reason is best told in the words of US General Chennault, commander of the 14th US Air Force :

"(...) orders arrived from theatre headquarters stating that no arms and ammunition would be provided to French troops under any circumstances. I was allowed to proceed with 'normal' action against the Japanese in Indochina provided it did not involve supplying the French troops (...) General Wedemeyer's orders not to aid the French came directly from the War Department. Apparently it was American policy then that French Indochina would not be returned to the French. The American government was interested in seeing the French forcibly ejected from Indochina so the problem of post-war separation from their colony would be easier (...) While American transports in China avoided Indochina, the British flew aerial supply missions for the French all the way from Calcutta, dropping tommy guns, grenades and mortars.'¹

British planes had flown 1,500 miles in attempts to assist. US planes, 150 miles distant, ignored the plight of their fellow imperialists. The French garrisons were

¹ *Way of a Fighter*, by General Claire L. Chennault, p.342. Chennault was later dismissed for minor interventions on behalf of the French. By way of corroboration, General Wedemeyer himself tells how he visited Roosevelt in March 1945 : '(...) He evinced considerable interest in French Indochina and stated he was going to do everything possible to give the people in that area their independence. (...) He admonished me not to give any supplies to the French forces operating in the area.' (*Wedemeyer Reports*, p.340).

annihilated. On March 10 1945 the Japanese declared Indochina 'independent' and installed Bao Dai as Emperor.²

of this support and shown how the Viet Cong were able to present themselves both as the protagonists of agrarian reform and as fighters for 'national independence', while systematically eliminating all those who either advocated or sought to create autonomous organs of struggle.

The rebellion in the South was contrary to the wishes (and 'interests') of Hanoi, who were concentrating on building up their country after the devastation of the French wars, and who had ordered their supporters in the South not to 'rock the boat'. In fact it was not until May 1959 that North Vietnam's leaders finally decided, at the 15th meeting of the Lao Dong Central Committee, to take control of the growing insurgency in the South.¹⁰ Central Committee member Nguyen Chi Thanh was despatched to the South where he commanded the Viet Cong until killed by a US bomb in 1967. Ho Chi Minh had been caught in the dilemma so familiar to Stalinist bureaucrats everywhere, of trying to 'live in peace' and create a prosperous state capitalism while simultaneously trying to appear as a 'revolutionary' 'assisting' the struggle. There has always been only one answer — to take over the autonomous movement and destroy it. Loath as he was to become involved in the South, Ho had no alternative. Only by 'helping' and 'participating' could he 'take over' and 'lead' the struggle. To ignore the plight of his Southern 'comrades' would leave him open to the charge of betrayal. At the same time another Stalinist myth was thereby manufactured. Having 'entered' the struggle and taken over the movement, the communist party (the nucleus of the future bureaucracy) retroactively becomes the 'inspirer' of the revolution. Past history is re-written in terms of Stalinist expediency.

However, Johnson wouldn't and couldn't accept the findings of his own intelligence services, for whatever flimsy justifications were made for the American presence, there could be no justification if there were no 'outside aggression'. Hence the bombings, and hence their failure to achieve anything for the US apart from the aforementioned 'self-justification'. Eight years later the US was still 'retaliating' against Hanoi for Viet Cong attacks in the South !

It took the Pentagon less than two months to realise that its long-planned bombing of the North was not going to prevent the collapse of the Saigon regime, and on April 1, 1965, Johnson decided to commit a substantial land force to the fighting.¹¹ Later the same month US intelligence reported the acceptance of the first North Vietnamese regiment into the 'enemy order of battle'.¹²

² 10 days after the Japanese capitulation; later that year, Bao Dai was to abdicate. No one held the puppet strings any longer. But as will be seen, both the Viet Minh and the French were to pick them up, in succession, a little later. Such was the dearth of supple-spined politicians at that time !

¹⁰ *The Pentagon Papers*, p.69.

¹¹ *The Pentagon Papers*, p.382.

¹² *The Pentagon Papers*, p.409.

Two of these '34A raids', taking place on July 30 and August 3, 1964, were to lead to the incidents that launched the 'official' phase of the American war against the North. On August 2 and August 4, North Vietnamese torpedo boats, seeking the raiders in the attack area (in the Tonkin Gulf), stumbled upon two American destroyers covering the operations. A few shells were exchanged. Johnson reported to the American Congress that US ships had been the object of 'an unprovoked attack' (he told Congress nothing of the '34A raids') and he immediately ordered retaliatory bombing of targets in North Vietnam. In less than 12 hours the bombers were on their way, in what appeared to be a remarkably speedy response, until *The Pentagon Papers* revealed that the operation was the result of six months' careful planning.⁶

The following month, on September 7, a White House strategy meeting reached a 'general consensus' that general air attacks would be launched against the North early in 1965.⁷ But at home Johnson was fighting an election campaign with Goldwater advocating precisely that policy ! Embarrassing ? Not a bit of it. Here is LBJ holding forth *in the same week* that the strategy meeting took place :

'I have had advice to load air planes with bombs and to drop them on certain areas that I think would enlarge and escalate the war, and result in our committing a good many American boys to fighting a war that I think ought to be fought by the boys of Asia to help protect their own land. And for that reason I haven't chosen to enlarge the war.'⁸

As opposed to Goldwater who, in addition to calling for bombs on Hanoi, demanded the defoliation of Vietnamese forests, Johnson in his campaign speeches consistently opposed escalation, the bombing of the North, and so on. But a few months later, having been re-elected as the 'peace candidate', Johnson was able, on February 13, 1965, to implement the decisions of the previous September and launch 'Operation Rolling Thunder', i.e. the sustained bombing of North Vietnam.

That the American bombing policy in North Vietnam was a total failure in its objective, namely to help secure the US position in the South, came as no surprise to American intelligence officers. Their reports repeatedly pointed out that the Viet Cong had indigenous support in the South.⁹ We have already indicated the basis

⁶ *The Pentagon Papers*, pp.261-263.

⁷ *The Pentagon Papers*, p.307.

⁸ *The Pentagon Papers*, p.311.

⁹ *The Pentagon Papers*, p.242.

The conquest of power

With the outbreak of war the leadership of the ICP had left Indochina for the safety of the neighbouring Chinese provinces. Party policy was now dominated by the call for 'national unity'. A resolution of the Central Committee called for the temporary cessation of the class struggle :

'For the moment the partial and class interest must be subordinated to the national problem. If the independence and freedom of the whole nation could not be recovered, not only the whole nation would be further condemned to slavery but the partial and class interests would be lost forever.'¹

In May 1941 the ICP 'dissolved' itself and the Vietnam Independence League, or Viet Minh, was founded to facilitate 'the mobilisation of the masses' national spirit'. Viet Minh policy was reformist to the core, advocating nothing more drastic than the confiscation of the land of 'traitors' and 'imperialists'. The Viet Minh was declared a 'broad' organisation. Even the French were asked to participate.

Based in China and backed by the local Chinese warlords, a pro-Chinese Truong Chinh was 'elected' Secretary-General of the Viet Minh. This brought the newly-formed body a monthly stipend of up to 200,000 Chinese dollars. The Chinese warlords thought it a really good investment; they considered the Viet Minh a particularly useful 'intelligence' organisation working on their behalf. Come the end of the war they felt they would be able to use Ho to achieve their ambitions in the mineral rich Tonkin area.

At no time during this period did the Viet Minh have any contact with or support from Mao and the Chinese communists. All political opponents were characterised as 'Japanese agents'. The Western Allies all became 'goodies'. As the official 'Party History' declares :

'The ICP advocated an extremely clear policy : to lead the masses in insurrection in order to disarm the Japanese before the arrival of

¹ *Thirty Years of Struggle of the Party, Democratic Republic of Vietnam*, p.70.

the Allied forces in Indochina; to wrest power from the Japanese and their puppet stooges, and finally, as the people's power, to welcome the Allied forces.'

In late 1941 Vo Nguyen Giap was duly despatched back to Vietnam to found what was later to become the People's Liberation Army. Giap concentrated on building up local village militias. They were Chinese-armed but remained at home, only being called into action on rare occasions. Then there were the guerilla units. By early 1942 Giap probably had no more than 100 men at his disposal. It was not until 1944 that the party called for the setting up of the 'Liberation Unit', consisting of regular soldiers. In December 1944 Giap had 34 men. Three months later, 1,000, and by August 1945, a total of some 5,000 men. On Christmas Eve 1944 Giap used his regular troops for the first time. Two French outposts were attacked and the defenders wiped out.

We have already detailed how the Japanese annihilated the French garrisons in March 1945. Prior to the fall of the Vichy Government, the Japanese, despite their declared policy of commitment to the independence of the peoples of Asia, had maintained French colonialism in power without question. Indochina was, at the time, the only country in East Asia where Europeans still ruled. On average Japanese forces stationed in Indochina numbered about 25,000 while the French had 99,000 men there, not counting indigenous troops !

In the changed situation, and with their Pacific empire crashing under the American onslaught, the Japanese tried desperately to find 'satisfactory' local governments. They encouraged a 'nationalist' revival and armed any anticommunist group prepared to accept them.² The Cao Dai and to a lesser extent Hoa Hao movement accepted these weapons. Approaches were made to Diem asking him to form a government but Diem realised that the days of Japanese rule were numbered. He declined the invitation. His day was yet to come.

In the North the Viet Minh were now becoming very active. In addition to Chinese help, American arms were parachuted to them. Quantity-wise the US didn't provide much : a total of 5,000 weapons at most. But the psychological value of this virtually official recognition was immense.

By June 1945 six northern provinces were under Viet Minh control. On August 15 the Japanese surrendered. Four days later the Viet Minh forces, *numbering 1,000 men*, marched into Hanoi and declared themselves the government authority. The Japanese had 30,000 troops in Hanoi but not a shot was fired !

² *Vietnam: The Origins of Revolution*, by John T. McAlister Jnr., pp. 118-135.

American involvement

How the United States frustrated the Geneva Agreement and became involved in developing the war during the next eighteen years is no secret, thanks to the publication of *The Pentagon Papers* by the *New York Times*. These documents were prepared for Robert McNamara who was then US Secretary of Defence in late 1967 as a detailed record of the history of American involvement. Substantial extracts from them appeared in *The Times* in a series of articles beginning in June 1971.

Geneva had 'frozen' the status quo, dividing Vietnam and forbidding the introduction of foreign troops or foreign military bases. We now know from official records that Eisenhower almost immediately approved the sending of some 300 CIA agents into Hanoi to carry out sabotage in key industrial plants, under a Colonel Lansdale. His task force was to become active from the minute the Conference closed.¹ Lengthy and detailed reports made by the Colonel on the various 'successes' these CIA agents achieved are reproduced in the *Papers*, reports which obviously impressed American decision-makers, for on May 11, 1961, John F. Kennedy not only clandestinely increased the US military mission in Saigon by 500 men, but also approved the financing of a stepped-up campaign of sabotage, ranger raids, and similar military actions in North Vietnam.²

Just prior to his assassination, Kennedy ordered that this programme of 'non-attributable hit and run' raids against North Vietnam be stepped up.³ These secret activities were carried further by the Johnson Administration which, on February 1, 1964, under code name 'Operation Plan 34A', ordered 'an elaborate programme of covert military operations against the state of North Vietnam',⁴ operations consisting of U2 spy flights, kidnappings, sabotage, the parachuting of psychological warfare agents into the North, commando raids from the sea to blow up rail and highway bridges, and the bombardment of coastal installations by PT boats.⁵

¹ *The Pentagon Papers*, pp.64 -65.

² *The Pentagon Papers*, p.82.

³ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 189.

⁴ *The Pentagon Papers*, p.235.

⁵ *The Pentagon Papers*, p.238.

having systematically eliminated all opposition are not confronted with quite the same problem.

Ho Chi Minh arrived in the capital on August 30, 1945. Three days later he addressed a mass rally of 500,000 in Ba Dinh Square, delivering the Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Vietnam :

'All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.'

He concluded his speech :

'We are convinced that the Allied Nations which have acknowledged at Teheran and San Francisco the principles of self-determination and equality of nations will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam.'³

Ho's 'popular appeal' worked. He received wholehearted support from the most unlikely quarters. The three Catholic bishops publicly supported Viet Minh policy (and in return a prominent Catholic layman was soon appointed Minister of the Economy in the new government). It was no coincidence that Ho had chosen December 2, the feast of the Vietnamese martyrs, as Vietnamese Independence Day !

In September, under the terms of 'Big Five' Agreements, 125,000 Chinese troops moved into the northern areas of Vietnam. They were supposed to disarm and concentrate the Japanese forces in the northern provinces — a task which, incidentally, they never accomplished. Ho set about organising elections to be held in January 1946. He promised the Kuomintang generals that the non-communist parties would be given 70 seats in the first legislature provided they did not compete in the poll. Not surprisingly the Viet Minh's single list of candidates was overwhelmingly elected. 90% of the population went to the polls, 80% of them voting for the 'Fatherland Front'. Standing in Hanoi, Ho himself received 98% of the votes cast. Giap, candidate for Nghe An, only managed a modest 97%.

In provincial towns controlled by right-wing authorities, no elections took place at all. Yet when the National Assembly convened, Viet Minh representatives were seated from those localities. Then there was the 'allocation' of seats. Of 374 elected members, only 18 came from Cochin China, although Cochin China's 51/2 million inhabitants comprised almost 25% of the total population. Only 1 of those 18 elected members ever managed to attend an assembly.

³ *Democratic Republic of Vietnam: Documents.*

Most of the voting results were determined in the Viet Minh controlled areas of the north where food ration cards had to be presented and stamped. Without this stamp the card became invalid. Under conditions of food scarcity and near famine (only six months previously some 600,000 had died of starvation in the Red River Delta) it was suicide for anyone aged 18 or over not to vote. The 90% vote claimed is probably quite accurate !

Two months later, in March 1946, the Assembly held its first meeting. A second meeting took place in October but only 291 members were present. Questioned about the absence of so many legislators, a Viet Minh minister announced they had been arrested for 'common law crimes'. By the time of the third meeting (November 8, 1946) only 242 members remained. The Assembly was to meet once more, in March 1955, to approve a resolution which said it was the 'sole representative of the people'. The next election, after 1946, was to be in 1960.

Ho Chi Minh has neatly summed up his own successes in one of the neatest 'elitist' braggings ever :

'When the August Revolution took place there were about 5,000 Party members, including those in jail. Less than 5,000 Party members have thus organised and led the uprisings of twenty-four million fellow-countrymen to victory'.⁴

Irrespective of who sat in the Presidential seat in Saigon, the stakes of the country remain unchanged. Indeed, at the time of maximum American involvement, the US rulers more and more openly admitted that it was 'their' war and they intended staying in Vietnam even if the impossible happened and they were asked to leave by one of their puppet Saigon governments.⁶

Prior to 1954, while the battles were being fought in the Northern provinces, the Saigon governments were dominated by Southern landowners and representatives of the old feudal nobility. Since 1955, ironically enough, the governments have been dominated by central Vietnamese and Northern Catholics — at a time when the burden of military struggle has been in the South.

At this point in time (March 1973), the population of South Vietnam is totally disrupted. According to official American estimates, 6-7 million people (or two-thirds of the population) have been refugees at one time or another since 1964. This has meant a great influx into the already overcrowded cities. In the years 1962-72, the urban population of South Vietnam has increased from 20 to 50%. The overwhelming majority of the new town dwellers have come from the countryside, now under communist control. The ink still wet on the 'Paris Agreement', Thieu has made it quite clear that these people will not be allowed to return home.

The only consistent feature of the various Saigon governments has been the hatred they have managed to inspire in the masses of the Vietnamese people — a fact tacitly admitted by Eisenhower in his memoirs :

'I have never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indochinese affairs who did not agree that had elections been held as of the time of the fighting, possibly 80% of the population would have voted for the communist Ho Chi Minh.'⁷

The 1956 elections agreed by the Geneva Conference never took place. After all, what price 'democracy' when the other chap looks like winning ? In fact, John Foster Dulles stated it just as bluntly as that. Asked at a press conference why the States supported the refusal of the Saigon government to allow the elections for national unification, Dulles said it could only happen when 'there are conditions of really free elections'. Asked to elaborate, he said that this meant 'a guarantee that there is not a serious risk that the communists would win'. The communists

⁶ This was stated by Henry Cabot Lodge, US Ambassador in Saigon, to a Senate Committee on August 9 1965. President Johnson said five days later that the remarks had not been intended for publication — but he did not deny that they had been made.

⁷ *Mandate for Change: The White House Years 1953-1956*, p.372.

⁴ *Our Party Has Struggled Very Heroically and Won Glorious Victories*, by Ho Chi Minh, p. 12.

he had switched allegiance to America. He had spent the post war years travelling about the US, winning support for his fanatically anti-communist, pro-catholic ideas. He was particularly favoured by John F. Kennedy and Cardinal Spellman, the voices of catholic America.

Diem quite openly assumed dictatorial powers. A year after his accession he organised a referendum to have Bao Dai ousted in favour of a Republic. Not to be outdone by Ho's electoral success, Diem managed to secure a 98.2% vote in favour of the Republic.

The widespread corruption of the Diem regime, the absurd morality laws which forbade dancing and the singing of sentimental songs, and the widespread persecution of all non-catholic elements, are common knowledge.

A prominent issue in South Vietnam is the land starvation of the peasants. Out of a total of 250,000 landowners, 6,300 (most of them absentee landlords), own 1,035,000 hectares of rice land (45% of the total), while 183,000 smallholders own 345,000 hectares (15% of the total). In other words, less than 3% of the landowners own 45% of the land.⁴ And this in spite of three so-called Land Reform Acts (agrarian laws). Total food production in South Vietnam in 1965 was only two-thirds of the 1938 total.

Dictators in South Vietnam have changed fairly regularly in recent years. In the North the whole monolithic structure can dispense even with scapegoats. Without exception, southern figureheads have all proved an embarrassment to their masters. For example, there was Air Marshall Ky who, just before his appointment in July 1965, gave an interview to Western reporters in Saigon. The interview was published in *The Sunday Mirror* on July 4, 1965. Ky said :

'People ask me who my heroes are. I have only one — Hitler. We need four or five Hitlers in Vietnam. I admire Hitler because he pulled his country together when it was in a terrible state in the early thirties.'

Latest stooge in Saigon is Nguyen Thieu. A professional soldier, who, like most of those in authority today, fought for the French against the Viet Minh forces. Thieu is equally blunt in his determination to allow no opposition parties, in his objection to peace in principle, and in his burning desire to invade the North. 'Being President of a peaceful country is not interesting; anyone can build roads and hospitals', he declared.⁵

⁴ See *The Two Vietnams*, by Bernard B. Fall, p. 153.

⁵ *The Observer*, October 29, 1972.

The British in the South

As the Chinese occupied the north, British (and some American) troops arrived in the south. It had been decided at Potsdam in July 1945 to make south Vietnam part of Mountbatten's South East Asia Command. Churchill and his colleagues were increasingly interested in this part of the world and saw the war essentially as a struggle to regain the old imperial outposts. They were particularly fearful that a collapse of the French or Dutch empires would give further impetus to the anti-colonial movement in Asia.

De Gaulle's policy was the same. The preamble of the Brazzaville Conference of January 1944 stated quite bluntly;

'The aims of the work of civilisation which France is accomplishing in her possessions excludes any idea of autonomy and any idea of development outside the French Empire bloc The attainment of 'self-government' in the colonies, even in the most distant future, must be excluded.'¹

But for reasons already explained, American policy was support for the Viet Minh. Like the Chinese warlords they hoped to use Ho Chi Minh to oust the French. Paul Mus described in *Vietnam-Sociologie d'une Guerre* the visit of an American officer to a Viet Minh prison camp. When a young French officer cried out to the American to liberate him, the American replied : 'Those fellows must have some reason for putting you in there. So why don't you stay where you are ?' The name of the French officer was Jean Ramadier. Two years later his father was Premier of France.

The British forces sent to South Vietnam were, at first, the 20th Indian Division of the 14th Army commanded by General Douglas Gracey. In brief his orders were to :

1. disarm and concentrate the Japanese forces,
2. release and repatriate allied POWs, and
3. maintain 'law and order'.

¹ *The Emancipation of French Indo-China*, by Donald Lancaster, Royal Institute of International Affairs.

What Gracey *did* in the four months of his occupation was :

1. overthrow the Viet Minh government in Saigon,
2. suppress the uprising that followed, largely with the use of Japanese troops, and
3. restore French rule.

On August 22 the Viet Minh established a 'People's Committee for the South' in Saigon Town Hall. Of the nine members, six were Stalinists. Chairman of the Committee was Tran Van Giau.

Five days later Tran Van Giau held his first meeting with Cedille, newly arrived French Commissioner-Delegate, parachuted in by the RAF. Giau made it quite clear that 'his Committee' was *determined* to have cordial relations with the French government.

On September 2, the day of Ho's big independence rally in Hanoi, the Committee staged a mass demonstration through the streets of Saigon. Although the Viet Minh marshals toured the streets calling for a 'peaceful' demonstration, it got 'out of hand' and the Viet Minh cadres lost control. Angry demonstrators 'arrested' known collaborators, killing five of them, and finally committed the crime of all crimes : they looted French property. Next morning the Viet Minh press denounced these 'excesses' and called for the immediate release of all French prisoners. Giau made a public appeal for 'co-operation' with the colonial powers ! 'In the interests of our country we call on everyone to have confidence in us and not be led astray by people who betray our country.'

Nguyen Van Tao, another prominent Committee member, put the party line even more clearly. He warned against the 'seizure of land and private property' and added : 'Our government is a middle-class government, even though the communists are in power'.²

Simultaneously, the Viet Minh appealed for the *voluntary dissolution* of all independent partisan groups, coupled with the call for all weapons to be handed over to the Viet Minh's own 'Republican Guard'. It was greeted by a leaflet issued by surviving Trotskyists of the 'Spark' group calling for the arming of the people, the

² Communist Party policy has always opposed workers taking over their factories or peasants taking over the land. NLF policy in South Vietnam remains the same today. *Never* is the call made 'The land to the tillers'. Communist policy is 'collectivisation' organised from above, after the fashion of Russia, China or North Vietnam.

Throughout the eight years of war with France that were soon to follow, Viet Minh guerillas hardly ever touched French property. 'When local People's Committees made their own revolutionary policy, seizing land and property, the Viet Minh Central Committee intervened, doing its best to temper them.' (*Struggle for Indo-China*, by Ellen Hammer, Stanford University Press, p.141)

The Saigon regime in the South

South Vietnam's population is 16-18 million, 5 million of whom live in the Mekong delta, which is the economic centre of the economy. This is the main rice growing area. There are rubber plantations to the north of Saigon. To a lesser extent peanuts, tea and maize are also cultivated. South Vietnam's survival is very dependent on foreign aid.

As early as May 8, 1950, the US announced her support for France in Indochina. In fact in the spring of 1952 General Gruenther (NATO Chief of Staff), told the American Congress : 'From a strategic and economic point of view, retention of Indochina is considered more important than Korea'.¹ With this in mind, the US had set up the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), its principle purpose according to Dulles being 'to provide our President legal authority to intervene in Indochina'.² By 1954 the US had paid \$1.1 billion (i.e. 78% of the French war burden), and Dulles was demanding a massive stepping up of involvement, including the use of nuclear weapons, to aid the French forces in Dien Bien Phu. Following the French capitulation there, the Eisenhower Administration seriously considered direct intervention and hinted as much to France;³ members of the French Military Command favoured this (at one time they had suggested American air strikes from planes painted with French markings), but a war-weary French public, coupled with the total defeat of the French army, led Eisenhower to decide on 'no intervention at this stage'.

Not surprisingly, as the French moved out of South Vietnam the Americans moved in. They quickly installed their own puppet Premier, the unsavoury Diem whom even a laudatory *Time* profile on April 4, 1955, described as capable of 'exploding into tantrums if interrupted' and who will, if a personal enemy is mentioned, 'spit across the room and snarl "dirty type" '.

Diem's father had been mandarin first-class, in charge of eunuchs in the royal harem. Diem had served as a provincial governor under the French, then as Minister of the Interior, a post in which he had served the Japanese. On their defeat

¹ *Daily Telegraph*, May 7, 1952.

² *New York Times*, June 3, 1964.

³ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 10.

rules whereby daughters of landlords who married into a 'low' class must first have spent one year in the new class before being considered part of it. A poor farmer's daughter who 'married up' could remain married for three years before being reclassified into the new (less desirable) social category.

On November 2, 1956, at exactly the same time as Soviet tanks were rumbling through the streets of Budapest, the class struggle erupted in North Vietnam too. The Ho Chi Minh Government faced its most important uprising of dissatisfied peasants.

By coincidence, Canadian members of the International Control Commission were in Nghe An province when the outbreak took place. Within a matter of hours the uprising had spread to neighbouring villages. Troops sent to restore order were driven from the village. Hanoi acted as any colonial power would have done. They sent their 325th Division to crush the rebels. Close to 6,000 farmers were deported or executed. (How many Northern My Lais that we have never heard of occurred during this period ?)

The land reform tribunals were abolished as of November 8, 1956. The Minister of Agriculture was sacked, along with leading members of Hanoi's 'Politburo'.

The problems of Northern land reform were largely problems created by political dogma. Ho's handling of the situation was reminiscent of Stalin's action in 1929 when he halted his forced collectivisation drive and exonerated himself from the consequences of his own policies by providing scapegoats from a lower level in the bureaucracy. Significantly the heads that rolled in Ho's purge were all back in their old positions within a year or so.

It has already been pointed out that both North and South Vietnam are dependent on outside aid. According to official Hanoi statistics, communist bloc grants and loans between 1955 and 1961 totalled more than \$1 billion, of which the USSR provided \$365 million and China \$662 million. This works out at over \$70 per person, which is roughly what the Saigon regime received from the US in the same period.

The extent of aid received more recently is difficult to assess. The State Department estimated that in 1972 the Soviet Union provided \$500 million, or 65% of North Vietnam's foreign aid.

How much of this aid actually reached the people is, of course, a matter of conjecture. Bureaucrats are the same the whole world over. For instance, late in 1955, the official Party organ *Nhan-Dan* admitted that the National Trade Service of Ho Chi Minh's native province had embezzled 700 million piastres (\$1 million), and that a drug-making factory had embezzled 37 million piastres.

formation of popular action committees, and the creation of a popular assembly to organise the struggle for national independence.³

The Viet Minh were trying to destroy the various 'self-defence groups' based on the factories and plantations, most of which stood for radical social change and did not accept the 'leadership' of the Viet Minh.

These pronouncements evoked angry responses from virtually every non-communist grouping. The Trotskyists were particularly effective in their denunciations of this policy of 'class betrayal'. The 'Peoples' Committee for the South' felt particularly vulnerable to such attacks.

The 'left opposition' had been largely obliterated during the War years. The Viet Minh had been the resistance 'recognised' by the Western Allies, had received all the military aid and all the propaganda boosts. It was a situation not unlike that of Tito's partisans vis-a-vis the 'other' opposition guerilla forces. Like Tito, the Viet Minh had used the opportunities and the weapons thrown in their laps to eliminate any Trotskyists and 'other Japanese agents' they could lay hands on.⁴ The Trotskyists were advocating the creation of 'rank and file' bodies. The workers were in fact doing this spontaneously, but it is easy to see how the Trotskyists can now claim it all came about because of 'their' leadership. (Whenever Trotskyists have actually captured the leadership of a movement they have invariably behaved exactly as the Stalinists. That there have been so few examples of Trotskyism 'in power' helps them to create the myth that they somehow represent the 'grass-roots' movement as opposed to Stalinist 'bureaucracy'.)

Some 400 workers from the Go-Vap tramway depot, five miles from Saigon, and militants from Tia-Sang organised a workers' militia, reiterating the call to all workers in Saigon and the surrounding area to arm themselves in preparation for the inevitable struggle against British and French imperialism.

THE NOOSE TIGHTENS

On September 12, 1945 the Trotskyist International Communist League and one of the People's Committees under its control issued an appeal which 'denounced openly the treasonable policy of the Viet Minh Government' and its capitulation to the threats of the British General Staff. Duong Bach Mai (the person whose election

³ Note that although more in touch with the impending reality, and although opposed to the out-and-out Stalinist policies, the Trotskyist demands were themselves bourgeois and non-socialist.

⁴ The Japanese, attempting to crush the Viet Minh forces in the latter days of the war, had armed the anti-communist and religious (Buddhist) Cao Dai and Hoa Hao groups, even offering arms and assistance to Ta Thu Thau. Ta neither accepted nor acknowledged the offer.

Ta Thu Thau had supported in 1935) had become Viet Minh Chief of Police in Saigon. He immediately ordered the arrest of the leaders of the International Communist League and the closing of its headquarters. When Duong Bach Mai's police detachment raided the headquarters of the People's Committee, where an Executive meeting was in progress, they met with no resistance. A Trotskyist participant stated 'we conducted ourselves as true militants of the Revolution. We allowed ourselves to be arrested without resisting police violence, even though we outnumbered them and were all well armed'.

Lucien, 'Quelques Etapes de la Revolution au Nam-Bo du Vietnam', Quatrieme Internationale, Sept.-Oct. 1947, p.43.

THE DROP

Late in 1945 the Trotskyists still considered themselves part of the 'same movement' as the Stalinists — and allowed themselves to be arrested without a struggle. This attitude was not reciprocated by the Viet Minh. During the last few weeks of 1945 the leadership of both Trotskyist groups ('The Struggle' and 'October') was decimated. Among the more prominent opponents of varying political beliefs who were killed by the Viet Minh in this period were Pham Quynli (prominent mandarin), Bui Quang Chien (constitutionalist), Ho Van Nga (leader of the National Independence Party) and the Trotskyists Ta Thu Thau, Tran Van Thach and Phan Van Hum. In his *Histoire du Vietnam de 1940 a 1952* Philippe Devilliers states : 'the Communists gave the appearance of coldly applying a systematic programme of elimination of their eventual adversaries.'

The first British troops flew into Saigon in early September (Gracey himself arriving on the 13th) and were welcomed enthusiastically by the Viet Minh. The city was bedecked with Viet Minh, British and American flags and a great variety of welcoming banners and slogans. The British promptly took over control of all vital installations — the airfield, power station, police stations, the jail and the post and telegraph offices.

From the start Gracey was not going to have any 'nonsense' from the Vietnamese. He had stated in Burma that 'the question of the government of Indochina is exclusively French' and his reaction to the Viet Minh reception committee that

Bureaucratic state in the North

North Vietnam today has a population of 18-20 million, at least half of whom live in the Red River delta or in and around Hanoi and Haiphong. Rice, sugar and maize are the main crops, but are not grown in sufficient quantities for home requirements. Coal is mined, and there is extensive industry in Hanoi and Haiphong (manufacturing cement, textiles, paper, plastics, and superphosphates).

External trade is carried out almost exclusively by barter and with the state capitalist world. This relationship has strongly reinforced their already concordant politics.

The Northern regime inherited an area twice ravaged in less than a decade, plundered by Japanese and Chinese, bombed by the US Air Force, ploughed under by French tanks. In addition, the sudden exodus of 860,000 refugees¹ to the South created a serious crisis of food production. Only a Russian 'crash' programme of Burmese rice staved off a serious famine.

Immediate state plans were drafted in all fields of food and industrial production. Invariably these first draftings proved to be overambitious, but in general the North Vietnamese bureaucracy proceeded with capital accumulation (at the expense of the peasantry) at a fairly rapid rate.

One of the most difficult problems of that period (1955-1958) was land reform. The first decrees had actually been drafted in 1953 (and applied where possible). They contained sets of rules for determining 'social class' which were quite comical — for example, a piglet was equated to so many quarts of rice.

By the use of dogmatic formulae, the whole population was subdivided into five categories ranging from 'landlord' to 'agricultural worker'. (Similar classifications were devised to categorise town dwellers.) Added to these classifications were

¹ 600,000 of these refugees were Catholics. Cardinal Spellman had succeeded in getting the US government to sponsor Catholic Action against the Stalinists. Very successful psychological leaflets were dropped : 'Christ has gone to the South', and 'The Virgin Mary has departed from the North'. Bishops and priests left, in many cases taking their whole congregations with them. Over 99% of the non-Catholics remained in North Vietnam. Most of those who moved South were richer peasants, and their departure had the positive effect of helping Ho's 'land reforms'. There was now plenty of surplus land to be parcelled out to the landless peasants who remained.

The Geneva agreements

The Geneva Conference began its discussions on Indochina on May 8 1954 (the day Dien Bien Phu fell). The participants were the old and new imperialist powers, Britain, France, the USA, the USSR, China, and their puppets : Cambodia, Laos, South Vietnam and North Vietnam. The agreements were reached July 20 and 21. These provided for a provisional military line at the 17th parallel. They prohibited the introduction into Vietnam of war material or of 'any troop reinforcements and additional military personnel'. They prohibited the establishment of 'new military bases' and emphasised strict non-adherence to 'any military alliance'. They further provided for elections to be held in July 1956 at the latest, under the supervision of an International Commission comprised of delegates from Poland, India, and Canada. The US and South Vietnam refused to sign the final declaration.

The Agreements paved the way for the consolidation of two bureaucratic states. The two Vietnams are theoretically complementary. In the North : rich mineral deposits and some industrialisation (although 80% of the population are peasants). In the South : agriculture. Both sides rely on outside aid.

awaited him is best summed up in his own words : 'I was welcomed on arrival by the Viet Minh and I promptly kicked them out'.⁵

Gracey's main preoccupation was 'law and order'. 'Officially' this was supposed to be being administered by the Japanese, some 40,000 of whom were based in south Vietnam,⁶ half of them in Saigon. They were an undefeated army with the entire command structure intact. Within 36 hours of his arrival in Saigon, Gracey called Field Marshal Count Terauchi, the Japanese commander to him, reminded him that 'law and order' was his responsibility under the terms of the surrender and that these powers must certainly not be usurped by the Viet Minh.

Of course 'law and order' to Gracey meant the maintenance of the status quo. His political understanding went no further than the *Manual of Military Law* which specifies that a military commander must observe the laws of the country concerned. In Vietnam, in Gracey's terms of reference, this meant *French* 'law and order'. The logic of his position ensured that he could not (had he even wanted to) come to terms with, or even seriously consult with, the Viet Minh, nor with any other native national body, and in fact he insisted that all demands or requests from the local population must be channelled through Terauchi's HQ. In this situation, the Viet Minh were finding it increasingly difficult to prevent the growing resentment towards the British, resentment that increasingly began to show itself in attacks on troops and the looting of French property.

As disorder increased, Gracey took sharper measures which in turn activated more resistance. Protesting at British connivance with the French, on September 17 the Viet Minh leadership was forced to shut Saigon market, call a series of token strikes and enforce a general boycott of all French traders.

Gracey replied with the immediate suppression of all Vietnamese newspapers and ordered that all Vietnamese personnel be disarmed. The Viet Minh pleaded with the British authorities, and even put forward proposals for a press censored by the British Army authorities in advance of publication, but Gracey was still not interested in discussing matters with the natives — not even 'friendly natives'.

On September 19 the British issued *Proclamation No. 1*, which in effect declared martial law. Paragraph 4 read as follows :

- (a) No demonstrations or processions will be permitted.
- (b) No public meetings will take place.
- (c) No arms of any description including sticks, staves, bamboo spears, etc., will be carried, except by British and Allied troops, and

⁵ *The Struggle for Indo-China*, by Hammer.

⁶ *Royal Central Asian Journal*, July-October 1953, p.213.

such other forces and police which have been specially authorised by me.

(d) The curfew already imposed on my orders by the Japanese authorities between 21.30 and 05.30 in Saigon and Cholon will be continued and strictly enforced.

The same day Gracey issued weapons to the French.⁷

In the early hours of Sunday, September 23, with Gracey's permission, the French struck against the Viet Minh Committee. In a fast and brutal coup d'état they occupied the Town Hall, arrested all members of the Committee they could locate, and ran up the Tricolour. The operation was carried out with what one British eyewitness, Tom Driberg, MP, described as 'maximum ineptitude and considerable cruelty'. American reporter Harold Isaacs described the takeover :

'(...) sentries were shot down. Occupants of the building were either killed or taken prisoner. Records were seized and scattered. Scores of Annamites were trussed up and marched off. Foreign eye witnesses that morning saw blood flow, saw bound men beaten. They saw French colonial culture being restored to Saigon.'

All day Sunday and the following Monday the newly armed French colons roamed Saigon settling old scores and taking their revenge for the humiliations of the past months. The shootings, beatings and arrests, in the main, were carried out quite indiscriminately against Vietnamese because they were Vietnamese. The reaction was swift and violent. Everywhere street barricades appeared, set up to hinder the British and French patrols. It all happened quite spontaneously, the Viet Minh had certainly not called for an insurrection, preoccupied as they were with 'law and order' and their own accession to power — following 'negotiations'. Important buildings and warehouses in the town centre were fired and, during the night of September 23-24, guerillas attacked the port without respite. The next day revolutionary bands openly paraded in the rue de Verdun, marched up the boulevard de la Somme, converging on the market place, which was then

⁷ When the British arrived in Saigon, virtually all the French were under lock and key and guarded for the most part by armed Vietnamese. They were demoralised, bitter, and spoiling for revenge. Their political allegiance was clearly understood by the British commanders. Mountbatten admitted that: 'The spectacle of France's betrayal had greatly undermined French prestige in her colony: particularly in view of the fact that the Vichy administration in French Indo-China had at all times collaborated openly with the enemy.' (*The Times*, March 4th, 1946.)

'One of the world's richest areas is open to the winner in Indochina. That's behind the growing US concern (...) Tin, rubber, rice, key strategic raw materials, are what the war is really about. The US sees it as a place to hold at any cost (...) Actually, much more than Indochina is involved. The real target in this war is the same vital area the Japanese gambled their empire for in the Second World War Today, South East Asia's raw materials are still necessary to American industry'.

No wonder then that French right-wing politicians rose in the National Assembly during the Appropriations Debate of March 14-18, 1947, to thank their own communist colleagues and the Soviet Union for leaving France to fight its war in Indochina without outside disturbance. In the same debate, Premier Ramadier emphasised 'in the Indochina question we have always noted to this day the correct attitude of the Soviet government'.

Between November 1946 and the summer of 1954, the French colonialists fought a protracted war against the Viet Minh forces, eventually suffering complete defeat at Dien Bien Phu on May 8, 1954. Two months later the war was over. France had suffered 172,000 casualties (30,000 Frenchmen dead, forgetting colonial troops). The French hold on Vietnam had ended for ever. In April 1956 French forces left the country.

During the years a change in American policy had taken place. Mao Tse Tung's regime had come to power in China and had recognised the Ho Chi Minh regime on January 20, 1950. Eleven days later the USSR had followed suit.⁴ The USA then gradually began to change its attitude to the puppet Bao Dai and the French military operation. The *New York Herald Tribune* expressed all the doubts and misgivings in the minds of America's rulers :

'We are in a difficult position. Bao Dai's regime cannot be considered truly independent as long as French troops remain in Vietnam (...) But if French troops were to leave Indochina, the whole country would be over-run by Ho Chi Minh's forces.'

The erstwhile 'allies' (France and the USA), for a while estranged, were obliged to overcome their mutual suspicions in the interest of common advantage. But the US rulers remained determined that they alone would have the pickings. As *US News and World Report* wrote on April 16, 1954 :

- On July 26 1946 a budget of 189 milliard francs was approved by the communist deputies. On the same day the Assembly adopted, with their support, a constitutional definition of the 'French Union'.

- On October 3 1946 the communist deputies voted to approve the final 1946 budget which included the military budget.

- On December 20 1946, a whole month after the murderous bombardment of Haiphong, the 182 communist deputies voted unanimously, together with the rest of the Chamber, to send congratulations to General Leclerc and his Expeditionary Corps !

- On December 23 1946 the communist deputies voted the provisional 1947 budget which included 70 milliard francs in military credits, required 'because of the resumption of hostilities in Indochina'.

⁴ Between 1945 and 1947 Russian recognition could have strengthened the new bureaucratic regime in North Vietnam. However Stalin was at the helm, rigorously applying the Yalta decisions.

set alight. In Saigon there was neither water nor electricity. The town centre fell quickly to the Allied troops, but the poor suburbs remained firmly in rebel hands.⁸

The insurgents were by no means a homogeneous lot, and consisted of members of Popular Committees, Vanguard Youth, Cao Daists, and even 'deviation' groups of Republican Guards. In these areas of popular control a long overdue 'justice' awaited many of the French functionaries of the old regime and, as was inevitable, 80 years of imperialist domination resulted in some cases in the innocent being 'punished' with the guilty. 150 French and European civilians were massacred in the Cite Herodia suburb on September 25. The Viet Minh Committee produced a leaflet : 'The French seem to take pleasure in murdering our people. There is only one answer — a food blockade.' While seeking to starve out the French (a futile hope as British ships controlled the harbour), the Viet Minh clung to its hope of negotiating with the British.

Having unleashed the French, even Gracey became appalled at the consequences, and attempted to backtrack. Where possible he disarmed the colons. Gracey decided to lean even more heavily on the Japanese troops at his disposal, and those who had been disarmed were promptly reissued with weapons, often with 3 inch mortars and bombs which they themselves had captured from the British in Singapore.

In the months that followed, the British were to have only the greatest praise for their Japanese allies. The London *Daily Mirror* of September 26 quoted a British officer in Saigon as saying : 'They (the Japanese) are in charge, and they could clean out the allied forces in one night, but their behaviour is excellent.' So pleased were the British with Terauchi's soldiers that, on October 18, British HQ thanked the Field Marshal with 'highest praise' for his co-operation. Harold Isaacs reported how 'the British were delighted with the discipline shown by their late enemy and were often warmly admiring, in the best playing field tradition, of their fine military qualities. It was all very comradely'.⁹

Other determined attacks were launched against the British occupied power and radio stations, but at no time came near to succeeding. The British positions

⁸ Before abandoning the centre of Saigon, the Viet Minh Committee plastered the walls with posters, inviting the population to 'disperse into the countryside' to 'avoid confrontation', and to 'remain calm' because the Committee hoped to open 'negotiations'.

⁹ The extent to which this 'comradship' was developed was illustrated, for example, when the Frontier Force Regiment was shipped out of Vietnam :

'Many Japanese senior officers and men lined the route to say goodbye to the battalion, and it was a curious, if not pathetic, scene to find the very men who had fought against us so bitterly, now manifestly sorry to bid the battalion farewell'

History of the Frontier Force Regiment: Aldershot 1962.

were easily held, and a counter attack through the north of Saigon temporarily stabilised the situation. In all the surrounding areas guerillas attacked convoys and supply depots, but thanks to the deployment of the well-disciplined and well-armed Japanese forces, and to the determined policy of compromise imposed by the Viet Minh on its followers, the Allied bases were never in serious danger.'

Mountbatten, from afar, declared 'the situation in Saigon is *very serious*', and instructed Gracey to make immediate approaches to the Viet Minh leadership to secure a peaceful settlement. A disgruntled Gracey declared that this had been his policy throughout his brief sojourn in Saigon, but he did as he was ordered, and a ceasefire was agreed for October 3, 1945.

The only concrete decision to emerge from the negotiations which accompanied the ceasefire was that British and Japanese troops were allowed 'free and unmolested passage' through Viet Minh controlled areas. British (Gurkha) and Japanese troops were promptly despatched to various strategic points in the periphery of Saigon.

Two days later, General Leclerc¹⁰ and his expeditionary force arrived. Leclerc declared his objectives were the restoration of 'order', and the building of 'a strong Indochina within the French Union'. A week later his troops were in action burning down villages to the north-east of Saigon.

During this period the Viet Minh Committee had continued to devote itself almost entirely to the elimination of any opposition to its policies.

Although decimated numerically, Tran Van Giau saw the Fourth Internationalists as a real danger, especially as the two factions had united and planned common activity. A conference of militants had been organised around the paper *La Lutte* to discuss future action. Giau decided to move quickly and decisively. The meeting place was surrounded by his 'police', and the organisers arrested. Thirty comrades 'disappeared' forever from the political scene. (*La Lutte* policy at the time had been 'critical support' of the Viet Minh Government.)

Three weeks later, Ta Thu Thau himself, en route to Saigon from Annam province, was seized by Viet Minh officials, brought before a local Peoples' Committee and charged with being a wartime Japanese agent. Three times he was

These touching sentiments were not shared, however, by the American commanders, and General Douglas MacArthur, hardly noted for his left-wing sympathies, summed up the US official viewpoint :

'If there is anything which makes my blood boil it is to see our allies in Indo-China deploying Japanese troops to reconquer the little people we promised to liberate. It is the most ignoble kind of betrayal.' (*The Other Side of the River*, by Edgar Snow.)

¹⁰ Visiting Haiphong some time later, Leclerc was met by Vo Nguyen Giap. 'I am happy to salute in you a resistance fighter like myself', declared the Viet Minh commander.

The French counter-attack

By November 20, 1946, the French Expeditionary Corps felt strong enough to resume hostilities. On November 24 the French navy captured Haiphong after a bombardment that killed 6,000 civilians. The French were now ready to reconquer their former colony. All Ho Chi Minh's efforts had been in vain. The French recognition of Indochinese 'sovereignty' had been a tactical manoeuvre. While the politicians spoke of 'sovereignty', French forces had steadily been built up for reconquest.

During this period (1945-46) in France itself, the Communist Party and the organisations it controlled were powerful. All arms had certainly not yet been surrendered. This probably explains why the USSR never openly supported Viet Minh ambitions for independence. Indeed the French Communist Party cell in Saigon warned the Viet Minh that resistance to the French occupation of Saigon (September 1945) or 'any premature adventures' towards independence 'might not be in line with Soviet perspectives'.¹ This explains why the French communist leaders in Parliament (Maurice Thorez² was Vice-Premier at the time) did nothing to oppose war credits or any of the emergency measures connected with the first phase of the war.³

¹ *No Peace in Asia*, op. cit., p. 173

² It was Thorez, General Secretary of the French CP who remarked to Nguyen Van Xuan who was in Paris with Ho Chi Minh in 1946 that he 'ardently hoped to see the French flag flying over every territory in the French Union', and that he 'had not the slightest intention of being held responsible for a sell out of France's positions in Indo China' (*Ho Chi Minh*, by Jean Lacouture, p.121).

³ Communist Party members today will often deny that the French Party ever voted the war credits for the Indochina war. Sometimes they will even imply that fighting in Indochina only started in 1947, after the Communist Party had been turfed out of the French government. Here is chapter and verse to nail this lie.

- In September 1945, the French government, in which the communists held several ministries, demanded 193 milliard francs of military credits, of which 100 milliard were specifically designated to set up the Expeditionary Corps. The Party voted for this measure.

- In January 1946, on the occasion of the annual budget vote, the Socialist deputies asked for a 20% reduction of military credits. Charles Tillon, communist minister for armaments, opposed the demand, and the communist deputies ensured that it was rejected.

precious months to reinforce their expeditionary corps and to set up, at Dalat, their first puppet government, that of Dr. Thin.¹³

¹³ The popular basis of Dr. Thin's government was very thin indeed : of its 11 ministers, 7 were French colons. Dr. Thin committed suicide a few months later. His 'government' was followed by that of General Xuan (who happened to be an officer in the French Army !). In April 1949, Bao Dai (yes, that man again) was installed in power — by the French this time.

found 'not guilty'. There seemed little point in arranging a fourth trial so he was taken outside and shot.

Having eliminated anyone that he could lay hands on that even smelled of opposition, Giau had a major reshuffle of his Committee and increased it to thirteen members, only four of whom were Stalinists; Giau himself resigned in favour of a 'non-party' man.

The Viet Minh was determined to prove its moderation. On the other hand, the workers of the Go Vap tramway depot were determined to resist both French and Viet Minh rule. The workers here had a long tradition of militancy.

They had won wage concessions from the Japanese occupation by their industrial actions and during August 1945 had taken over and run the depot themselves. Refusing to accept the Viet Minh line of collaboration, they had formed themselves into eleven-men combat groups and attempted to group on the Plaine de Jones to the north of the capital. Most of them were eliminated by Gurka troops; some of the survivors met the fate of all 'saboteurs' and 'reactionaries' who fell into the hands of the Viet Minh. But although it had now strengthened itself organisationally, and to a large extent had the monopoly of 'revolutionary power', its political opponents decimated and divided, the Viet Minh's credibility was dangerously approaching zero. Despite the agreement with the British, repression was daily becoming more evident and spontaneous guerilla actions the instinctive reply. The Viet Minh Committee recognised that it must either take over and lead the rebellion or totally miss the boat.

A major offensive was planned; its objective was to clear the occupation forces from Saigon. It was launched in mid-October. The Viet Minh forces pushed their way into the centre of Saigon and launched a determined assault on British HQ. During the nights October 13 and 14 desperate attempts were made to occupy the docks while RAF installations and aircraft were attacked from three directions and attempts were made to fire the aircraft on the airfield. Again the combined forces of Britain (largely Indian troops) and Japan succeeded in driving off the attackers, who in many cases were armed only with spears, bows and poisoned arrows.

The Vietnamese were pushed steadily out of the city into the countryside where, for the remaining months of the British presence, the war was to revert to guerilla attacks and ambushings.

As the British went over to the offensive the Gurkha regiments made international headlines by competing with one another for the highest number of 'insurgents' killed. It was the beginning of the 'body count' war. However the real brunt of the fighting was borne by the Japanese who, in the peak November period, suffered more casualties than all the other Allied forces put together.

Gracey's intelligence reported that the main guerilla centre lay in the triangle Loc Ninh — Tay Ninh — Saigon, to the north of the capital, and it was here that on November 8 a major offensive was launched by the British, French and Japanese to clear the area. The general policy adopted by the British authorities towards the local inhabitants is summed up neatly in Operational Instructions No. 220 of the Indian Infantry Brigade of October 27 :

'There is no front in these operations. We may find it difficult to distinguish friend from foe — beware of 'nibbling' at opposition. Always use the maximum force available to ensure wiping out any hostiles we may meet. If one uses too much, no harm is done. If one uses too small a force and it has to be extricated, we will suffer casualties and encourage the enemy.'¹¹

The operation, lasted less than 2 weeks. In the main, as the troops advanced the guerillas simply dispersed and disappeared. Nevertheless it was claimed a 'success', some 200 alleged Viet Minh were killed, and by the end of the month the British assumed that all major resistance to them was at an end.

As Saigon was now considered safe, Mountbatten himself arrived to accept officially the surrender of Field Marshal Terauchi's Samurai sword. It was a truly gentlemanly ceremony, with the British and Japanese bowing to and saluting each other. This contrasted in many respects with the surrender ceremonies that had taken place in Tonkin just two months and three days previously. On that former occasion Soviet and Viet Minh flags had been flown (but no French flag !) and the only French general present was offered seat No. 115 at the ceremony, behind the Viet Minh leaders and a bevy of junior Chinese officers. Now, while the representatives of all the colonial powers toasted each other in Saigon, the insurrection was very much alive in Cholon, Saigon and the Mekong Delta, but especially in the triangle just to the north of the southern capital — the scene of the recent operation.

An irritated Gracey prepared yet another drive to clear the area, and Allied units were now instructed to look upon all inhabitants as enemies. As one local British Commander put it to his men :

'The difficulty is to select the enemy, as immediately he has had his shot or thrown his grenade he pretends to be friendly. It is, therefore, perfectly legitimate to look upon all locals anywhere near where a

¹¹ Official History of the Indian Armed Forces, by Prasad.

shot has been fired as enemies, and treacherous ones at that, and treat them accordingly.'¹²

The first few days of 1946 saw some heavy fighting. Isolated but increasingly disturbed British Labour MPs, led by Tom Driberg and Fenner Brockway, were beginning to challenge Government policy in the House of Commons. An official spokesman told the House on January 13 that an estimated 2,700 Viet Minh insurgents had been killed. Attlee had already assured Fenner Brockway that 'he may be certain that the Government is carrying out the principles by which it has always stood' (sic). His only comment to the House of Commons on the subject was to warn of the danger of taking press reports at face value.

Anyway, for Britain it was all becoming rather academic as their days in Vietnam were ending. During January 1946 most of the Indian troops were shipped to Indonesia to fight a similar but bloodier campaign, this time to restore Dutch rule. At the end of the month all military control passed to the French. 'We have done our best for the French', General Gracey told Harold Isaacs, 'it is up to them to carry on'.

The French renounced all rights in China as the price of a Chinese withdrawal from the North. On March 6 the French and Viet Minh authorities signed an agreement, which, in words, recognised 'the Republic of Vietnam as a Free State having its own government, parliament, army and treasury, and belonging to the Indo Chinese Federation and the French Union'.

In reality Ho was being outplayed by the French. The 'agreement' not only provided for 15,000 French troops to be stationed above the 16th Parallel, but also for the Viet Minh to provide a further 10,000 troops, *all to be placed under the French Command*. Ho realised that he was being outplayed, but was unable to break from the Stalinist ideology that was based on 'belief' in the implementation of the Yalta and Teheran agreements. It would have been inconsistent for the Viet Minh to advocate more than they did — a mere 'independence within the framework of the French Union'.

In exchange for vague promises of 'a free State belonging to the French Union' Ho Chi Minh allowed the French Expeditionary Corps to occupy the main towns and the key highways of the country. He called on the population to welcome the French back. Ho Chi Minh then went to France, to the Fontainebleau Conference, which the French succeeded in dragging out from early March to late September, when they signed a modus vivendi with Ho Chi Minh. They, of course, used these

¹² Official History of the Indian Armed Forces, op. cit. p.211.