

1945: The Saigon commune

Ngô Văn

One of the main concerns of the Vietminh Committee was to ensure its 'recognition' by the British authorities as a de facto government. To this end the committee did everything it could to show its strength and demonstrate its ability to 'maintain order.'

Through its press it ordered the dissolution of all the partisan groups that had played an active role in the struggle against Japanese imperialism. All weapons were to be handed over to the Vietminh's own police force. The Vietminh's militia, known as the 'Republican Guard' (Cong hoa-ve-binh) and their police thus had a legal monopoly in the carrying of weapons. The groups aimed at by this decision were not only certain religious sects (the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao) but also the workers' committees, several of which were armed. Also aimed at were the Vanguard Youth Organisation and a number of 'self-defence groups,' many based on factories or plantations. These stood on a very radical social programme but were not prepared to accept complete control by the Vietminh.

The Trotskyists of the Spark group (Tia Sang), anticipating an imminent and inevitable confrontation with the military forces of Britain and France, started to distribute leaflets calling for the formation of Popular Action Committees (tochuc-uy-ban hanh-dong) and for arming of the people. They advocated the creation of a popular assembly, to be the organ of struggle for national independence.

Workers of the big Tramway Depot of Go Vap (about eight kilometres from Saigon), helped by Tia Sang militants, organised a workers' militia. The militia issued an appeal to the workers of the Saigon-Cholon area to arm themselves and to prepare for the inevitable struggle against the forces of British and French imperialism. By now General Gracey had proclaimed martial law.

Before it abandoned the centre of Saigon, the Vietminh Committee plastered the walls with posters, inviting the population to 'disperse into the countryside,' to 'avoid confrontation,' and to 'remain calm, because the Committee hopes to open negotiations.' A sense of insecurity hovered over the town, which slowly drained itself of parts of its Vietnamese population.

During the night of 22–23 September 1945 French troops, supported by Gurkhas commanded by British officers, reoccupied various police stations, the Post Office, the Central Bank and the Town Hall. They met no immediate resistance. The news spread like a trail of gunpowder and triggered off a veritable insurrection in the working class districts of the town. Explosions were heard in widely separate areas. The movement had broken without anyone giving any kind of directive.

The Vietminh had certainly not called for insurrection. Their one preoccupation was 'law and order' and their own accession to power — following negotiations.

In all the outlying suburbs trees were cut down, cars and lorries turned over, and primitive furniture piled up in the streets. Elementary barricades were set up to prevent the passage of French and Gurkha patrols, and the taking up of strategic positions by the imperialist forces. The centre of the town rapidly fell under the control of the French and Japanese troops, supported by Gurkhas. But the poorer suburbs of Khanh Hoi, Cau Kho, Ban Co, Phu Nhuan, Tan Dinh and Thi Nghe were firmly in the hands of the rebels.

The rebels themselves were not a homogenous lot. Among them were members of the Popular Committees, of the Vanguard Youth, Cao-daists, and even 'off the line' groups of Stalinist Republican Guards.

In areas where the popular forces were in control Frenchmen were shot: the cruellest functionaries of the old regime, the hated policemen, known by the population to have participated in torture, were sought out, killed and thrown in the canals. Racialism, fed by 80 years of imperialist domination, and by the contempt of the white man for the yellow man, left its imprint on the violence of the masses, which erupted at moments like these. The massacre of a hundred French civilians in the Heraud Estate, at Tan Dinh, was a painful reminder of this fact. The threats of certain French colonists to skin the Annamites alive to make leather sandals' rebounded back against all whites.

The occupation forces feverishly searched the whole centre of town. This did not prevent the insurgents from setting fire to various important buildings, such as the Manufactured Rubber Company, and to warehouses. During the night of 23–24 September, guerrillas attacked the port without respite. The following day revolutionary groups openly paraded in the Rue de Verdun and marched up the Boulevard de la Somme, converging on the Market Place, which they later burnt down. In Saigon there was neither water nor electricity. Supplies were breaking down. Each day the French sought to extend the area under their control, while various armed groups organised themselves as guerrillas in the periphery of the city.

The Vietminh 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 the British ships controlled the access to the harbour) the Vietminh clung to its hope of starting negotiations with the British. Talks with Gracey did at last start ...and a truce was announced on 1 October. On 5 October General Leclerc, head of the French Expeditionary Force, arrived. His mission was to 'restore order, and to 'build a strong Indochina within the French Union.' He landed his troops. The commandos of the battleship Triomphant paraded down the Rue Catinat. The hated Tricolour again fluttered from various windows.

The 'negotiations' between the Vietminh and the British continued. The only result was that British and Japanese troops were allowed 'free and unmolested passage' through zones occupied by the insurgents. The Vietminh Committee, continuing its policy of appeasement towards the imperialist Allies, had consciously taken this decision. The Gurkhas and the Japanese moved out further detachments occupying strategic points on the periphery of Saigon. On 12 October French troops, supported by Gurkhas, launched a general attack towards the north-east. The miserable peasant huts burnt from Thi Nghe to Tan Binh. The encirclement of the town by the rebels was gradually broken, in desperate fighting.

The leader of the Bay Vien group of guerrillas refused to undertake underhand police work against other tendencies not affiliated to the Vietminh. He proclaimed his independence in relation to the latter. His was not the only armed band to refuse the authority of the Stalinists. The biggest of such 'dissident' groups was known as the Third Division, de-tam-su-doan. It was led by an erstwhile nationalist, who had for a while placed his faith in Japan. A few hundred armed men organised sustained resistance to the French, in the Plaine des Joncs, but they surrendered a few months later, and the group disbanded.

The Vietminh would not tolerate any tendency that dared formulate the least criticism of it. It dealt with such tendencies by physically liquidating them. The militants of the Trotskyist group La Lutte were the first victims of the Stalinist terror, despite their proclamations of 'critical support to the Vietminh government.' Gathered in a temple in the Thu Due area, and while preparing the armed struggle against the French on the Gia Dinh front, they were surrounded one morning by the Vietminh, arrested and interned shortly afterwards at Ben Sue in the province of Thu Dau Mot. There they were all shot — together with some 30 other prisoners — at the approach of the French troops. Among those murdered was Tran Van Thach, one-time municipal councillor for Saigon, elected in 1933 on a Stalinist-Trotskyist list, and a few months earlier released from the penal settlement at Poulo Condore. Ta Thu Thau, also released from Poulo Condore, had gone to Tonkin Province to help organise assistance to the famine-stricken areas. He was murdered by supporters of Ho Chi Minh, on his way back, in central Annam.

In this atmosphere of Vietminh terror, the workers' militia of the Go Vap tramway depot, some 60 strong, participated in the insurrection, on its own initiative. The 400 workers and employees of the Tramway Company were well-known for their militancy and independent frame of mind. Under French imperialist rule there had been no trade union rights. After 9 March 1945, when the Japanese had replaced the French at the head of this particular enterprise, the workers had immediately constituted their own workers' committee and put forward a series of demands.

Japanese soldiery, led by Colonel Kirino, had come to threaten them, but confronted by their militant and united stand, had eventually been obliged to grant them a wage increase and even to recognise 11 delegates elected by the 11 categories of workers: electricians, carpenters, metal workers, etc.

In August 1945, when foreign technicians had momentarily abandoned the enterprise, the depot had been taken over and managed by the workers themselves, until the time of the insurrection.

All those insurgents who did not rally immediately to the Vietminh flags were denounced by the Vietminh as traitors. Workers who didn't identify with the 'patriotic cause' were called 'saboteurs' and 'reactionaries.' The southern CGT was presided over by the arch-Stalinist Hoang Don Van. Its function was to control the workers of the Saigon-Cholon area, by nominating their 'representatives' for them, from above.

In this atmosphere of violent ideological totalitarianism, the workers of the Go Vap tramway depot, although affiliated to the southern CGT, refused the label of Cong-nhan cuu-quoc (Worker Saviours of the Fatherland). They insisted on remaining a proletarian militia, and rejected the Vietminh flag (yellow star on red background), saying they would continue their fight under the red flag, the flag of their own class emancipation.

The tramway men then organised themselves into combat groups of 11 men under elected leaders — and under the overall command of Tran Dinh Minh, a young Trotskyist from the north who had published a social novel in Hanoi, under the pseudonym of Nguyen Hai Au, and who had come south to participate in the struggle.

At this stage the local Stalinists, under the command of Nguyen Dinh Thau, seemed far more concerned at arresting and shooting their left critics — and in fact all whom they saw as potential rivals for the leadership of the movement — than at prosecuting the struggle against the French. Terrorist acts became the rule. They left a deep imprint on the 'state-in-embryo' which the maquis was soon to become. The emergence of the Vietminh as the dominant force, in the years to come, was only possible after a lot of working class and peasant blood had been shed.

Refusing to accept the authority of Nguyen Dinh Thau, the tramwaymen's militia sought to regroup in the Plaine des Joncs, towards which it had opened a way, fighting meanwhile against the Gurkhas and the French at Loc Giang, Thot Not and My Hanh.

In the Plaine des Joncs the tramwaymen established contact with the poor peasants. And it was here that, in a fight against the imperialist forces, Tran Dinh Minh was killed, on 13 January 1946. Some 20 other tramway workers had already lost their lives in the course of battles waged on the way.

The intolerance of the Vietminh in relation to all independent tendencies, the accusations of treachery combined with threats of murder and the numerical weakness of the tramwaymen's militia eventually forced its members to disperse. Three of them, Le Ngoc, Ky and Huong, a young worker of 14, were stabbed to death by Vietminh bands.

The Saigon explosion reverberated into the countryside and into the more distant provinces. The peasants seized the local officials who had most distinguished themselves by their cruelty or their extortions, and many were put to death. But in the countryside, as in the towns, the pretext of popular anger against the exploiters was everywhere used by the Vietminh to settle accounts with political dissenters.

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