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# On Vietnam

Ngô Văn

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1968

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## **Preface**

The text below is extracted from *Sur le Vietnam*, a series of articles published in Informations et Correspondences ouvrières from the end of 1967 and the beginning of 1968, at the height of the movement against the Vietnam war in Europe and North America. Whilst this description as a whole has not hitherto appeared in English, the final chapter, The Saigon Insurrection of 23 September 1945, was the only account of the events available in Britain for many years, having been first translated by Chris Pallis and printed in Solidarity, Volume 5 no.5, 27 October 1968, pp.3–6, 16. It was subsequently reproduced in the United States as a leaflet by the Spartacist West group of the movement now known as the ICL, and later by S Pirani (ed.), Vietnam and Trotskyism, Australia 1987, pp.56–60.

## **Introduction**

This account was largely written from memory, without the advantage of an extensive documentation to hand. Comrade Van's more extensive treatment of the same period is to be found in Le Mouvement IV<sup>e</sup> Internationale en Indochine, 1930–39 in the Cahiers Leon Trotsky, no.40, December 1989, pp.21–60.

The author, Ngo Van Xuyet, was a member of the League of Internationalist Communists for the Fourth International, formed in Saigon in 1935; like Ta Thu Thau's organisation this group supported the Fourth International, but did not participate in the La Lutte front, concentrating instead on the publication of the journal Le Militant. He was jailed for a year in 1936, continued political activity on his release, participated in the 1945 Saigon insurrection, and has lived in exile in France since 1947.

...

## **1. The La Lutte Group and the Workers' and Peasants' Movement (1933–37)**

South Vietnam in the 'thirties: we have seen how the world economic crisis reverberated in Vietnam in essentially peasant revolts and in the awakening of the working class movement momentarily decapitated by the repression at the beginning of the 'thirties.

Some Vietnamese students who had been trained in France organised themselves into the two main tendencies that divided the Third International: Stalinism and Trotskyism. Some of them had been expelled from France after their demonstrations against the sentences following the Yen-bay rebellion in 1930.<sup>1</sup> Moscow trained some of the militants who were assigned to reconstruct the Communist Party in illegality; the kernel of this new illegal party fell under the blows of police repression in 1935, and when one of its leaders, Tran Van Giau, now in Ho Chi Minh's information services, was before the court in Saigon being questioned about his occupation, he declared that he was a professional revolutionary. Along with his companions he joined those who had been sentenced in 1933 in the hard-labour camp of Poulo-Condore. Also born in clandestinity round about 1932 were the small Trotskyist groups under the leadership of some of those expelled from France. Bulletins run off with gelatine disseminated in secret the theoretical discussions of the Vo-san (Proletarian) group of Ta Thu Thau and the Thang-muoi (October) group of Ho Huu Tuong and others amongst some of the awakened city workers. The second of these groups charged the first with a conciliatory tendency towards the Stalinists. Inspired by the Permanent Revolution, these disciples of Trotsky advocated a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in alliance with the peasantry in order to accomplish this 'permanent revolution,' the foremost tasks of which would be national liberation through anti-imperialist struggle and agrarian reform through the abolition of private ownership and the division of the land amongst the peasants, whereas the Stalinists were planning on a 'democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry' that would realise the same objectives. The secret political influence of the Trotskyists was essentially urban; the Stalinists rooted themselves in the countryside on account of the origins of their movement, where they propagated the notion that the Trotskyists were the enemy of the peasantry.

But very soon the three Trotskyist groups – the third being the Ta doi lap tong tho (Publications of the Left Opposition) – were broken up; in August 1932 the police arrested 41 militants and sympathisers in Saigon and in the provinces. The first trial of the Trotskyists took place in Saigon on 1 May 1933, and 16 out of the 21 accused were condemned to between three months' and five years' imprisonment.

At the time of the Saigon municipal elections in 1933 both Stalinists and Trotskyists attempted to carry out joint legal action by putting together a single electoral list, the 'workers' list' (so lao-dong). In order to stand in elections you had to be either a proprietor or, at least, pay business tax, so the Trotskyist teacher Ta Thu

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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<sup>1</sup> For the Yen Bay incident, cf n11, see below Ngo Van Xuyet's account of Ta Thu Thau.

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.

Thau became a carpet seller in Lagrandière Street, whereas the Stalinist journalist Nguyen Van Tao became a lemonade seller in the Old Market. Electoral meetings began to be held in the Thanh-xuong, a small local theatre. Coolies, commercial employees, Saigon workers and young people were for the first time openly exhorted to struggle for the eight hour day, for trade union rights and for the right to strike by the candidates to the municipal council who were seeking the votes of the citizens in order to 'represent' them. The success of these meetings alarmed the police, who closed the Thanh-xuong theatre along with the theatres in the suburbs (Khanh-hoi and Tan-dinh), but meetings rendered impossible by this police intervention were transformed into street demonstrations. The bourgeois electoral list of the Constitutionalist Party was defeated, and the workers' list gained a majority of those seats upon the municipal council that were set aside for the Vietnamese. It was at the time of this legal agitation that La Lutte first appeared, a weekly newspaper in French of the United Front between the Saigon Stalinists and Trotskyists (you should bear in mind that no paper in the native language was allowed to appear without the prior authorisation of the colonial administration, so La Lutte could only cater for a thin layer of the urban population, that which could read French; even then it was often the victim of seizures and searches, but in the Vietnamese language it would not even have been allowed to appear). A French journalist, old Ganofsky, who lived in poverty on the margins of colonial circles, gave his name as manager of La Lutte. This free spirit was afterwards interfered with on several occasions and he paid the consequences of his disinterested act right up to his death.

This local United Front that was dictated by the necessities of the struggle against strong colonial oppression soon became disrupted by the evolution of the politics of the Russian Communist Party, and consequently the politics of the French party. The France-Soviet Pact of May 1935 converted France into an ally of Russia, and the French Communist Party now had the duty of defending 'French democracy' against Fascism. The Stalinist group dutifully dispensed with its usual jargon of 'French Imperialism,' no longer talked about national independence, and imparted a purely reformist direction to its slogans. Deep differences arose within La Lutte, but the Ta Thu Thau group still did not break its formal unity with the Stalinists. The wave of strikes that was followed by the factory occupations and the formation of the Popular Front in France in June 1936 had an immediate echo in the peninsula of Indochina, where the reformist current grew stronger. A Popular Front known under the name of the Indo Chinese Congress Movement (Phong-tiao-Dong-duong-Dai-hoi) was formed on the initiative of the La Lutte group with the bourgeois Constitutionalist Party, in order to draw up demands relating to the

political, economic and social reforms that were to be presented to the Popular Front government of the metropolitan country. At the end of 1935 a small secret Trotskyist group was set up, the Internationalist Communist League, which launched the slogan of 'action committees' amongst the workers and peasants by means of a leaflet in the Vietnamese language, but its militants were immediately thrown into prison. The Stalinists urged respect for the law to the peasants who had begun to agitate in a violent manner against direct and indirect taxes and for a reduction in ground rent.

The 'first trial of the Fourth International,' the trial of the Internationalist Communist League, opened in Saigon on 31 August 1936. Following a plea submitted by their lawyers with regard to the tortures and maltreatment they had undergone at the hands of the police, a complaint that raised an echo in the *Depêche d'Indochine* and *La Lutte*, Lu Sanh Hanh and seven of his comrades were sentenced to light prison sentences of between six and 18 months.<sup>2</sup>

The ferment among the workers manifested itself in partial strikes that culminated in the general strike of 1937 that included workers in the arsenal at Saigon, of the Trans-Indo Chinese Railway (Saigon-Hanoi), the Tonkin miners and the coolies of the rubber plantations, the mass of the proletariat, in other words. They were demanding an eight hour day, trade union rights, the right to strike and convene, a free press, etc. It was during this struggle that the workers, assisted by the militants, organised their strike and support committees and their contacts throughout the country. There was something spontaneous in this wave of demands and chain explosions, and in the limited understanding of the workers and peasants. They were fed on the illusion of the possibilities of freedom and social reform offered by the Popular Front of the metropolitan country. Agitation and propaganda and the legal and underground activities of the organised political groupings, whose members could be counted on the fingers, are not enough to explain this vast movement.

It was then that Brévié, who had been appointed governor of the colony by the Popular Front government, resorted to repression. Not only was the skeleton of working class trade unions formed during the General Strike banned, and its militants sent to prison (October 1937), but even the Movement of the Indochinese Congress was itself dissolved. Trotskyist and Stalinist papers that had sometimes been able to appear in the Vietnamese language were banned once more, and the labour legislation remained a dead letter. It now became difficult for the Stalinists

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.

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<sup>2</sup> Apart from 'Lucien,' the writer, *Ngo Van Xuyet*, was also jailed at this time.

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 colons 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, guerillas 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 guerillas 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 guerillas 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

to continue their defence of the Popular Front, which had in no way changed fundamentally France’s imperialist colonial policy.

The Moscow Trials were now at their zenith, and the French Communist Party sent the MP Honel to give the local Stalinists the order to break with the Trotskyists. Abandoning La Lutte to the Trotskyists, the Stalinists employed the same venomous methods against them as those of their masters in the Kremlin. In their new paper *Le Peuple* (later *Dan-chung*) they were to represent their erstwhile comrades as spies for the Mikado and provocateurs. The period of methodical murders will be described when we come to the 1945–46 period. The utter and immediate obedience of the Stalinist group to the orders of Moscow can only be explained by their blind fanaticism. Young men, driven by an ideal, were transformed overnight into wolves, howling to the death with the other wolves against their brothers in the fight, with whom they had still been elbow to elbow only the day before, in struggle as well as in prison. Regimentation had corrupted them, along with the Vietnamese workers’ and peasants’ movement, which was thus sacrificed from birth to Russian foreign policy. As we were later to see, the exploited were to forge new chains for themselves under the leadership of these ‘professional revolutionaries,’ when they thought that they were struggling for their emancipation – those of the industrial world, where production is not a requirement of true and vital human needs, but those of state capitalism as the ‘revolutionary vanguard’ inevitably turned into a bureaucracy possessing the state.

Obviously, French imperialism breathed freely and easily during this period of relative support by the Stalinists for the integrity of the empire. The calm was broken by the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 23 August 1939, followed by the declaration of war on 3 September. The decree of 26 September, which dissolved all organisations “relating to the Third International”, was the prelude to the mass arrests of militants of all tendencies, Stalinists, Trotskyists, nationalists and the leaders of the magico-religious sects in October 1939, and then were to close upon them the sinister doors of the prisons and the camps for the “special training of workers”, the death camps that were established in unhealthy regions, in which few survived. In a declaration of November 1939 in conformity with Stalin’s foreign policy the Indochinese Communist party at one and the same time denounced the ‘imperialist’ war of France against Germany as well as the Japanese plans for aggression against Russia. This sudden shift translated itself in 1940 into a concealed peasant insurrection fomented by the Indochinese Communist Party in Cochin China, which was drowned in blood.

## 2. The Sects and the Vietminh

[We omit here the section dealing with the expression of peasant discontent through sectarian Buddhist consciousness, and extract merely what deals with the movements during the Second World War.]

The young Marxists carried their dream of “transforming the imperialist war into a civil war” into the prisons, but the words pronounced at Zimmerwald coming from far-off Europe, and their illustration in the Russian events of 1917, were nonetheless to continue to sound in their hearts. A Communist Party song composed about 1935 that called for civil war remained deep in their hearts: “We will take the opportunity of the war between the imperialisms and when Soviet Russia shall be attacked, we will engage in civil war” (“Thua luc de-quoc tranh-chien, voi luc danh So-viet lam noi-chien mau”). It was upon propaganda in favour of this same idea in an illegal Trotskyist duplicated sheet, the Vanguard (Tien-dao) that the Prosecutor attached to the Saigon court had supported his indictment at the time of the trial of the Internationalist Communist League in September 1936.

Pre-emptive arrests did not prevent the peasants of Cochin China from rising in December 1940, and in the same year an upsurge broke out at Bacson in Tonkin. Repression caused thousands of deaths, and courts martial sent those who were captured to death and to the prisons. The prisons were so full that a certain number of prisoners were locked up in barges berthed near Saigon, where they perished like flies.

[Here we omit more material upon the beliefs and history of the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao.]

It should be remembered that after the French defeat in Europe the Japanese occupied Indochina, and in agreement with Vichy preserved the French administrative and repressive apparatus, together with a new colonial governor henceforth at their service. The policy of the Japanese attempted to eliminate the Stalinist tendency and to search for a compromise of collaborating with the nationalist tendencies and the sects; in 1942 the ‘mad bonze’ who had been exiled in Laos was liberated by them, and when on 9 March 1945 the Japanese brought the French colonial administration to an end, they armed the devotees of these two sects, hoping to be able to use them as military auxiliaries in the event of an American landing.

Let us return to the Stalinists and to their activities up to their seizure of power in 1945. In May 1941 Ho Chi Minh, who was living in Kwangsi in China, convened a conference that brought together Vietnamese elements of all origins and formed along with them an organisation under the unassuming title of Viet Minh (an ab-

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.

### Erupted

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,

same Committee. The leaflets of the Committee of 17 September called for a general strike against the French, but always in the hope of a possible negotiation with the British, and recommended calm to the population. Three days afterwards, on the 20<sup>th</sup>, the Vietnamese press was banned by the British, and the proclamations of the Committee were torn down and removed from the walls of the city. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> the British were controlling the prison, and were rearming some 1,500 French soldiers who had been shut up by the Japanese in the barracks of the second Indo Chinese Regiment. Finally, during the night of 22–23 September, the French, assisted by the Gurkhas, reoccupied the police stations, the political police headquarters, the Tax Office and the Post Office. The Vietminh Committee left the town hall and withdrew into the neighbourhood of Cholon; that same night the Saigon insurrection broke out.

## 4. The Saigon Insurrection

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.

briefing of Viet-nam dot-lap dong minh, The League for the Independence of Vietnam), whose effective leadership belonged to his own followers.

The Chinese generals of the Guomindang now convened a second conference of the Vietnamese political refugees in China at Lieou-tcheou on 4 October 1942, with the intention of brushing aside the Communist tendency and of setting up the Dong-minh hoi, the Association for National Liberation, presided over by Nguyen Hai Tha, an old pro-Chinese emigré. Ho Chi Minh was imprisoned for 18 months. However, at the conference of March 1944 at Lieou-tcheou, in the course of which a programme for a 'provisional republican government of Vietnam' was elaborated, the Vietminh was represented, and had a portfolio. This programme consisted of two points: the liquidation of the domination of the French and Japanese, and independence for Vietnam with the assistance of the Guomindang; but whereas the nationalists of this government remained in China, where they waited for the intervention of the Guomindang to assure them of power in Vietnam, the Ho Chi Minh group, under the banner of the Vietminh, came back into Tonkin and established itself in the region of Thai-nguyen. When the Japanese coup of 9 March 1945 put an end to French rule in Indochina, the Vietminh found itself practically master of the highlands. Orientating himself towards the Allies (Russia, Nationalist China, Great Britain and the United States), Ho Chi Minh organised a few skirmishes against the Japanese, made contact with the Americans at Kun-ming, and from them obtained weapons with which to struggle on the side of the Allies. After the surrender of the Japanese on 15 August 1945, the Ho Chi Minh group (the Vietminh) was already an organised military force, however hastily armed and numerically weak.

## 3. August 1945, The Coming of Ho Chi Minh

Here we shall examine the situation that permitted the seizure of power by Ho Chi Minh and his Vietminh followers in August 1945.

The first cannon shots in Europe that began "the continuation of politics" in the blood of the slaves opened up for Japanese imperialism, which had been engaged upon a full-scale war of conquest in China since 1937, a perspective of realising the Greater Asia Plan of Tojo for the ousting of the old Western masters from South-East Asia. When the French refused to allow their troops to penetrate into Tonkin in 1940, the Japanese went over to the attack at Lan-son and Dongdang in the evening of 22 September, and on the 24<sup>th</sup> landed at Haiphong after having bombarded the port. So began the Japanese occupation of Indochina; it main-

tained the administrative apparatus of French colonialism with a Vichy admiral in charge who largely collaborated with the Japanese general staff. The systematic plunder of the produce of the country for the needs of war plunged the population into increasing misery; more than ever the peasant masses lived in destitution. American bombing, typhoons and exceptional cold all added up to disaster, culminating in the great famine of March to May 1945, with about a million deaths in the north, including deaths in the streets of Hanoi.

In the south of the country the religious sects that had been persecuted by the French cherished a hope in Japan. The Cao-daists, whose Pope Pham Cong Tac was living in exile at Nossi-lava (Madagascar), were counting on the return of Prince Cuong-de, who was a refugee in Japan, and the devotees of the 'Mad bonze,' the Hoa-Hao, had obtained from the Japanese the return of their master Huynh Phu So, who had been exiled to Laos by the French. From 1943 onwards some pro-Japanese nationalist groups were formed, and their members were utilised in the Japanese propaganda and police services.

Round about 1943 in the mountain region of Tuyen-quang near the Chinese frontier in the north, Ho Chi Minh organised his guerilla centre and made contact with the Americans to ask them for weapons, whilst proclaiming himself to be on the side of the 'democratic Allies against Japanese Fascism'; his 'people's army' was officially inaugurated in the resistance starting from 22 December 1944.

Faced with the American offensive in the Pacific and the threat of ruin for the Berlin-Tokyo-Rome Axis, the Japanese put an end to the authority of the French over the whole peninsula by a coup starting from 9 March 1945. The French troops were disarmed and confined to their barracks, and the commanders were either imprisoned or put to death; the population was concentrated and strictly controlled. The Japanese effected a proclamation of independence by the Emperor Bao Dai and by means of Tran Trong Kim created a 'national government' at Hué on 2 March. The leaden cover that had weighed down upon the country was now split. The popular masses felt relieved, since of the two brigands who had been plundering them, one had fallen under the blows of the other, and they were filled with a feeling of satisfaction over the one that was impotent, along with the illusion that with 'national independence' something positive was going to be done about their condition. The arrogant policemen of the French regime were no longer in the streets of Saigon questioning workers and clerks returning from work in order to verify their personal identity cards (giay thne than). No longer were French colons to be heard threatening to kick the backsides of rickshaw boys who were claiming what was owed them. The members of the pro-Japanese nationalist groups received key posts in the administration. The youth of country, town and village

had leaflets spread all over the city by Japanese fighter planes proclaiming that he had charged the Japanese with the maintenance of public order, and that he forbade the population to keep any weapons under threat of severe punishment. An immense poster repeating this proclamation was stuck on the city walls. The haughty tone of this Allied military representative was the equivalent of a formal notice, addressed not only to the armed groups of the religious sects who had held onto quantities of Japanese weapons, but also to the Nam-bó Committee, whose armed militia was more or less held responsible for the 'disorders' of 2 September. Gracey installed his headquarters in the small palace of the governor of Cochin China. A feverish activity agitated the groups and sects. The Hoa Hao assumed the name of the Social Democratic Party (Dang dan-xa), and it seems that they, along with the Cao-daists, were invited to a few subordinate ministerial posts of social affairs by the Vietminh. The Trotskyists of the La Lutte group pronounced in favour of support to the Stalinist Vietminh in this phase of the struggle for national independence and for the formation of a democratic republic, but declared that they reserved the right to criticise; another Trotskyist tendency denounced as an illusion fostered among the masses the possibility of obtaining national independence by negotiation with the imperialist brigands whose alliance was being solicited by the Vietminh. Advocating the arming of the people (which was against the intentions of the Nam-bo Committee to control all the armed groupings) and the preparation of an armed insurrection and against the return of the old regime, they organised some tens of workers and clerks in a 'People's Revolutionary Committee' ('uyban nhan-dan cach-mang') in the Tandinh suburb of Saigon, and a similar people's committee was formed at Bien-hoa, some 30 kilometres from Saigon. But the activity of such committees, in a duality with the de facto power of the Stalinists, was a stain that could spread, and the arrest and incarceration of their members by the police put a stop to it. We should note that the militants of Tan-dinh allowed themselves to be disarmed without protest, for they feared that if they fired upon the police they would only foster the accusations of provocation that had been launched against them by those in charge in the town hall, and they would be misunderstood by the masses. The leaders of the sects who were also the victims of police searches disappeared, along with their armed groups. The repression of the Vietminh was already aiming at controlling all its opponents.

The Nam-bo Committee, to whom Gracey had accorded some polite acknowledgements without giving them formal recognition, still operated in the town hall; on the other hand Cédile, who was feverishly plotting with the British to "re-establish colonial order", had also entered into a dialogue of the deaf with this

and promised the formation of a democratic parliamentary republic. At the same time as this poster announced the 'taking of power' by the Vietminh, a list of the members of the Provisional Government, presided over by the Stalinist Tran Van Giau, was put up in front of the Saigon town hall, fastened to an imposing column covered with red cloth; another Stalinist, Nguyen Van Tao, who had been a Saigon municipal councillor, was assigned to the Ministry of the Interior, and in order to give their committee the appearance of a national union that would be acceptable to the Allies in an eventual negotiation, the Stalinists secured the governmental collaboration of a doctor, some non-Stalinist intellectuals, and even a landowner. This Nam-bo committee sat in the town hall, guarded by militiamen in white uniforms. The police and cops had joined them, and the commissariats were controlled by Tran Van Giau's comrades; the pirates of Le Van Vien, called the Bay Vien, had been enlisted as policemen and as agents for the future Stalinist assassinations (they had been well known under the French under the label of the 'bands of Binh xuyen,' the name of a hamlet situated between Saigon and Cholon).

The activity of the Nam-bo Committee extended out towards the provinces, where they set up their own provisional committees that took control of the people's committees that had spontaneously arisen in the villages and of the old Vanguard Youth. The arrival of the Allied Commission was announced for the beginning of September. In the streets of Saigon floated immense banners bearing inscriptions of greeting in English, Russian, Chinese and Vietnamese: "Welcome to the Allied Forces!" Some demonstrative actions marked the intentions of the Nam-bo Committee to have done with French colonialism: the Saigon streets changed their names. The Rue Catinat, the luxurious artery of the city, famous for its police offices, jails and torture chambers, was baptised 'The Street of the Paris Commune,' and the Norodom Boulevard was called 'The Boulevard of the Republic' ... The statues of the 'heroes' of the conquest (the Bishop of Adran holding the young prince Canh by the hand in front of the cathedral, Admiral Rigault de Genouilly at the side of the Saigon river, and Bonnard in front of the Municipal Theatre) and other monuments of the colonial era were destroyed.

On the morning of 2 September a large official procession was organised by the Nam-bo Committee. The newly armed militia opened the march in uniform. In the afternoon some shots were fired in the cathedral square, no-one knows from where, provoking a general outburst; the demonstrators flung themselves upon the French houses, and the demonstration ended late at night with dead and wounded on both sides.

Soon the Gurkhas of the Twentieth Indian Division arrived by plane under the command of the British general Gracey. From the moment of his arrival Gracey

was paramilitarily organised to serve as an auxiliary force for the Japanese army in the event of an American landing; this movement was known under the name of the Youth Vanguard (Thank-nien tied-phong). The Cao-daists formed their own armed groups, whereas the Hoa-Hao were forging sharp-edged weapons whilst "waiting upon events", in other words, the opportunity for seizing power. The militants of the Stalinist group who had escaped the repression or who had been freed from the concentration camps after 9 March were working – mobilised after a fashion – for the 'national government' and the peasants, and were operating underground within the Youth Vanguard. All this political ferment in the South during the five months that preceded the defeat of the Japanese was escaping from their control, whereas in the regions of Upper Tonkin the zone of the armed groups of Ho Chi Minh was spreading; they, also, were waiting upon 'events.'

The bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki followed by the surrender of Japan on 15 August 1945 marked another bloody era for this corner of Asia, intended by the imperialist powers (the Potsdam agreement between Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt) to be occupied to the north of the seventeenth parallel by Chinese troops and to the south of it by British troops. This new partition of the world wiped French imperialism from the map of Indochina, and through the mediation of Chiang Kai-Shek's Chinese the Americans were counting on including Northern Vietnam within their sphere of influence in South East Asia.

Faced with the political gap created by the Japanese surrender, and preceding the Chinese troops who were bringing with them the pro-Chinese nationalists of the Dong-minh-hoi and the Viet-nam quoc dan-dang, Ho Chi Minh brought together his supporters in the village of Tantrao (province of Thai-nguyen) and created a Committee for the National Liberation of Vietnam (Uy-ban giai-phong dan-toc Viet-nam), the majority of which was composed of about 10 former members of the Communist Party. In this way he broke with the 'government in exile' in China, and therefore with the pro-Chinese nationalists. After some spectacular demonstrations organised by his emissaries in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh made his entrance there at the head of his 'people's army' around 18 August. Without further ado the representative of Bao Dai's pro-Japanese government in Hanoi, Phan Ke Toai, withdrew. Thus the de facto power of the Vietminh was set up with the indifference of the Japanese, who had received instructions from the Allies to maintain order until the arrival of the Chinese troops. It should also be said that the Japanese released some 400 political prisoners who had been incarcerated in the Shell buildings who were claimed by the Vietminh, and that they allowed them to get hold of weapons. At the same time the 'people's committees' took control of the administration in the provinces, and the Mandarins disappeared or submitted.

A provisional Vietminh government was formed in Hanoi on 25 August, presided over by Ho Chi Minh; in Hue, after the resignation of the Tran Trong Kim government, Bao Dai also abdicated, and was designated as a 'supreme counsellor' by Ho Chi Minh.

## Frozen

What happened in the South of the country after 15 August? The same absence of power as in the North made itself felt in Saigon; the Japanese troops seemed to be frozen into immobility whilst awaiting the arrival of the British, whereas ever since 9 March the disarmed French had been waiting for their 'liberation' and their return to power. The supporters of Ho Chi Minh (some emissaries who had come from Tonkin had joined the Stalinist group of Cochin China) went around in cars provided with loudspeakers calling out "defend the Vietminh" ("ung-ho Viet minh"), the 'Vietminh' being a name hitherto unknown around Saigon having all the attraction of a mystery, and then they distributed leaflets claiming themselves to be "on the side of the Russian, Chinese, British and United States Allies for independence". The 'United National Front' which in a few days had collected together the Party for the Independence of Vietnam (Viet-nam quoc gia doc lap dang), the Vanguard Youth, the Group of the Intellectuals, the Federation of Civil Servants and the Tinh do cu Buddhist sect along with the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai, appealed to the population to demonstrate for independence in the presence of an uncertain and threatening situation. On 21 August 1945, for the first time in the political life of the country, from the morning onwards, veritable masses of people assembled like ants and filled the Norodom Boulevard, then the Botanical Gardens near the governor's palace, and then crossed the major arteries in order chanting slogans: "Down with French imperialism!" ("Da dao de quoc phap"), "Long live the Independence of Vietnam!" ("Vietnam hoan toan doc lap"), whilst the flags and banners floating above this moving army indicated the presence of the Vanguard Youth, who had been a pro-Japanese organisation only yesterday, peasants led by Stalinist militants who had come from the environs of Saigon, workers of Saigon-Cholon, Cao-daists, Buddhists of various sects grouped around their bonzes, the Hoa Hao, and the militants of the Trotskyist La Lutte and International Communist League groups. The latter, under the flag of the Fourth International, raised the slogans of "the land and ricefields to the peasants, the factories and enterprises for the workers!". Some demonstrators were armed with sharpened bamboo poles. Banners were seen with the unusual inscriptions such as "Murder Assault Groups" ("Ban am sat xung phong") raised by bare-chested

and tattooed men, who were carrying sharpened weapons and old rifles. The Vietnamese police at the service of the occupation no longer knew from where to take its orders: it remained passive in the presence of the procession crossing the city on strike, and the crowd only disappeared in the afternoon. This demonstration, which owed its initiation to the Vietminh, was the classic tactic preparatory to the seizure of power – it represented the seal of general approval. But in fact everybody went down into the street with different aspirations. The only common but overwhelming sentiment was "never to see the French back in power, long live the end of the colonial regime!"

This first awakening of these masses, who had been forever in "chains . and gags", emanated an electric tension amid an unusual calm, the brooding calm that precedes a storm. All constraint was broken, and everybody seemed to live a moment of total liberty, where the absence of the state and the bankruptcy of the police allowed everyone to prepare himself in his own way for the eventuality of a terrible conflict. What darkness upon the horizon of a fundamental change! Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin had decided our fate at Yalta and Potsdam. We were now to be cast body and soul into a future without a tomorrow. Faced with the perspective of the imminent arrival of the British troops, and faced with the threat of the return of the old colonial regime (Colonel Cédile, the special envoy of the 'New France,' was already in the Governor-General's palace in Saigon), everybody decided to look for and obtain weapons; everyone lived in the same explosive atmosphere.

Events were about to unfold in these crucial moments of general crisis with the speed of lightning. The nationalist groups and sects that had been pro-Japanese remained armed, but incapable of taking the initiative: their time was finished with the fall of Japan. The Vietminh, politically reinforced by the coming of Ho Chi Minh to Hanoi, and having already taken control of the movement of the Youth Vanguard, whose leaders had joined it, also having been strengthened by the monster demonstration of 25 August, in which it saw the approval of the masses for its policy of collaboration with the 'Allies' for national independence, was about to impose its rule.

## Range

In fact, a proclamation signed by the 'Southern Provisional Executive Committee' ('Uy-ban hanh chanh lam-thoi Nambo') soon appeared on the walls of the city. The Committee appealed to the population to range itself behind it with a view to obtaining the independence of the country by negotiation with the 'Allies,'