

The Vietnamese Revolution & Its Leadership

**Mike Karadjis
& Allen Myers**

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Introduction

By Mike Karadjis

Since “The Vietnamese Revolution and its Leadership” was written 20 years ago, Vietnam has undergone a profound transformation. The analysis of the revolutionary Marxist nature of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) undertaken by Allen Myers allows us to better understand the subsequent events.

Myers’ pamphlet begins with a description of the unimaginable destruction imposed on Vietnam by French and US imperialism. The enormity of the CPV’s achievement in carrying out such a world-historic defeat of these imperialist powers in one of history’s most unequal contests led the Democratic Socialist Party (then called the Socialist Workers Party) to see that it would require a revolutionary leadership of enormous calibre.

War did not end with the defeat of the US; the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia then launched a brutal three-year border war against Vietnam until Vietnamese troops went in to help liberate the Cambodian people. “Today they [the Vietnamese people] are giving selfless material and military aid to prevent the return of the Khmer Rouge”, Myers explains.

However, Vietnam paid a gigantic price for this selfless aid. While the US, China and the US-backed Thai military armed the Khmer Rouge along the Thai-Cambodian border to keep Vietnam bogged down in Cambodia, an international embargo was imposed on Vietnam and Cambodia by the imperialist powers, the right-wing Asian regimes and China. China invaded Vietnam in early 1979, and though decisively driven back, it forced Vietnam to keep half a million troops on its northern border.

Vietnam had to double the size of its armed forces, which it could ill afford. Aside from its gigantic reconstruction needs, the liberation forces inherited a south Vietnam with far weaker health and education systems than those in the socialist north, thus

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requiring significant resources. The US had killed tens of thousands of technocratic cadre of the southern liberation forces during the “Phoenix program” in the late 1960s; hundreds of thousands of officials and experts from the former US-backed Saigon regime fled the country in 1975. This lack of skilled personnel required thousands of cadres to be sent from the north to fill the void.

While most of these cadres were dedicated communists, the shifting of people from their own environments to positions of leadership in very different regions also led to negative phenomena. The attraction of corruption and arbitrary behaviour in the chaotic situation affected some; some made deals with the capitalist classes which still held a powerful position in rural-urban trade in the Mekong and Ho Chi Minh City. The opposite problem also occurred: a premature attempt to eradicate these capitalist traders in 1978, leading to a renewed exodus of hundreds of thousands of skilled small business people, while peasants refused to sell grain to the state at far below market prices. The bourgeoisie was able to offer better prices to the peasants due to the utter poverty and disorganisation of the new state apparatus in the south; but until the state actually had the resources and basic efficiency to replace the long-established links of the bourgeois traders, simple expropriation only made the situation worse.

The CPV recognised its mistake and in 1979-81 instituted a number of reforms allowing more flexibility within the planned economy, for small traders, for peasants to engage in limited market activities, and for state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to do some of their productive activities “outside plan”. State prices for peasant produce were boosted. While much is made of the economic “failure” of socialism, industrial and agricultural production boomed in the first half of the 1980s.

However, beneath the boom inflation ate away due to the Cambodian war and international embargo. The state tried to pay better prices to peasants and still subsidise workers’ basic needs, but enormous resources were being used on the military, and no exports could be made to the Asian region. In 1982, prices doubled, making both prices paid to peasants and wages to workers increasingly meaningless. This prompted peasants and state enterprises to engage in more economic activities outside of “plan” than sanctioned, increasing the state’s fiscal crisis, till inflation rose to hundreds of percent in 1986-87.

As the Cambodian war drew to a close, and the international embargo (except by the US) was lifted in 1989, darkness descended from another quarter. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern European socialist states cut Vietnam off from its major source of international aid, trade and technical assistance.

In this Soviet-bloc trading system, decent prices were paid for Vietnamese goods,

and Vietnam paid low prices for manufactured imports. Its end meant that Vietnam now had to pay “free market” prices in international trade, and receive capital and aid on the basis of imperialist-conditioned development loans or foreign investment. But the entire SOE-centred system of subsidies and allocative planning had been dependent on this non-market driven international order. To maintain the old system would have led to the collapse of the state-controlled economy.

This led to the CPV embarking on the “Doi Moi” economic renovation program at its Sixth Congress in 1986. In the spirit of the New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced by Lenin in 1921, in a similarly catastrophic economic situation, the CPV recognised the role of the private sector, of foreign investment and of market mechanisms at the current stage of development in an underdeveloped country such as Vietnam.

Direct allocative planning of investments, production inputs and outputs and prices via the SOEs was abolished, allowing SOEs a measure of autonomy; a foreign investment law was passed; agricultural cooperatives were made voluntary, and all but collapsed; peasants were no longer required to sell any produce to the state at below-market prices; and relations between SOEs, private and foreign enterprises, small household businesses, individual peasants and surviving cooperatives were to be based primarily on market mechanisms. All sectors were to be encouraged to invest to develop the productive forces and pull Vietnam out of abject poverty.

However, the CPV claims to maintain a “socialist orientation” within this mixed economy. The foundation stone of this was to be the dominant state-owned sector, along with a renewal over time of the cooperatives. It was via these sectors, under CPV guidance, that economic growth was to be channelled in a socialist direction, while aiming to minimise the negative impacts of the market and the private sector.

However, achieving such a goal would be a Herculean task given the country’s destruction, underdevelopment, and isolation from any similar socialist experiments except in a few other poor countries. How has Vietnam progressed?

The answer, while not ignoring the great many negatives that the CPV itself admits to, would in the circumstances have to be “outstanding”.

Vietnam has experienced the highest economic growth in the world after China, doubling its GDP in the 1990s. When the Asian capitalist “tiger” economies crashed in 1997, Vietnam walked away with mere scratches. But economic growth often tells us little; the point is what is done with the rising income: poverty fell from 75% in the late 1980s to 28% in 2002, the world’s most rapid poverty reduction on record. Its social indicators are on a par with those of much wealthier countries in the region and far above those of countries at a similar economic level.

Primary enrolment rates were as high as 88% before the crash in the late 1980s,

after which they dropped to 78%, but then rose to 95% by 2001. By contrast, in China they fell from 97 to 93% between 1991 and 2001. China's decline was the regional norm — the World Bank contrasted Vietnam's achievement with "the East Asia and Pacific region" where overall "net enrolment of children in primary education declined from 97% in 1991 to 92% in 2001".¹

Vietnam's life expectancy of 69 and infant mortality rate of 30 are roughly equivalent to much wealthier China, Thailand and the Philippines, significantly better than richer Indonesia and India and dramatically better than countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan which share Vietnam's level of GDP per capita. Its literacy rate of 94% is equivalent to Thai and Philippine levels, and far above that of China, Indonesia and Malaysia, where literacy stands around 85-87%. In China female literacy stands at only 78%,² the lowest in the region, while in Vietnam, it is 91%; among 15-24 year-olds, females are ahead.³

When making these comparisons, we need to bear in mind that Vietnam's GDP per capita stands at only around \$430 a year. The figure is nearly double this in Indonesia and India, around \$1000 in China and the Philippines and around \$2000 in Thailand.

In the 1990s, Vietnam eradicated polio, neonatal tetanus and leprosy, and reduced malaria fatalities by 97%.⁴ In 1997, it was one of only two countries in the world to meet WHO targets of diagnosing over 70% of tuberculosis (TB) infections and curing 85% of patients. By 2002, the number of countries was 22, but Vietnam was "the only high-burden country among them", where "high-burden" includes all the populous countries of east, southeast and south Asia. While Vietnam diagnoses 82% of TB cases, Thailand only manages 73%, the Philippines 58%, Indonesia 30% and China only 27%!⁵

Vietnam has 170 primary health clinics at the village level per million population, compared to 32 in Indonesia, 63 in China and 141 in Thailand. There is a hospital bed for every 389 Vietnamese, compared to every 465 Chinese, 665 Thais, 910 Philipinos and 1743 Indonesians.⁶ By the late 1990s, nearly every one of Vietnam's 10,000 communes had a primary school and a commune health centre. According to WHO, 79% of Vietnamese births are performed by skilled specialists, compared to 71% in Thailand, 53% in the Philippines and 36% in Indonesia.⁷

Vietnam has the highest rate in the region for child immunisation against six major infectious diseases, and this national campaign is free. While Vietnam immunises 99% of children against TB, China manages only 77%. While 96% of Vietnamese children sleep under a net to guard against malaria, UNICEF gives no figures for China, Thailand or the Philippines, but only 32% for Indonesia.⁸

Neoliberal experts see this human development as arising from the introduction

of the market and private capital with Doi Moi. However, the capitalist countries we are comparing Vietnam with favourably do not lack free markets and private sectors. The assertion also ignores Vietnam's outstanding progress in health, education, childcare and other areas under the pre-Doi Moi system.

Above all, it leaves out the key role that decades of war, destruction and embargo played in keeping socialist Vietnam behind its real potential. The Cambodian war and the embargo ended in 1989, the same time economic changes were taking hold; thus while these changes were important, the new conditions of peace and trade played a role in the economic take-off which would have taken place under any system.

Moreover, Doi Moi has not been merely an opening to the market and private sector; the government has also used these forces to build the state sector, it has avoided a more open development of rural capitalism, and it has allowed great leeway for industrial workers to organise against exploitation in the private and foreign sectors.

The state sector's contribution to GDP has *risen* since Doi Moi, from 33% in 1990 to 40% today. The share of the state (SOEs and state budget) in investment rose from 42% in 1992 to 58% in 2001. State budget revenues as a percentage of GDP rose from 14 to 21%, and SOE taxes in 2001 accounted for 50% of state revenue, up from 40% in 1999. All these trends in China have been in the exact reverse — there the share of the state sector in investment fell from 68 to 47% in the 1990s,⁹ and the state sector's weight in GDP plummeted from 85% in 1978 to 38% in 1998, *before* the huge increase in privatisation after that year. Chinese leaders now put the SOE share at only 20-25% of GDP. In 1978, Chinese state revenue accounted for 29.5% of GDP, but by 1999 the figure had dropped to 13.3%.

The paradox of a larger Vietnamese state sector following the introduction of private and foreign sectors is partly explained by the big rise in the share of industry, largely in state hands, at the expense of agriculture. Yet even the state's share in industry initially rose at the expense of small household and cooperative industrial sectors which had been permitted pre-Doi Moi. By contrast, the state share in industry has declined in China, from 77.6% in 1978 to 20.3% in 1999.

Of the nonstate part of GDP and investment, a significant share is from foreign investment, which a country as poor as Vietnam needs for injections of capital and access to technology. Of 35% of GDP accounted for by the domestic "private sector", only 3.3% can be attributed to the capitalist sector — the bulk is the small "household sector" in urban and rural areas, not surprising in a country where millions of small-holding peasants constitute some 70% of the population.

Of course, many state enterprises become purely commercially-oriented firms, many are inefficient or hotbeds of corruption. The CPV has been very frank about

these problems. However, many positives can also be noted. SOEs pay much more tax than private firms; a recent report showed that SOE garment workers received pay around 30% higher than those in private and foreign firms, with far better conditions.¹⁰ Workers maintain some control over SOE operations; the World Bank complains that the “equitisation” (share privatisation of a portion of assets of small SOEs not considered key by the government) is held up due to workers’ opposition, as workers need to agree in their majority.¹¹ Vietnam analyst Melanie Beresford claims the Workers’ Congress is “the highest authority within an enterprise”.¹²

Many SOEs have non-economic social roles. “Objectives of SOEs may include a magnitude of targets ranging from the maximisation of employment to regional policy goals.”¹³ A survey of 91 SOEs showed that “profit maximisation was put on a par with creating employment for workers as the first operation target”.¹⁴ Asked why it uses little imported raw dairy products which are cheaper, state Vinamilk director Mai Kieu Lien responded “a business should think of not only profits, but also social obligations. Vinamilk has followed a policy of using domestic dairy products, progressively reducing imports ... *though profits were thereby lower by an average of VND30 billion a year, Vinamilk has effectively provided thousands of rural jobs via the development of herds of dairy cows.*”¹⁵

The relatively egalitarian land distribution is also fundamental to Vietnam’s success. Decollectivisation has been successful due to the limitations on liberalisation. Land is leased for 20 years rather than owned outright, restricting its value to a buyer or creditor; land bought during the lease period can be reallocated at the end of the period. A ceiling is placed on the size of land holdings. Diversification is combined with a continued emphasis on food security, to not fully expose the food needs of the poor to market volatility. A new cooperative law emphasises their voluntary and democratic nature. The state provides subsidies on fertilisers, seeds and other inputs, and a large amount of subsidised credit.

Vietnamese unions actively fight violations of workers conditions. Though virtually every strike has been led by spontaneous workers’ organisations rather than official unions, and “although the majority of the strikes did not follow proper legal procedures, they were tolerated by the government with no reports of retribution against the strikers”.¹⁶ In virtually every case reported, the official unions, local government bodies and police intervene and force the bosses to relent to workers’ demands. A hostile report by the US Department of Commerce claimed that “labour rights sentiments in Vietnam are backed by a conciliation system and a judiciary sympathetic to labour demands”.¹⁷

By contrast, China’s Labour Law bans strikes and spontaneous union formation.¹⁸

In a recent research on attitudes of Taiwanese bosses to workers in China and Vietnam¹⁹ the bosses complained that they were unable to beat Vietnamese workers or arbitrarily force them to work long hours, as was a matter of course in China. The difference lay in the activism of Vietnamese unions compared to Chinese, and the attitude of the government, compared to the Chinese government's repression of worker activism.

All this indicates that predictions of the death of Vietnamese socialism are greatly exaggerated. Nevertheless, the challenges of maintaining a socialist orientation in a poor country within global capitalism are enormous. The commercial environment eats away at socialist consciousness. Drawing the line between incentives for private investment and allowing crass displays of wealth is easier said than done. Corruption, individualism and acquisitiveness rise at the expense of the moral incentives and collectivist spirit which sustained the war effort and are necessary for the building of socialism. The CPV frankly admits the effects on a proportion of its own members, but the proliferation of high-level anti-corruption cases signifies continuing vigilance.

In some regions such as the Central Highlands and Mekong Delta, land concentration and landlessness are more pronounced than elsewhere in the country, despite Party policy. In some cases, even when the government distributes new land to poor farmers, they sell it back to wealthier farmers as they need cash. As long as poverty and technical backwardness exist, the best intentions can be undermined.

Following the collapse of the east bloc, a bankrupt Vietnamese state allowed small fees for education and health. It would be difficult to argue that this was not forced by necessity; it would also be difficult to argue that this was not a huge blow against socialist fundamentals. The great progress the country has made in health and education since then is evidence of the CPV's desire to overcome this step back. Today fees for primary school attendance, for children's health and basic health services for ethnic minorities and many others classed as poor are again waived, but this leaves a great many in serious difficulty. It is a difficult reality that serious health problems can drive a family into poverty in a society claiming socialist-orientation.

These facts need to be set in context. The lack of US reconstruction aid following "bombing it back into the Stone Age" has left a lasting legacy of 2 million people affected by Agent Orange, the chemical weapon sprayed by the US, and weekly deaths from unexploded US bombs 30 years later. Agent Orange results in a plague of cancers and horrific birth defects, still affecting those born today. The Vietnamese state has to find money for basic subsistence for these people, and for other surviving veterans, often crippled by war. NGOs report some 7 million people living with physical disabilities, about 9% of the population.

Keeping all this together is the CPV. The party that led the victory in 50 years of

conflict with imperialism is now trying to steer through this extraordinary situation. Many of those who dedicated their earlier lives to fighting for a socially just society are now in positions in government, local people's committees, SOE management, trade unions, enterprise workers' committees, mass organizations like the Women's, Youth, Farmers' and Veterans' Unions. Many western leftists see much to criticise about Vietnam's direction since Doi Moi. CPV members themselves also struggle to find paths that have not previously been trodden. A mixture of solidarity, deep humility and respect for the enormous achievements this party has made, in war and peace, should be our starting point in how we view the current situation in Vietnam.

The Vietnamese Revolution & Its Leadership

By Allen Myers

We've often made the point that the defeat of US imperialism in Vietnam in 1975 marked an extremely important shift in the world relationship of class forces between imperialism on one side and the workers and peasants on the other. Vietnam demonstrated conclusively that not even the awesome firepower of US imperialism could defeat a determined national liberation struggle. The effects of the Vietnamese struggle contributed greatly to a process of radicalisation within the United States and other imperialist countries and imposed high political costs on future acts of aggression.

Focusing on that important shift in the relationship of class forces, it perhaps becomes too easy to forget what the Vietnamese had to endure in order to achieve that historic victory — what it means to go through 45 years of war and revolutionary struggle without a let up. They had to endure five years of Japanese occupation during World War II and a horrible famine that wiped out two million people; a war against a French expeditionary force of half a million troops, followed by a war against the United States, the most powerful imperialist country in the world, which also sent more than half a million troops equipped with the very latest technology. In the late 1960s it was being estimated that for every Vietnamese killed the United States was spending \$400,000.

During the course of the US war, more than 14 million tons of explosives were set off in Vietnam — the equivalent, if you can imagine such a thing, of 720 Hiroshima-style atomic bombs. In the late 1960s, in the southern half of Vietnam the United

This is an edited and slightly expanded version of a report adopted by the National Committee of the Democratic Socialist Party (then the Socialist Workers Party) in October 1984. In the 1960s *Allen Myers* was a GI activist in the US movement against the Vietnam War before moving to Australia.

States was exploding 300 pounds of munitions per year for every human being in that half of the country.

The Vietnamese Revolution in 1975 inherited a country in ruins. There was vast physical destruction by the war in both north and south. The economy of the southern half of the country was grossly distorted by years of providing goods and services for the occupying US troops and the lack of any kind of balanced economic development; the few industries which did exist were dependent on imports of raw materials and so on. There was starvation in parts of the countryside. An estimated 150,000-300,000 tons of unexploded munitions were lying around in rice fields; those bombs and shells are still killing people today. Somewhere between three and four million people were suddenly left with no means of support by the collapse of the Thieu regime's repressive apparatus.

Despite this horrendous situation, the Vietnamese Revolution in a very brief time was able to solve the most pressing problems, such as preventing mass starvation. It began to reconstruct society on a new basis, in a way that had a powerful attraction for other exploited countries of the region — so much so that this revolution aroused tremendous fears and hatred in imperialism and reactionary governments of the region: ASEAN, the Pol Pot regime in Kampuchea, the conservative bureaucracy that rules in China. So, once again, the Vietnamese people were forced to engage in warfare to defend their revolution, this time against a ferocious border war organised by the Pol Pot gang, and then against a Chinese invasion carried out largely at the instigation of United States imperialism. In the process, they saved the Kampuchean people from genocide, and today they are giving selfless material and military aid to prevent the return of the Khmer Rouge and assist the Kampucheans in the construction of a revolutionary society.

Our own party was largely a product of the struggle of the Vietnamese people. There were comrades who were Marxists before the days of the antiwar movement, but the majority of cadres who founded the Socialist Workers Party gained their initial political experience in the struggle against what US and Australian imperialism were doing in Vietnam. Our party always saw the most active solidarity with Vietnam as absolutely central both to building a revolutionary party in Australia and to advancing the worldwide struggle for socialism. And when victory finally came on April 30, 1975, we rushed out a special issue of *Direct Action* heralding it, correctly, as “A victory for all humanity”.

But despite this record, of which the party can be justly proud, and even in contradiction with it, we didn't fully understand what was happening in Vietnam or the character of the forces involved. In particular, we seriously misjudged the

Communist Party of Vietnam — what it was, what its goals were, what it was achieving. We took the view that the CPV was a Stalinist party. That is, we saw it as analogous to the CPSU after the latter came under the domination of the Stalin faction, as a party that defends the interests of an entrenched, privileged bureaucracy against the interests of the workers and peasants, and which seeks a permanent compromise with capitalism and imperialism rather than seeking to destroy them.

Fortunately, our practice was better than our theory. We didn't let our view of the Vietnamese Communist Party interfere with the all important task of aiding the Vietnamese fight against imperialism. But a bad theory will have its effects sooner or later. Our false view of the character of the CPV was an important element in preventing us from learning the lessons about the nature of revolution in the underdeveloped countries that could have been learned from the Vietnamese victory. As a result, we lost four years: We didn't start learning those lessons until the Nicaraguan revolution finally brought them home to us in 1979. Along with ignorance, our wrong view of the CPV was responsible for the wrong view of what was happening which we initially adopted when Pol Pot was overthrown.

Our resolution *The Struggle for Socialism in the Imperialist Epoch* formally changed our wrong position on the CPV. The purpose of this report is to explain in more detail than the resolution could do why this change was necessary; to look at why we took the position we did, so that we don't make similar mistakes in the future; and to begin the process of learning the great deal that we need to learn about the Vietnamese Revolution and the role in it of the Communist Party.

* * *

How did we arrive at our original, wrong position concerning the Vietnamese Communist Party? What was the argumentation we accepted then, and why do we now regard that argumentation as mistaken?

A debate about the character of the Vietnamese Communist Party took place in 1973-74, in the pages of *International Socialist Review*, between Pierre Rousset of the French Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire and Fred Feldman and George Johnson of the US Socialist Workers Party. I don't think we ever voted on the competing articles as such, but the majority of our party certainly accepted the Feldman/Johnson argument that the CPV was a Stalinist party. In discussing this view, it's easiest to cite the Feldman/Johnson articles, because it was there that the view was laid out most clearly, but our own press at the time reflected the same false ideas.

The debate itself was not a very fruitful one, for three reasons.

Permanent revolution

The first is that it was conducted in terms of the false schema of the theory of permanent revolution. Rousset said, in effect: “The Vietnamese party has been leading the revolution successfully, therefore it must have adopted the program of permanent revolution in practice.” Feldman and Johnson said: “No, they didn’t follow the program of permanent revolution in practice and therefore they’re Stalinists, not revolutionaries.”

Obviously, that’s not a very good way to look at the question. Both sides were partly right and partly wrong, but we made the mistake of thinking we had to accept either one or the other, because we still held to the schema of permanent revolution. The Vietnamese CP certainly didn’t follow the theory of permanent revolution, but that fact doesn’t make them Stalinist. As I will try to illustrate below, the CPV carried out Lenin’s theory of revolution in the oppressed, underdeveloped countries. But because of our fixation with permanent revolution, we couldn’t see the difference between Lenin’s theory as applied by the Vietnamese and the Stalinist/Menshevik policy of subordinating the workers and peasants to the national bourgeoisie.

Now, one of the problems in discussing Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution with the comrades who still think it’s correct is this: Whenever we point to some attempt to apply that theory which leads to absurdity or disaster, the comrades answer: “No, that’s not what we mean by permanent revolution, that’s not what the theory really means.” And it’s fairly easy for them to do that, because the presentation of this theory over the years varies quite a bit. You can find passages in Trotsky’s writings in which the theory appears quite close to Lenin’s, just as you can find passages in which it is an ultraleft theory counterposed to Lenin’s. This ambiguity is one of the things that’s wrong with the theory, although it’s not the main problem with it. But what Trotsky might have meant or intended is not really decisive. More important is the effect that the theory has on the political positions of the people who adhere to it; whether they understand it “correctly” or not is really a diversion. In the debate with Rousset, Feldman and Johnson presented permanent revolution in a way that clearly reveals its ultraleft character, and used the theory to attack the practice of the CPV. To my knowledge, no one who supported the theory — including Rousset — said at the time that Feldman and Johnson had misrepresented it.

Let me illustrate how permanent revolution coloured the debate. Feldman and Johnson quoted the following passage from a 1967 work by Le Duan, *Forward Under the Glorious Banner of the October Revolution*:

Since the victory of the October Revolution, and especially after the Second World War, the national liberation movement owes its outstanding characteristic to the awakening of the workers and peasants who have been playing a more and more

decisive part among forces of national liberation, while the national bourgeoisie, though to a certain extent anti-imperialist in tendency, is essentially hesitant and reformist. Moreover, today these forces find the steadiest support in the socialist camp. All these new factors have enabled the national liberation movement to develop not only on a large scale but also in depth, thus acquiring a new quality. Though national and democratic in content, national liberation revolution no longer remains in the framework of bourgeois revolution; instead, it has become an integral part of the proletarian revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat on a world wide scale ... That is why the national liberation movement possesses a tremendous offensive capacity and an extremely great effect, seriously threatening the rear of imperialism and creating the conditions for socialist revolution to spread all over the world.

That is a very good short summary of the analysis which forms the basis for the Leninist strategy of revolution in the underdeveloped countries. But Feldman and Johnson saw it as an expression of a counter-revolutionary strategy counterposed to permanent revolution. They commented:

To the unwary reader, this sounds rather like Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution and Lenin's writings on the colonial question after the Russian Revolution. Le Duan's words are carefully chosen, however, and contain a different content. Note that while the national bourgeoisie is criticised as "hesitant" and "reformist" *it is not excluded from the alliance that will make the "national liberation revolution"*. Moreover, the "content" of this revolution is explicitly given as "national and democratic" — the socialist tasks that revolutionary Marxists would pose as an equal part of that content are substituted for by a highly ambiguous formula: "no longer in the framework of bourgeois revolution ... on a worldwide scale." What precisely does Le Duan mean by this? Does he mean, as Trotskyists would pose the question, that national democratic and socialist tasks are combined in a single "stage" of the revolution? Or does he mean that bourgeois-democratic regimes, with working-class participation, in the colonial world can escape neocolonialism by allying themselves at the governmental level with "socialist" governments in other countries, thus "creating conditions" for an advance to socialism at some future date?¹ (Emphasis added)

That expresses it quite clearly. There are only two real alternatives: either the theory of permanent revolution or the Stalinist/Menshevik theory of subordinating the workers to a government dominated by the national bourgeoisie. The Leninist strategy of a national liberation struggle led by the working class and resulting in a workers and peasants' government is entirely squeezed out of the picture — the reference to Lenin's writings "after the Russian Revolution" alludes to the myth that after 1917 Lenin was "won over" to Trotsky's theory.⁵ And the Trotskyist side of this false dichotomy is

equally clear: Revolutionary strategy requires the *exclusion* of the national bourgeoisie from the anti-imperialist struggle. The authors recognise the existence of national democratic tasks in the colonial and semicolonial countries, but they regard national liberation revolutions as a myth created by Stalinist theoreticians, as they remind us by putting the phrase in inverted commas. From the standpoint of the permanent revolution schema, the CPV was betraying the fight for socialism by seeking a national liberation revolution and refusing to exclude the national bourgeoisie from the struggle.

With that kind of perspective, you couldn't get very far in understanding what the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Vietnamese Revolution were all about. The theory of permanent revolution distorted the whole discussion. Neither side of this debate looked at the course of the Vietnamese struggle in the correct context of the Leninist strategy of revolution.

The second defect with this debate is partly visible in the passage quoted above. This was its essentially normative approach, especially on the side of Feldman and Johnson, the side we supported. By a normative approach we mean the setting up of norms or standards — usually arbitrary ones — which are taken as absolutes that allow you to judge everything else without the tiresome task of observing and studying reality: if a party conforms to the norms, then it's one of the elect; otherwise you can write it off.

Misuse of norms

So, in the passage quoted, Feldman and Johnson simply *defined* “revolutionary Marxists” as people who follow the theory of permanent revolution in putting socialist tasks on the immediate agenda in colonial and semicolonial countries; if you don't accept that theory, then you're not a revolutionary Marxist. But even if the theory of permanent revolution were correct, it couldn't provide that sort of dividing line between those who are and who aren't revolutionary Marxists.

An even more grotesque example of this normative approach is the following passage:

Revolutionary Marxists consider the construction of an international party on a clear revolutionary program to be an absolute necessity for the triumph of socialism on a world scale. They seek to discover whether the Vietnamese Communist Party represents

[§] There is of course nothing in Lenin's writings stating acceptance of Trotsky's theory, so adherents of the myth rely on third-hand and fourth-hand accounts of remarks Lenin is supposed to have made in private conversations. They thus assume that Lenin would have allowed confusion in the world communist movement on a crucial question of revolution, merely for the sake of his personal prestige.

a model of such an organisation in its program and methods or whether it has committed errors in theory and practice that differentiate it from revolutionary Marxism.²

So, from that standpoint a revolutionary Marxist party is one that doesn't make mistakes. The picture is that there is some sharply defined body of absolute truth called "revolutionary Marxism." Either you have ownership of it in every detail and therefore do everything right or you make mistakes. By that kind of reasoning, there never has been a revolutionary Marxist party anywhere, and there never will be one.

If you persist in this sort of normative approach even when reality begins to expose the fact that your norms aren't as accurate or decisive as you believed, the next step is to start denying reality. There is evidence of that in the same article. The authors were arguing that the CPV ignored political work in the cities:

What has been the role of the CPV in the cities? ... The high point of the upsurge in the cities in the second resistance was undoubtedly the Tet offensive of 1968. There is no question that the liberation forces could not have functioned as well as they did in Saigon, Hue, and elsewhere, without massive and active support from the city masses.

Nonetheless, very significant considerations should make us hesitate to assume the most favourable variant about the role of the NLF-PRG in the urban areas. First, the program of the PRG and NLF guarantees workers no more than the right to participate in management, and attempts to give the bourgeoisie assurances that their property rights will be upheld. That is not likely to attract the enthusiastic support of class conscious workers.

So, the evidence is that the workers are following the NLF-PRG. But our theory says workers aren't likely to be attracted by their program. Therefore, we'll ignore the evidence!

Misinformation

The third defect in this whole debate was that large parts of it were based on ignorance. It was argued that the Vietnamese were following the Maoist theory of people's war and essentially leaving the cities in the political control of the enemy until they were finally conquered from the countryside. That was simply not true. And the extent to which it was untrue surprised a lot of people. The following is from *Giai Phong!* This book was written on the spot in Saigon almost immediately after its liberation.

The revolution ... had not been merely a military fact, much less a question of tanks and divisions. In Saigon as in the rest of Vietnam, as the regular troops advanced, the clandestine political organisation that made the advance possible came to life. Out of the shadows emerged a whole formation of fighters who for years had contributed silently from within to the struggle for the country's independence. Cadres emerged

from among students, Front representatives from among factory workers, many people at every level of society revealed themselves for what they were: agents of the Front.

In Quang Ngai, the woman who for years had sold sugar cane juice in front of the central police headquarters was a member of the Revolutionary Committee of the city. The “madman” who for years had begged at the bus station and who every so often would run shouting into the fields, despite the curfew, was actually an officer in the Liberation Army.

In Ban Me Thuot on Liberation Day people discovered that what they took for a “family” living a short distance from the Hotel Anh Dao was in fact the NLF group in charge of the region ...

They were scattered everywhere. Father Tran Huu Thanh, the anti Communist Catholic priest who had led the “movement against corruption”, discovered that the young student who accompanied him to every street demonstration and acted as his bodyguard was a guerrilla fighter in the Front. Mme. Ngo Ba Thanh, a leader of the Third Force, discovered that the secretary general of her movement, a girl by the name of Tran Thi Lan, was a Front cadre. Even Colonel Do Viet found that two of his fellow officers in the Psychological Warfare Command were Vietcong agents.³

Now, a certain amount of our ignorance was perhaps understandable: The Vietnamese were not advertising the kind of work they were doing in the cities. In the same way, in regard to northern aid to the struggle in the South, they did their best, for obvious reasons, to conceal that.

But I think we have to say that some of our ignorance was self-imposed, in order to maintain our conclusion that the Vietnamese Communist Party was Stalinist and thus to preserve the blinkered perspective of permanent revolution. Here is just one example of that deliberate ignorance. Arguing in another article that the Communist Party was merely following orders from Stalin when it declared Vietnam independent in 1945, Feldman and Johnson wrote:

... did the CPV violate Stalin’s promise [to imperialism] at Potsdam? Did it act differently than the Indonesian CP, which was and remained a Stalinist party in alliance with a bourgeois government? First of all, the government that was established in Vietnam was a coalition that included not only the CPV, but also “emperor” Bao Dai and the existing bourgeois parties.⁴

In point of fact, there was never any coalition with Bao Dai. Bao Dai did, however, have a certain amount of credibility among more conservative sections of the population. When the Japanese took over formal control from the French in March 1945, Bao Dai got permission or orders to declare a phoney “independence”, and some people were taken in by that. So when the August Revolution occurred, the Viet

Minh went to Bao Dai and told him he would have to abdicate. They had a speech all written out for him that included the stirring declaration: “I would rather be a simple citizen in an independent country than king of an enslaved nation.” And then, to demonstrate that there was a role for everyone in the new, independent Vietnam they wanted to build, the Viet Minh appointed him a special adviser to the government. There’s no record that he ever offered any advice, or that the CPV would have accepted it if he had. In any case, there certainly wasn’t a coalition.

* * *

So those were the three major factors behind our false view of the character of the Vietnamese Communist Party: an incorrect theory of revolution in the underdeveloped countries; a schematic, normative attitude to a living revolution; and plain ignorance.

This report can only be a tentative beginning towards overcoming the last problem, ignorance: We obviously have to do a lot of learning, as a party, about the Vietnamese Revolution and the CPV. But it’s never too soon to throw out schematic norms. And what we’ve learned in the last few years about the Leninist theory of revolution in the oppressed countries will help us to understand the Vietnamese Revolution and will be enriched from what we learn about Vietnam.

Relation between privilege & policies

Correcting our mistaken view of the Vietnamese CP can also help us to make more precise our understanding of Stalinism and how it influences the world class struggle. We know that the dominance of the Stalin faction in the CPSU was based on specific material causes: The rise of a privileged bureaucracy with interests contrary to those of the workers and peasants and which sought guarantees against any threat to its privileges by excluding the masses of working people from any real exercise of political power. We use the term “Stalinism” to describe this whole, materially based development.

But we also use the word in a more extended sense, to designate the class-collaborationist policies which the privileged bureaucracy developed in an effort to protect its special interests — its efforts to appease imperialist threats by trading off the interests of revolutionary struggles in other countries. And we’ve also used the word “Stalinist” in regard to parties in capitalist countries which generally follow policies that are complementary to those policies of the Soviet bureaucracy.

When a term is used so broadly, there’s an obvious danger of confusion if you don’t get very specific whenever there’s the possibility of ambiguity. We might decide that a particular party is following a Stalinist line on some question, but that by itself

doesn't tell you very much. You need to ask why it's following that line, which of course means learning a great deal more about the party than a handful of its official positions. A party may follow a wrong policy because it's made up of privileged bureaucrats, or people who want to be privileged bureaucrats. But it might also simply be a case of a revolutionary party that has made a mistake.

We should also be a bit cautious about rushing in and labelling as wrong policies that are adopted by a party leading a difficult struggle. It might be the policies we favour that are wrong. That was certainly the case in Vietnam, where the ultraleft line flowing from the theory of permanent revolution would have produced a disaster if it had been followed by the Communist Party.

Stalinist bureaucrats harm the world revolution because their goal is compromise with imperialism. But it's bad logic and ultraleft idiocy to conclude that therefore every compromise with imperialism is a sell-out by Stalinist bureaucrats. Sometimes a compromise is the wisest course for revolutionaries; that's what Lenin decided at the time of Brest-Litovsk, despite the screams of the "lefts" in the Bolshevik Party and the Left Social-Revolutionaries. The dividing line between Stalinists and revolutionaries is not that the former always compromise and the latter never do. The dividing line is whether compromise is seen, in practice, as an historic goal or as merely changing the arena and forms of a continuing struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

Sacrifice & hardship

Now, to turn specifically to the Vietnamese Communist Party: Is there any solid evidence to indicate that it is the political representative of a hardened bureaucratic caste defending material privileges against the needs of the Vietnamese workers and peasants? If we were to answer that question in the affirmative we'd immediately raise the question: When and how did this caste arise?

The Communist Party was founded in 1930. There weren't any privileges available for members of the Communist Party in 1930, that's for sure. Being a communist in the 1930s brought heavy persecution, not material privileges. It brought arrests, long prison sentences, execution or being beaten to death in prison. The infamous Con Son "tiger cages" used by the US puppet regimes were crammed with political prisoners throughout the French colonial period. That wasn't the sort of environment that appeals to would-be bureaucrats. There weren't any unions or other mass organisations in the '30s that lasted long enough to provide anyone with a bureaucratic niche.

World War II provided even less opportunity for somebody to accumulate material privileges. The experience of the CPV was quite unlike that of the Chinese Communist Party, which held power in large areas for lengthy periods of time in the 1930s and the

1940s. It was during that time that the leaders of the Chinese party consolidated themselves as a materially privileged caste. But the Vietnamese Communist Party never created more than a very small liberated area in a very impoverished region of the northern mountains late in the war. After the war itself, it managed to hold on to Hanoi for only a year and a half, so there wasn't an opportunity for a privileged layer to develop and consolidate its position. Then came the long years of war against the French — another period of great hardship and sacrifice, not material privilege.

From 1954 to 1964 there was peace in the northern half of Vietnam. Abstractly, it might have been possible for a bureaucracy to develop and entrench itself in a privileged position at that time. We know of no evidence of this, however, and that sort of process could hardly take place without leaving some visible evidence — profound changes in program and practice, deep divisions within the party and so on, such as occurred when the Soviet CP was being transformed into the instrument of a bureaucratic caste. None of that occurred in Vietnam. We also know that being a member or leader of the Communist Party in that period still meant a high chance of physical privation and death in the South. Because, contrary to some myths, the government in North Vietnam did not “abandon” the South during that period.

After the escalation of the US involvement in 1964, the Vietnamese operated an economy that was essentially one of war communism. There was, if anything, a reduction, a necessary and unavoidable reduction, of any differentials in incomes that might have developed in the preceding period.

That leaves only the period since 1975 when, theoretically, a privileged caste might have developed. We don't have any detailed studies or statistics on the distribution of incomes and so on in Vietnam. But, given the record, that's not an obstacle for us at this point. We shouldn't fall into the trap of thinking that we have to prove things in the negative. That's a false way to approach the question, because bureaucratism is not at all an inevitable result of revolutions. It's a mistake to approach revolutionary societies such as that of Vietnam thinking that Stalinism must be developing unless there's absolute proof to the contrary.

Well, what about the program of the CPV? Even if it is not the political representative of an entrenched bureaucratic caste, is its program perhaps so corrupted by Stalinist ideas and policies that we would have to say that this party cannot consistently represent the interest of the workers and peasants, that it is an obstacle rather than an aid to the world revolution? Or, perhaps as another variant, could we say that it is a centrist party — one that vacillates between revolutionary and reformist positions?

The first thing to emphasise is that program is, above all, what you do, not what you say. The 35-year struggle that defeated US imperialism in 1975 was certainly not

something that represented an obstacle to the world revolution.

But I think it is worthwhile to go back and briefly look at some of the developments in the CPV from the time of its foundation. Such an examination would show two things.

First of all, whatever else you say about it, it would be simply absurd to describe the CPV as vacillating. It has had a most consistent line for more than four decades — implemented, of course, with different tactical measures in different situations.

The second conclusion, which can help us to understand a good deal that we previously did not understand, is that in its early years the CPV was considerably influenced by Stalinism, both ideologically and through the direct interference of the Communist International in its affairs. But that influence never totally dominated the party, and the Leninist trend, of which Ho Chi Minh was the central leader, eventually won out in determining the character and course of the party.

Lenin & Ho

The central issue in the Vietnamese Revolution, as in the colonies and semicolonies generally, has been the relationship between national liberation struggle and class struggle within the society. Lenin's great contribution on this question was his emphasis on the absolutely central role in the entire world revolution of the struggle against imperialism.

On a world scale, in a period that is now extending over centuries, humanity faces the tremendous task of passing from capitalism to socialism. Yet in many countries of the world, the underdeveloped countries, the class that is the bearer of those new social relations, the proletariat, is often a tiny minority of the population. The most immediate tasks facing those societies are tasks that are historically associated with the bourgeoisie and the development of capitalism.

Therefore the dilemma that Lenin addressed and found the solution to is this: How can you show these societies a way forward which does not strengthen capitalism? How can you involve in a struggle for a world socialist society class forces whose most immediate interests are not socialism but national, bourgeois tasks? That is the dilemma that Lenin's theory of revolution in the underdeveloped countries deals with. His answer was that the struggle for liberation from imperialism could mobilise, behind the leadership of the working class, the nonproletarian layers (chiefly the peasants) who are exploited or oppressed by the conditions maintained by imperialism. This worker-peasant alliance could defeat the state power of the bourgeois and landowner forces allied with imperialism and form a workers and peasants' government to carry out the national revolutionary tasks. As the power and consciousness of the workers

and peasants increased, the revolution would grow over uninterruptedly to socialist tasks and, with assistance from more developed socialist states, establish the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Lenin's strategy is of course not a tactical recipe. It doesn't provide mathematical formulas that can be used with a slide rule or computer to calculate in advance to what extent rich and middle peasants in the Philippines are going to join a struggle against Marcos. That's something that you have to discover in practice — it's a matter of tactics, flexibility and learning from experience. But it can only be done within that overall strategy that Lenin developed.

Under Ho Chi Minh's leadership, the Vietnamese Communist Party succeeded in applying Lenin's strategy to the concrete conditions of Vietnam and thus leading the workers and peasants of that country to victory.

The party was founded formally in 1930, but its real history goes back to early 1925 when Ho Chi Minh, then known by the name of Nguyen Ai Quoc — Ai Quoc meaning "patriot" — arrived in Canton and founded the Revolutionary Youth League, Thanh Nien. Ho had been a nationalist from his early youth, and he became an instant hero in Vietnam in 1919, when — after some travels around Europe contacting socialist groups of various sorts — he showed up at the Versailles peace conference and demanded independence for Vietnam. He seems to have had, up until that point, some illusions about the democratic verbiage that accompanied World War I. He lost those illusions in 1919 at Versailles.

In 1920, as a member of the French Socialist Party, Ho read for the first time Lenin's Theses on the National and Colonial Questions. He decided immediately that he was a Leninist.

Later he wrote, referring to the debates in the Socialist Party:

Formerly, during the meetings of the party branch, I only listened to the discussion; I had a vague belief that all were logical, and could not differentiate as to who were right and who were wrong. But from then on, I also plunged into the debates and discussed with fervour. Though I was still lacking French words to express all my thoughts, I smashed the allegations attacking Lenin and the Third International with no less vigour. My only argument was: "If you do not condemn colonialism, if you do not side with the colonial people, what kind of revolution are you waging?" ...

At first, patriotism, not yet communism, led me to have confidence in Lenin, in the Third International. Step by step, along the struggle, by studying Marxism-Leninism parallel with participation in practical activities, I gradually came upon the fact that only socialism and communism can liberate the oppressed nations and the working people throughout the world from slavery.⁵

Ho participated in the split in the French Socialist Party that brought about the creation of the French Communist Party. Within the Communist International and the French Communist Party, he was a firm supporter of Lenin's line on the colonial revolution. At the Fifth Congress of the Comintern in 1924, during the discussion of the report on the national and colonial questions, Ho stressed the great potential of the colonial revolution:

In all the French colonies, discontent mounts hand in hand with misery and famine. The uprising of the colonial peasants is imminent. They have already risen up in many colonies, but their revolts have been drowned in blood each time. If at the moment they appear to resign themselves, it is uniquely because of a lack of organisation and leaders. The Communist International must work to bring them together, provide them with leading cadres, and guide them on the road to revolution and liberation.⁶

Ho was very critical of communists in the imperialist countries who downplayed in any way the struggle against imperialism. During the same congress of the Comintern, under a totally different point of the agenda, he made this remark:

I cannot help but observe that the speeches made by the comrades from the mother countries give me the impression that they wish to kill the snake by stepping on its tail. You all know that today the poison and life energy of the capitalist snake is concentrated more in the colonies than in the mother countries ... Yet in your discussion of the revolution you neglect to talk about the colonies ... Why do you neglect the colonies, while capitalism uses them to support itself, defend itself, and fight you?⁷

Thanh Nien

It proved to be good timing when Ho established the Youth League, Thanh Nien, in 1925. The years 1925-26 were a watershed in Vietnamese nationalism. They marked the passing away of an old generation of bourgeois nationalism and the beginning of a new upsurge of revolutionary nationalism. In 1925 the well-known bourgeois nationalist Phan Boi Chau was captured, tried and sentenced to life imprisonment by the French colonialists. In response, a huge popular upsurge swept the country, demanding his freedom. And in fact the French backed down and released Phan Boi Chau from prison while keeping him under house arrest. The following year, the equally well-known and respected nationalist Phan Chu Trinh died, and his funeral became the occasion of another huge upsurge. Vietnamese from all walks of life collaborated to stage what were essentially political demonstrations, although they were described as giving Trinh a state funeral. While they didn't have control over their own state, the Vietnamese people were going to bury their nationalist hero with the proper respect.

A very central role in these events was played by young people, particularly students. Many people who were later prominent in Vietnamese politics first began their political activities at this time. Truong Chinh, who is today the president of Vietnam, Vo Nguyen Giap the noted military strategist, Le Duan, Pham Van Dong — all began their political activities at this time, as teenagers, as did Ta Thu Thau, who was later one of the leaders of the Vietnamese Trotskyists.

Thanh Nien began bringing young Vietnamese out to Canton — a task made easier by the fact that many of them were expelled from school as a result of their activities — and putting them through training courses of various lengths and then sending them back to Vietnam to organise others. They ran a cadre school, and I'll just give you a little idea of the syllabus:

The revolutionary theory curriculum included a historical survey of the evolution of human society, with emphasis on the era of capitalism and imperialism; an examination of the history of Western imperialism and the movements of national liberation in Korea, China, and Vietnam; and a critical study of Gandhism, Sun Yat Sen's *Three Principles of the People*, and Marxism-Leninism. Trainees also received instruction on the October Revolution and the history and organisations of the First, Second, and Third Internationals, the Democratic Federation of Women, the Democratic Federation of Youth, the Red Aid International, and the Peasant International. According to an archival document of Thanh Nien, the theoretical part of the curriculum included the following items:

Theory of communism

The ideology of the Three Principles of the People (with critique)

Anarchism (with critique)

Party organisational forms, workers' associations, and women's liberation associations

Secret operations

Forms of propaganda and agitation

Current events

History of the French occupation of Indochina and revolutionary mobilisation⁸

The cadre school also provided students with instruction in practical activities, from public speaking and writing articles to organising unions, peasants and youth. Between 1925 and 1927 about 300 Vietnamese young people went through this training program. Ho's aim seems to have been to conduct a regroupment within the radical nationalist movement and crystallise out of it elements who could become communists. Thanh Nien's newspaper presented quite a broad radical program and articles on a wide range of topics. Ho himself wrote at least one article on Confucianism saying: It's true

that Confucian ideas are used to hold things back, but Confucius was a very bright man and if he were alive today he'd actually be a follower of Lenin. Within the Thanh Nien, Ho organised a secret group which considered itself the nucleus of the future Communist Party.

By the late 1920s, Thanh Nien had a membership of several thousands. But like many young and growing revolutionary groups, it suffered some problems. One was a certain sectarianism. There was another group developing called Tan Viet. Not a great deal is known about it, but it was obviously developing towards communist ideas, because it later joined the Communist Party, and it several times proposed to Thanh Nien that the two groups fuse. Tan Viet would send a delegate off to talk to Thanh Nien, and, the delegate would be won over to Thanh Nien and joined up, and then Thanh Nien would say go back and tell them they can all come and join us too. This is not a very good way to conduct fusions, as we know.

Ultraleft course

More long-lasting problems developed as a result of several events. In December 1927 occurred the so-called Canton soviet — an attempted putsch by the Chinese Communist Party which resulted in a savage repression of the labour movement in that city and the definitive defeat of the second. Chinese revolution.

With Chiang Kai-shek's forces dominant in southern China, for the next couple of years Ho and his comrades were more or less on the run, and communications with Vietnam largely broke down.

In that situation Thanh Nien members in Vietnam tended to shift their focus to the French Communist Party for outside contact. And through that they became aware of and influenced by some of the developments taking place in the Communist International, particularly the Third Period line. In conjunction with the Third Period line, the Comintern imposed a rigid "proletarianisation" policy; everybody was supposed to become a proletarian. Certainly, in and of itself, an orientation to the proletariat is obviously important and necessary, but it also has to be put into a certain context, especially in an underdeveloped, semicolonial country: In 1930 the Vietnamese working class was approximately 2% of the population. Unfortunately, many of the young Thanh Nien cadres succumbed to the danger of a certain workerism and a consequent neglect of the importance of a correct orientation to the peasants.

Under the influence of the Third Period line transmitted to them by the French Communist Party, a group of these proletarianised former students in northern Vietnam decided that Thanh Nien was too patriotic and wasn't sufficiently communist. They organised a secret faction for what was to be the first and last congress of Thanh

Nien, which was held in 1929. They went into the congress, said Thanh Nien should become a communist party, and when that wasn't accepted the entire delegation (except for one person who turned out to be a police agent) walked out and set up an organisation called the Indochinese Communist Party. The new party began — with considerable success — trying to recruit Thanh Nien's members.

The remaining members of Thanh Nien therefore decided that the name communist was pretty catchy and they'd better become communists too, so they set up the Annamese Communist Party, Annam being the French name for central Vietnam.

Then Tan Viet, the group which had been trying unsuccessfully to fuse with Thanh Nien, decided it had better be communist too, and so it established the League of Indochinese Communists. And all three immediately wrote off to Moscow and asked to be recognised as the Vietnamese section of the Communist International. The Comintern replied that the three groups should unite.

A unification conference of the Communist Party was held in February 1930, convened by Ho Chi Minh; it established what was called the Vietnamese Communist Party. The new party's line, although still a bit vague in many areas because of the differing compositions and ideas of groups coming from different directions, included a clear stance on the national liberation struggle, a line that Ho had been arguing for through Thanh Nien. One of the adopted resolutions stated:

The party must do its best to maintain relationships with the petit-bourgeois, intellectual, and middle peasant groups, to attract them to follow the proletariat. As concerns the rich peasants, medium and small landowners, and Vietnamese capitalists who have not shown themselves to be clearly counter-revolutionary, we must make use of them, or at least neutralise them. Whichever organisation has demonstrated its counter-revolutionary character (such as the Constitutionalist Party, etc.) must be overthrown.⁹

But that Leninist approach wasn't the line that the Comintern was pushing at that point. This was the Third Period, when everybody was supposed to overthrow capitalism on short order, regardless of local conditions. At the insistence of the Comintern, a plenum of the CPV Central Committee was held the following October which adopted the ultraleft line favoured by the Comintern. For example, a resolution passed by the plenum clearly repudiated the line of the conference on the question of an anti-imperialist alliance:

The landlords are a class which does not participate in the cultivation of the land, nor does it live like peasants. They use their land in order to get their share of the crops, that is, they oppress and exploit the peasants. Although it is true that some of them may have a few hundred hectares while others 5-7000 hectares, all of them belong to the

landlord class, the enemy of the peasants. They must be overthrown, and their land confiscated.¹⁰

The same document explicitly criticised the idea of making use of, or even neutralising, layers of the bourgeoisie which had not exposed themselves as counter-revolutionary:

While it is true that there exists such a group, they cannot be on our side, nor can we make use of them ... The party must do its best to destroy their influence among the masses ... To say that the party ought to neutralise them is to tell the party not to advocate the struggle of the workers and peasants against the native bourgeoisie. The party cannot have such a policy.¹¹

This retreat from the Leninist strategy of national liberation struggle was buttressed with wishful thinking about the consciousness of the masses: “The most outstanding and important feature in the revolutionary movement in Indochina is that the struggle of the worker-peasant masses has taken on a very clearly independent character and is no longer influenced by nationalism as it used to be.”¹²

The plenum also made a point of changing the party’s name from Vietnamese Communist Party to Indochinese Communist Party, in order to dissociate the party from the Vietnamese nationalist struggle, which the ultraleft line saw as counterposed to class struggle.

As part of this ultraleft shift, the new Communist Party was involved very quickly — in fact, even before the plenum was held it was involved to some extent — in an ultraleft adventure in the famous Nghe Tinh soviets.

In February 1930, a bourgeois nationalist party, the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang,[§] had led a soldiers’ mutiny in northern Vietnam. The mutiny had been suppressed within a day, but the French followed it up with huge repression: For example, airplanes bombed villages that were merely suspected of being sympathetic to the mutiny. Nevertheless, in the central Vietnamese provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh, there were militant peasant demonstrations on May Day. The French attacked some of the demonstrations, the peasants called other marches to protest against the repression, these marches were attacked, leading to new protests. This process developed into a long, drawn-out struggle lasting more than a year. Before it was over it involved things like the peasants seizing control of villages, attacks on French offices and Vietnamese collaborators, and so on.

But the upsurge was confined to these two provinces. There was undoubtedly widespread sympathy for this movement, but never any significant active support

[§] The name means Vietnam Nationalist Party. Quoc Dan Dang is the Vietnamese equivalent of Kuomintang, on which the Quoc Dan Dang was consciously modeled.

from other parts of the country, and this made it easy for the French to isolate the movement and suppress it.

It's not very clear, and different historians have different views on the question, whether the Communist Party was involved in organising this uprising or whether, on the other hand, it simply moved in to try to direct what was essentially a spontaneous upsurge. There is also some evidence that there were differences between the Central Committee, which was located abroad, and the members of the Communist Party who were there on the spot.

Nevertheless, it is quite clear that the Communists on the spot encouraged ultraleft excesses — things like forcefully stamping out traditional customs that were regarded as reactionary, carrying out executions of some landowners and rich peasants — and that the Communist Party didn't use its influence to try to conduct a retreat when it became clear that this movement was isolated. As a matter of fact, towards the end of this period, ultraleftism reached the point that members of the CP itself were attacked by peasants who thought that these CPers were being too moderate, weren't being revolutionary enough.

Furthermore, the Comintern thought the whole thing was wonderful: Even after the Nghe Tinh movement had been brutally suppressed, the Comintern was calling for more of the same.

In the aftermath of this adventure, there was a great loss of support for the CP in the urban areas, where it had previously had a wide sympathy, and the virtual destruction of the CP by the repression that followed. There were about 10,000 political activists arrested after the suppression of the Nghe Tinh soviets, and most of them were communists. The party was so decimated in the period 1932 to 1934 that the Comintern decided to reorganise it completely.

Vietnamese who had been trained in Moscow were sent back to Vietnam to try to begin regrouping nuclei of branches. Many of these people were not at all real communist cadres. They were often recruited from Vietnamese who were in France for reasons unrelated to politics and who had no experience of the anticolonial struggle. A very high percentage of them — in one case 22 out of 35 — couldn't cope with the hardship and voluntarily surrendered to the police and spilled everything they knew within a short time of arriving in Vietnam. Those who didn't give up had usually been instilled with a bureaucratic sense of automatic obedience to whatever line was issued from Moscow.

The influence of the Comintern in the party was further increased by the fact that at this period Ho Chi Minh, who was in China, was captured by the British. He was held in jail for about 15 months, and, in fact, at the time it was widely thought that he

was dead; there was a memorial service held for him in Moscow.

In classic Stalinist style, the apparatchiks who'd been sent back from Moscow framed Ho. They attacked his supposedly conservative nationalist line and at the same time blamed him for the ultraleft excesses carried out by the Nghe Tinh movement. For example, an article in their journal *Communist Review* said that they were indebted to Ho for his past services — this was written at the time when they thought he was dead — “but our comrades should not forget the nationalist legacy of Nguyen Ai Quoc and his erroneous instructions on the fundamental questions of the bourgeois-democratic revolutionary movement in Indochina, and his opportunist theories ... Nguyen Ai Quoc did not understand the directives of the Communist International; he did not fuse the three communist organisations of Indochina from top to bottom and did not put into prior discussion the tactics that the Communist International had to apply to extirpate the opportunist elements of these sections. The brochure entitled ‘political principles’ [adopted by the unification conference] and the statutes of the unified party did not exactly follow the instructions of the Communist International. Nguyen Ai Quoc also advocated such erroneous and collaborationist tactics as ‘neutrality with regard to the bourgeoisie and the rich peasants’, ‘alliance with the middle and small landowners’, and so forth. It is because of such errors from January to October 1930 that the ICP followed a policy which in many respects was in opposition to the instructions of the Communist International even though it had energetically led the masses in revolutionary struggle, and it is equally because of this that the policy followed by the soviets of Nghe An was not consistent with the party line.”¹³

So, as a result of French repression and the Comintern's influence, the Leninist strategy of revolution which Ho Chi Minh tried to apply had been completely superseded in the Indochinese Communist Party by the Stalinist Third Period line. Ho himself was apparently not in contact with Vietnam. He lived in Moscow from 1933 to 1938, occupying a fairly minor post in the Communist International; he was an observer, but not a delegate, at the last congress of the Comintern.

Collaboration with Saigon Trotskyists

Meanwhile, a third trend of the Indochinese CP had developed in Saigon. This began in June 1930, when the French government sent back to Saigon a number of Vietnamese students who had become Marxists during their period of study in France. They had been members of the French CP. When the Trotskyist-Stalinist debates began to take place, some of these students became Trotskyists and others of them supported Stalin's line. Despite these disagreements, however, these students had continued to cooperate in the anticolonial movement and anticolonial actions in France — in fact

that's what got them sent back to Saigon — and they continued their collaboration in Saigon.

The pro-Stalin and pro-Trotsky groups in Saigon had some interesting differences from communists elsewhere in Vietnam. These stemmed partly from their different backgrounds — that is, their experience of bourgeois legality in France — and partly from the different opportunities that presented themselves. There were differences, which I won't go into, in the official status of different regions of Vietnam, and Saigon had somewhat more formal elements of bourgeois legality; these returned students made as much use of this as they could. They ran joint election campaigns for the Saigon municipal council.

Out of one of those campaigns came the newspaper *La Lutte*, which they published jointly and in collaboration with other nationalists who belonged to neither tendency.

Then the Popular Front government was elected in France. During the campaign, the Popular Front had promised to send a commission to investigate the situation in Vietnam (a promise which was never carried out). This grouping of returned students said OK, we'd better get Vietnamese society organised to present our view of the situation, the view of as many people as possible to this investigating commission, and so we'd better go out and start organising people to express their views on things — what should be done, how society needs to be changed — and we'll bring it all together into something called the Indochinese Congress. The French saw through it, of course; they banned the Indochinese Congress, but during the period when they were organising for it, it was a great organising tool for these young returned Marxist students.

The Saigon grouping who became part of the Indochinese CP accepted Stalin's line on the major issues in dispute in the international communist movement, but they obviously weren't bureaucratic hand-raisers. They weren't apparatchiks, they were people who were thinking for themselves and insisted on the right to do it. For example, at the end of 1936 they were ordered by the Central Committee of the Indochinese CP to cease all collaboration with the Trotskyists. The Southern Regional Committee then held a conference and voted to continue collaborating with the Trotskyists; they went on doing that for roughly another year.

There was a real political logic to this collaboration between Trotskyists and CP members in Saigon. There's a longstanding myth held dear by Trotskyists which portrays the Saigon Trotskyists as a powerful political movement, so powerful that the southern region of the Communist Party was forced into this united front against its will. It's not true. It exaggerates both the strength of the Trotskyists and the extent to which "Stalinists" can be forced by popular pressures into a united front whose goals they don't share.[§]

Like any united front, that between the Trotskyists and the Communist Party in Saigon was based on a measure of agreement. This agreement went beyond opposition to French rule. It was based on a convergence of outlook regarding the national struggle: The Stalinist ultraleft Third Period line converged with the Trotskyist schema of permanent revolution, which was similarly ultraleft in denigrating the national liberation struggle and therefore the peasant question. From the Nghe Tinh movement, for example, the Trotskyists drew only the conclusion that “proletarian” adventurism was preferable to peasant adventurism. Their journal *Duoc Vo San* (Proletarian Torch) In August 1932 wrote (referring to the ICP as “our party” because at this time the Trotskyists tried to operate as factions of the communist parties):

Our party has been repressed to the point of being completely destroyed by white terror. We have to change our policy. We ought to abandon the motto “Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Peasantry”. We ought to show the party members that the revolutionary force of the workers is more powerful than that of the peasants, using as an example the militant force of the workers of Canton in 1927. Only the workers can practice the theory of Karl Marx.¹⁶

When the Communist International and the Indochinese Communist Party went over to the Popular Front line, that broke the political convergence. The *La Lutte* collaboration was doomed and eventually broken. There were other factors involved as well. It was primarily the “Indochinese Communism” faction of Trotskyism led by Ta Thu Thau that collaborated with the ICP.

When Thau and a number of ICP leaders were in jail, the Octobrist faction of the

[§] For example, in their July-August 1973 article, Feldman and Johnson wrote:

“... Nowhere have the Stalinists undertaken a united front with the Trotskyists unless they were forced to do so by the strength of the Trotskyists ...

“The relative strength of the Vietnamese Trotskyists was indicated by their winning 80% of the vote in elections to the Colonial Council of Cochin China (southern Vietnam) In 1939. The pro-French party’s candidates got 15%; the Stalinists received 1%.”¹⁴

The authors did not explain how this “relative strength” In 1939 “forced” the Communist Party into a united front that began nine years earlier, nor why this strength ceased to be effective in 1937, when the united front was broken.

The poor showing of the CP in the election was due less to the “strength” of the Trotskyists than to the unpopularity of the CP’s shift to a line of seeking alliance with antifascist French forces, which meant that the Trotskyists were perceived as the only tendency with an anti-French line. It should also be noted that elections were staged with an extremely limited franchise and attracted little interest even from those eligible to vote, considerably reducing their reliability as indicators of popular, and especially working-class, opinion. I have not been able to find figures on the 1939 elections, but in the 1933 Saigon election there were only 4332 eligible voters, of whom 982 (22.6%) actually cast ballots.¹⁵

Trotskyists led by Ho Huu Tuong got control of *La Lutte* and began converting it from a joint paper, in which both sides had input, into something that was much more of a Trotskyist paper. (Because of its extreme “leftism”, other Trotskyists referred to the Octobrists as the “Four and a Half International”.) But basically it was the ending of that political convergence which brought an end to the collaboration.

The road back to national liberation

The Popular Front period was a very disorienting and demoralising one for many members of the Indochinese Communist Party. It was not merely the abrupt change of direction: The Popular Front line discredited the party because the logic of it, as understood by the party leaders, required them to go looking for an alliance with antifascist sections of the French. And while there were antifascist French around, there weren't many who would support Vietnam's national rights, or even a significant democratisation of the forms of French rule. That was a really disastrous line for a Vietnamese party trying to find its way to leading the national liberation struggle.

They set up the Indochinese Democratic Front. This was supposed to be a broad Popular Front-type formation, an antifascist alliance with progressive French forces. It virtually never got off the ground except to a very limited degree in northern Vietnam.

When World War II broke out, Communists and Trotskyists were arrested wholesale. That point probably marked the lowest of the low points reached by the Vietnamese Communist Party. Here was a young party that had set out to lead the liberation of its country as part of the world revolution. It had naturally looked for guidance to the Communist International. But nine years of Comintern policies had brought the party to a dead end. With its nationalist credentials badly damaged, its popular support eroded and large numbers of its cadres and leaders in jail, it had no real prospect of a way forward on the road it was travelling. Fortunately, events and Ho Chi Minh's leadership combined to put the party back on a Leninist road.

Ironically, while French repression in 1931-32 had helped to impose the Comintern line on the Communist Party by removing the more independent cadres who might have resisted the Third Period line, the arrests in 1939 tended to have the opposite effect. They removed some of those who had most faithfully followed every twist and turn of the Comintern line. In addition, the Stalin-Hitler pact and Moscow's renunciation of support for the imperialist “democracies” further cut the ground from under the feet of anybody in the Communist Party who favoured a continuation of the policy of downplaying the anti-imperialist struggle.

Another factor which should not be underestimated was the capacity of the party to learn from its experiences. Prison often provided cadres and leaders with the time

to study theoretical and practical questions. From the early 1930s onward, the ICP had a well organised study network in all the main political prisons. There were two different syllabuses, depending on the length of the sentence. Long-term prisoners went through a systematic study of Marxism-Leninism, while short-term prisoners concentrated on works like Bukharin's *Historical Materialism* and *The ABC of Communism*.

Con Son island in the early 1930s [writes one historian] was a key testing ground for Communist Party operations ... It is ... remarkable how many messages and study documents were smuggled onto the island, usually with the assistance of sympathetic guards or clandestine French Communist Party members working aboard supply ships. Cigarette wrappers or scraps of tissue paper were used to write out tiny circulating copies of study materials, after which the original was sequestered against the likelihood that copies would eventually be discovered and confiscated. When this did once happen and the French demanded to know where the original was hidden, prisoners teased them by claiming that students returned from Moscow had written them from memory. As early as 1932, French administrators were complaining that Vietnamese who knew little of communist theory and practice when they entered prison were already completely trained and capable of carrying on individual propaganda missions.

Revolutionaries arrested at the outbreak of World War II were even more intent on making use of their time in jail. Clandestine journals were composed by hand and distributed inside several prisons. Lessons were prepared on how to mobilise different sectors of the population, how to avoid capture, give public speeches, write leaflets, and draw posters. Some inmates were able to entice military guards studying for promotion to show them basic weapons texts or to demonstrate the manual of arms ...¹⁷

In another passage, the same author provides further detail:

Even when behind bars, radical Vietnamese often went to great lengths to obtain and circulate information about international affairs. Thus, Le Van Luong managed to follow the 1933 Berlin trial of Georgi Dimitrov by means of Paris newspapers smuggled into death row of Saigon Central Prison. Three political detainees in Hanoi's Hoa Lo prison pooled their last pennies to arrange purchase of several newspapers describing Hitler's June 22, 1941 attack on the Soviet Union. By 1943, ICP cadres in several prisons had reliable enough access to foreign news reports that they were able to feature regular overseas columns in clandestine newspapers. In Son La prison one creative individual summarised the international news in long poems for memorisation and recitation. At the end of 1943 he pictured the German armies retreating on the Russian front, British and American aircraft bombing Berlin, guerrillas attacking in Yugoslavia, the Japanese losing the Gilbert Islands, and the Congress Party demanding that Great Britain grant independence to India ...¹⁸

The reorientation began as early as September 29, 1939, when the Central Committee of the ICP issued a directive stating that “the situation in Indochina will lead to the issue of national liberation”. With the French imperialists preoccupied by war in Europe, the colonies would have greatly increased opportunities to win their freedom. In November, a Central Committee plenum stressed that national liberation was now “the foremost task of the Indochinese revolution”. A resolution stated:

To survive, the peoples of Indochina have no alternative than to overthrow the French imperialists and resist all types of aggressors — white or yellow — in order to achieve their national liberation ... All questions of the revolution, including the agrarian question, must be resolved with this goal in mind.¹⁹

The plenum voted to set up an Indochinese National Anti-Imperialist United Front. In order to mobilise the broadest possible forces for the central task of national liberation, the plenum decided to put the call for a complete agrarian revolution back on the shelf for the time being. The task now was “only to oppose high land rents, exorbitant interest rates, and to confiscate land owned by the colonialists and traitors, for distribution to the tillers”. This was a sensible tactical decision, and not unlike the way the Sandinistas proceeded in Nicaragua after the overthrow of Somoza. It did not reject solving the agrarian problem, but put the solution in the necessary context of anti-imperialist struggle.

The reorientation wasn’t accomplished instantaneously, however. The united front for national liberation decided upon by the 1939 plenum, which became the Viet Minh, was not actually set up until May 1941, when Ho returned to Vietnam. In the meantime, in November-December 1940, the southern region of the party had attempted an insurrection that was brutally suppressed by the French, greatly weakening the party structures. This setback undoubtedly reinforced the willingness of other party leaders to adopt Ho’s strategy of patience and meticulous preparation of the broadest possible forces to strike at the main enemy. The May 1941 plenum of the party completely adopted the anti-imperialist line of Ho Chi Minh.

Since the October 1930 plenum called at the insistence of the Comintern, the party’s position had been that the anti-imperialist struggle and the antifeudal struggle were simultaneous and equal tasks. The May 1941 plenum corrected that position and adopted the Leninist view that these two tasks could, and probably would, proceed at different paces, based on the greater priority of the national liberation struggle.

The content of the revolution was redefined. It had previously been described as a bourgeois-democratic revolution, which was taken to mean that antifeudal tasks had at least equal importance with national liberation. The plenum redefined the coming revolution as a national liberation revolution:

The Indochinese revolution is at present no longer a bourgeois democratic revolution that solves the anti-imperialist and agrarian problems. Rather, it is a revolution to solve only one urgent problem, that of national liberation. The Indochinese revolution during this period is, therefore, a revolution of national liberation.²⁰

This was an application of the Leninist strategy to the conditions the party faced. Defeating imperialism was the way to prepare the solution of the specific tasks of the bourgeois revolution. The plenum resolution explained:

To put aside the bourgeois democratic revolution and put forward the national liberation revolution does not mean that the Indochinese proletariat neglects the agrarian tasks, and it also does not mean that it takes a step backward. It means only to take a shorter step in order to try to take a longer one. Everyone knows that, at the present stage, unless the French and the Japanese are overthrown, not only will the nation remain in slavery forever, but the agrarian question will never be solved. Therefore, during this period, in order to solve the task of national liberation, it is not possible to put forward a second task that is not necessary for the entire people, yet is harmful to the first task.

The resolution went on to explain the last point in more detail:

At this time, if we put forward the slogan of overthrowing the landlords, distributing lands to the peasants, not only will we lose an allied force who would support us in the revolution to overthrow the French and the Japanese, but we would also push that force to the side of our enemy, as the rearguard of our enemy.²¹

That was the strategy the Vietnamese Communist party followed for the next three and a half decades: The Leninist strategy of making the anti-imperialist struggle the central focus, the context for particular social and economic demands. Now, as I said earlier, the strategy is not a tactical recipe. Whether or not it's wise to expropriate all or part of the large landowners, for example, depends on the specifics: Have they allied themselves with the imperialists and, if so, is this perceived by the masses of workers and peasants? Can the poor peasants be mobilised for the anti-imperialist struggle by limited gains now and the prospect of larger gains in the future, or do they require more extensive immediate gains? Can the demand for land be satisfied by the expropriation of open traitors, or only by the expropriation of large landowners as a class?

In other words, to say that a national liberation struggle or national-democratic revolution is on the agenda only defines the broad category of tasks to be accomplished. It still remains necessary to investigate and establish the specifics of each individual task and how they affect the overall goal. General Giap described this interaction in one of his writings on the war against French imperialism:

How did our party solve the antifeudal question with a view to mobilising the peasant

force during the Resistance War? In the August Revolution, after we had overthrown the power of the king and mandarins, a number of traitors were punished, their land allotted to the peasants. After the French imperialists re-invaded our country, the collusion between the imperialists and the most reactionary section of the feudal landlord class gradually took shape. The essential contradiction in our society at that time was the contradiction between, on the one side, our nation, our people, and on the other, the French imperialists and their henchmen, the reactionary feudalists. We accordingly put forth the slogan “To exterminate the reactionary colonialists and the traitors.” As a result, as early as the first years of the Resistance War, a number of the most reactionary of the landlord class were repressed in the course of the operations against local puppet administration and traitors. Their land and that belonging to absent landlords were allotted outright or given to the trusteeship of the peasants. Thus, in practice, the antifeudal task was carried on.

However, due to a vague conception of the content of the revolution for national liberation as early as 1941, in the first years of the Resistance War, in our mind as well as in our policies, the antifeudal task was somewhat neglected and the peasant question underestimated in importance. Only by 1949-50 was this question put in a more definite way. In 1952-53, our party decided to mobilise the masses for a drastic reduction of land rent and to carry out land reform, implementing the slogan “land to the tiller”. Hence, the resistance spirit of millions of peasants was strongly roused, the peasant-worker alliance strengthened, the National United Front made firmer, the administration and army consolidated and resistance activities intensified ...²²

But once it got the overall strategy right, the Communist Party proved itself remarkably adept at dealing with that sort of tactical question. Its correct strategic orientation allowed it to develop the closest ties with the masses of workers and peasants; and those ties are the basis for correct tactical decisions. The skill of the Vietnamese Communist Party in adapting its tactics to changing circumstances should have told us something about the character of the party. Because bureaucratized, regimented parties aren't very adaptable. The adaptability of the CPV throughout a long war of resistance would have been impossible if the ranks of the party hadn't thoroughly understood and agreed with the strategy it was following or if the leaders hadn't constantly been getting feedback from ranks who weren't afraid to tell them the truth.

Writing about the period of World War II, David Marr gives a very interesting description of the CPV's attention to detail in refining its tactics:

... the ICP Central Committee ... used the theory of contradictions to explain both domestic and foreign developments. As might be expected, the three contradictions inside Indochina which attracted the most attention were those between colonial ruler

and ruled, between landlords and poor peasants or agricultural labourers, and between capitalists and workers.

Within these principal contradictions there were said to be numerous secondary contradictions, for example, those between progressive and reactionary colonial elements, between large and small landlords, or between French, Japanese, and Vietnamese capitalists. Sometimes contradictions were refined even further, as when party secretary general Truong Chinh distinguished those Vietnamese serving as prefects or district officials from those who worked as government clerks, interpreters, or teachers. The latter were more likely to respond favourably to revolutionary overtures, he concluded.

Internal ICP analyses of this type were designed both to uncover contradictions previously neglected and, more importantly, to suggest how contradictions detrimental to the enemy could be heightened while those detrimental to the party could be dealt with tactically according to the needs of the moment. Assessing the overall balance of forces became a deadly serious job, with an increasing premium on investigation and experience rather than ideological supposition. These secret assessments were then used as the basis for refining the party's approach to separate classes, strata, and minority groups. By "increasing friends and reducing enemies", one brought closer the day of revolutionary victory. Thus, Truong Chinh criticised a particular central Vietnam national salvation association for advocating confiscation of Catholic Church properties and indiscriminate opposition to the royal family and mandarinates. On the other hand, the ICP was constantly worried that its national united front strategy would disappoint poor peasants and agricultural labourers. It instructed cadres to promise these groups concrete if limited gains at the time of national liberation, and sweeping land redistribution once independence was consolidated. Beyond that, party cadres themselves were reassured that both the national revolution and the land revolution were simply steps on the path to a full-fledged socialist revolution.²³

Of course, they made mistakes at times, and the Vietnamese CP is quite frank about admitting its mistakes. It would be stupid to think that you can go through 35 years of war and revolution without making mistakes. And with the illusion of wisdom provided by hindsight, it's always easy to say this or that shift should have been made earlier or later. But in fact, for a party that is leading such a mass struggle, there are really only two ways to make shifts that become necessary. One is to do it too early and one is to do it too late. If you do it before it becomes evident that it's necessary from the concrete actions of masses involved in that struggle, then you're just following a schema — you're whistling in the dark, making a guess. And when the actions of the masses tell you that you have to change direction, then you're already too late. The trick is to

compress that margin between too early and too late to a minimum, and that's what the CPV did quite consistently.

But there's another aspect to this question of mistakes made in such a titanic struggle. That is that most of the things we pointed to in the past as mistakes were not mistakes of the Vietnamese Communists — they were our mistakes, sometimes based on ignorance, but more often flowing from an ultraleft conception of the revolution.

I can't in this report provide a detailed history of 35 years of struggle led by the Vietnamese Communist Party. What I want to do is focus on some major events, particularly those where there has often been misunderstanding of what was going on and, consequently, a misjudgment of the CPV.

The August Revolution

The August Revolution of 1945 was carried out under the banner of the Viet Minh, the anti-imperialist resistance front organised by the Communist Party. (The full name — Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh — means Vietnam Independence League.) David Marr describes the Viet Minh as “designed to represent all social classes via a range of national salvation associations, each of which would be guided from within by clandestine ICP members. In each village the various salvation associations (of peasants, youth, women, elders, etc.) would elect representatives to a district committee, and so on. The emphasis within these groups was to be on investigating, planning, proselytising, organising and training for armed struggle, not immediate uprisings. The enemy could be attacked, but only in guerrilla fashion, thus striking a balance between locally initiated violence and minimum risk to the overall Viet Minh organisation pending the opportune moment for a general uprising. Meanwhile, besides this technique of organising a united front from below, Viet Minh leaders tried to work out a united front from above with existing groups which had either declared themselves against the Vichy French and the Japanese already or might be convinced to take such a position.”²⁴

The insurrection was above all a political victory, carried through despite the lack of significant military force. The Armed Propaganda Brigade for the Liberation of Vietnam, which eventually became the Vietnamese People's Army, was founded only on December 22, 1944, with 34 soldiers and an “arsenal” consisting of two Chinese-made automatic weapons, 17 rifles, 14 rear-loading rifles, six time bombs and a submachine gun for which there existed 150 bullets. Guerrilla units had even fewer weapons:

... The French had long maintained very tight restrictions on civilian ownership of guns, ammunition, and explosives. In the hills of northern Vietnam, however, the

minority peoples retained an assortment of hunting rifles and muskets. During World War II the Viet Minh also managed to acquire a very limited stock of Kuomintang, French, Japanese, and American firearms. Wherever a Viet Minh squad went, though it usually possessed only two or three guns, citizens were encouraged to hold them, practice the manual of arms, and perhaps learn how to disassemble, clean, and reassemble the various models. The handful of available pistols were given nicknames by Viet Minh leaders, and soon developed long revolutionary pedigrees independent of their temporary custodians. With an average of only four or five rounds per weapon, the main effect was clearly symbolic ...²⁵

At the time of the August Revolution, the size of the Viet Minh regular armed forces, according to different historians, was somewhere between a few hundred and a thousand. The Communist Party had, in all of Vietnam, approximately 5000 members, many of whom were still in prison. But the insurrectional demonstrations that swept the country were carefully prepared through patient political work. Particularly in the Red River delta region, Viet Minh committees throughout 1945 took control of villages, then of county and provincial seats, then of urban areas. In June, the first major liberated zone was established, covering six provinces with a population of about one million. As Japanese troops became demoralised by their impending defeat, Viet Minh agitation and propaganda became more open:

... In Hanoi, for example speeches on soapboxes at street corners became daily affairs, while Viet Minh propaganda publications flooded the city. Selective terrorism also sowed fear, demonstrated Viet Minh power, and confirmed the rumours, deliberately exaggerated, about daring Viet Minh attacks on the Japanese. Japanese soldiers who wandered around alone often found themselves roughed up, their weapons “confiscated”; a Viet Minh assassination squad roamed the city, giving “warnings” to the so called *Viet gian* (Vietnamese traitors), or reputed pro-Japanese elements or well-known collaborators with the French ... The killings were not numerous, but sufficient to cow adversaries and to advertise the Viet Minh presence. New forms of propaganda were invented: Viet Minh flags mysteriously appeared atop buildings and floated on rafts in rivers; young pupils were taught to sing Viet Minh songs in unison in schools; and theatre and movie audiences often found themselves in total darkness, while a mysterious voice commanding a loudspeaker explained the Viet Minh program. By July 1945 the Viet Minh presence was ubiquitous, especially in Bac Ky [northern Vietnam] ...²⁶

Central to the success of the Viet Minh was its ability to combine a clear and firm strategic orientation with great tactical flexibility. Unlike bourgeois nationalist layers in Vietnam (and in other Asian colonies such as Indonesia) who were often duped by the Japanese granting “independence” to their conquests, the Viet Minh understood that

all imperialist powers were enemies of Vietnamese national liberation. Within this strategic framework, it skilfully took advantage of contradictions between the imperialists.

Up until March 1945, the Japanese had allowed the French colonial apparatus to continue administering Vietnam, while the Japanese forces plundered the supplies they required by “agreement” with that administration. During that period, Viet Minh actions and propaganda were directed against both powers. But on March 9, the Japanese carried out a coup, imprisoning their French allies and taking control in their own name. The ICP Central Committee met as the coup was taking place — suggesting that it had a strong intelligence network within the Japanese command — to evaluate the situation and make the necessary changes in tactics. The Central Committee concluded that the defeated French were “no longer our concrete and immediate enemy”; in the new circumstances “the principal, *concrete*, immediate, and unique enemy” of the revolution was now the Japanese, and anyone, including the French, who fought against that enemy was to that extent an “objective ally”. The Viet Minh should therefore seek collaboration with French forces resisting the Japanese — in particular to obtain weapons — if necessary appealing to the ranks over the heads of their officers:

... if the French Resistance refuses to help us with weapons to fight the Japanese, we still have the obligation to try to mobilise a union with their infrastructure, attracting the resolutely antifascist elements, who have an internationalist inclination, to unite in action with us against the Japanese, or to come to our side with weapons of the French imperialists, over the head of their selfish and irresolute officers. They can form with us an anti-Japanese Democratic Front in Indochina.²⁷

The Central Committee also soberly assessed the likely popular reaction to the Japanese coup, judging that many people would be fooled by Japanese talk of “independence”. It therefore decided against an immediate insurrection and called instead for stepped up armed propaganda and preparation for the general insurrection.

The central immediate issue used to mobilise the population for the revolution was rice. The Japanese and French throughout the war had requisitioned large quantities of rice, and in addition many rice farmers had been forced to switch to nonfood crops demanded by the Japanese military. By the end of 1943, there was starvation in parts of Vietnam, and throughout 1944 and 1945 an increasingly disastrous famine developed in northern and central Vietnam, which eventually claimed two million lives. (There were adequate rice supplies in the south, but these were either hoarded by the authorities or could not be moved because of the destruction of transport.) The Viet Minh mobilised the population to seize rice that was being held

by the French or Japanese or, in some cases, by Vietnamese landowners. The period from March to August was one of increasingly generalised partial insurrection. When news of the Japanese surrender reached Vietnam, ICP cadres throughout northern and central Vietnam launched the final insurrection as a natural outgrowth of the preceding period and on the basis of the Central Committee decisions of March; the Viet Minh issued a call for a general uprising on August 13, but in some areas the insurrection was under way before the call was received.

The August Revolution was a wave of popular mobilisation that has rarely if ever been equalled in any country before or since. The very size of the movement discouraged reactionary resistance to it: “With few exceptions, there were no haggles, no fights, and little shooting. It was an insurrection by street demonstrations. Hanoi was taken on August 19 with a mass demonstration and three revolver shots — to salute the Viet Minh flag; Hue, on August 23 with a mass demonstration; Danang, on the same day with two people with rifles leading a mass demonstration; and Saigon, on August 25 with an enormous demonstration.”²⁸

But this seemingly spontaneous upsurge had been prepared and made possible by the patient political work and clear-sighted leadership of the Communist Party. Because its political line conformed to the realities and the needs of the situation, it was able to direct the revolutionary process to victory despite the tremendous objective obstacles and the party’s relatively small membership.

Nor was the insurrectionary process itself left to chance or to spontaneity. In northern Vietnam, for example, the regional party leadership decided it was necessary to seize power in Hanoi through mass action immediately, rather than lose an opportunity waiting for the arrival of Viet Minh armed forces from the liberated zone. A Vietnamese history relates:

In Hanoi, the General Association of functionaries of the puppet administration organised a big meeting [on August 17] with the participation of tens of thousands of people at the square in front of the municipal theatre to support the Tran Trong Kim “provisional government”. Under the leadership of the Bac Ky [northern Vietnam] and the Hanoi party committees, the revolutionary masses occupied the rostrum of the meeting, and Viet Minh cadres informed the people of the capitulation of the Japanese fascists, explained briefly the program for national salvation of the Viet Minh front, and called on the masses to rally to the Viet Minh banner to overthrow the pro-Japanese puppet government. The puppet police and civil guards also sided with the Viet Minh. The meeting was immediately turned into a huge demonstration. Marching through the streets, the masses shouted slogans:

— Support the Viet Minh!

- Down with the puppet clique!
- Complete independence for Vietnam!

On the morning of August 18 the Revolutionary Military Committee (Insurrection Committee) of the Hanoi party committee moved from the suburbs to No. 101, Tran Hung Dao street to lead the insurrection.²⁹

The 19th was set as the date for the insurrection in the capital. Marr describes the preparations:

The 18th of August was devoted to spreading the word, sewing flags, sharpening knives, and identifying targets. Viet Minh cadres were able to commandeer autos and drive through a number of nearby provinces showing the flag and urging people to both seize local power and to march on Hanoi. Several district and provincial offices were indeed seized that very day, another example of local political initiative that quickly gathered momentum and essentially eliminated the collaborator administration throughout northern Vietnam by August 24. Meanwhile, in Hanoi, a group of young Viet Minh activists and some citizens from nearby Ha Dong province made a show of force on August 18 that could well have upset plans for the following day, yet ended up confirming the Military Revolutionary Council's assessment of Japanese intentions. With an eye to obtaining firearms, the group marched on the headquarters of the collaborator militia and was blocked by a unit of Japanese soldiers. The lieutenant-colonel in command of the Japanese troops requested to parley with a ranking Viet Minh representative: This was arranged, and an informal bargain was struck whereby the Japanese would not counter Viet Minh activities as long as the Viet Minh endeavoured to prevent attacks on Japanese personnel.³⁰

On the morning of August 19 [relates the Vietnamese history] Hanoi looked like a forest of golden-starred red flags. Many factories and shops had closed and markets were empty. The entire population poured into the streets. The revolutionary masses and national salvation self-defence units paraded through the streets, ready to fight the enemy.

Tens of thousands of peasants from the suburbs and the districts equipped with sticks, scimitars, machetes and a few rifles marched into the capital.

Under the leadership of the party, the revolutionary masses, from all corners of the capital poured into the Municipal Theatre Square to participate in a big meeting organised by the Hanoi Viet Minh Front ...

The meeting began at 11am. After a salvo was fired to salute the national flag and the national anthem played the representative of the Revolutionary Military Committee read the Viet Minh's appeal for insurrection and establishment of a democratic republican government.

The meeting soon became an armed demonstration. Headed by the self-defence combatants the revolutionary masses split into several columns which attacked and occupied the imperial delegate's residence, the civil guard barracks, the police headquarters and other services of the puppet administration. After occupying the imperial delegate's residence, we used the telephone there to tell the mayor of Haiphong, the chiefs of the provinces of Hai Duong, Bac Ninh, Ha Nam and Nam Dinh that the Viet Minh had already seized power in Hanoi and ordered them under penalty of death to rapidly hand over power to the Viet Minh.³¹

It was not until 12 days later, on August 31, that the first units of the Liberation Army arrived in Hanoi.

One enemy at a time

On September 2, at a mass rally in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam's independence and presented the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The new government now faced the task of consolidating national independence and its own authority in extremely difficult circumstances.

There were only a small number of cadres available to deal with those tasks. The situation was one in which a less far-sighted leadership could quickly have lost all the gains of the August Revolution. There was a serious threat of a further famine. Chinese Kuomintang troops, in accordance with the Potsdam agreement, were entering the northern half of Vietnam, supposedly to disarm the Japanese. The main functions of these 180,000 Chinese troops, however, were plundering the countryside and supporting the Kuomintang's bourgeois nationalist counterpart, the Quoc Dan Dang; these Kuomintang troops were in Hanoi already on September 2, when Ho read Vietnam's declaration of independence. The Quoc Dan Dang established its own armed base areas outside Hanoi as soon as there were no Japanese or French to fight. With Chinese support, it then set up headquarters in the middle of Hanoi and through loudspeakers began broadcasting attacks on the so-called "red terror" taking control of Hanoi. The Chinese forces insisted that the QDD and other bourgeois forces be included in the government.

The situation in Saigon was even more precarious, although the South was fortunate in that it had escaped the famine. But this also meant that the population had not been mobilised to anywhere near the same extent as it had in the North. The Communist Party was far weaker as a result of the repression following the unsuccessful uprising in 1940. Most of the CP cadres had been imprisoned or killed, and during the war there had been little contact between the Central Committee and the party in the South. There were organised pro-French and pro-Japanese groups far stronger in the

South than they were in the North. Also much stronger were religious groups, particularly the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects. During a massive demonstration in Saigon on August 20, for example, an estimated one-fifth of the crowd consisted of sect members, mostly peasants, marching behind a monarchist flag.

As a result of this different relationship of forces, the organisation that took power in Saigon was not the Viet Minh but a coalition called the Committee of the South. The Viet Minh initially had a majority — six of the nine members — on this committee, which was in effect the provisional government of Saigon; its president, Tran Van Giau, was a communist. But within a short time, bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces gained control of the committee.

On September 2, a mass demonstration in Saigon was fired on. The perpetrators of the crime have never been conclusively identified, but logic points to French provocateurs. Riots followed in which five Frenchmen were killed — precisely the sort of “incident” required by the British commander in order to justify an armed crackdown on the independence movement.

Within a few days the British expeditionary forces began to arrive. Their commander, General Douglas Gracey, had little sympathy with Vietnamese nationalist aspirations and immediately demanded that the Vietnamese political groups lay down their arms. Tran Van Giau was realistic enough to realise that the revolutionaries were not yet strong enough in Cochin China to seize power on their own and attempted to conciliate the British, despite resistance from noncommunist elements in the Committee of the South. Criticised for his moderation, Giau was forced to resign the presidency of the committee, which was now expanded to 13 members, only four of whom represented the Vietminh. At one stroke, the Vietminh ceased to be *primus inter pares* and became simply one of several parties claiming to represent the interests of Vietnamese nationalism in the South.³²

The *last* thing the Vietnamese national liberation struggle needed at this point was a fight with the British troops. The Communist Party had a far better understanding of the necessary priorities than did the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalists who criticised them from the “left” (insofar as the latter were sincerely seeking national independence and not acting as provocateurs or seeking to advance their own party interests at the expense of the revolution). The communists realised the precarious situation of the revolution and the consequent need to manoeuvre between the foreign powers that were attempting to crush it. One historian summarises some of this manoeuvring:

The Chinese, while adding enormously to the already great problems of postwar Vietnam, were also extremely useful to the Viet Minh to the extent that they blocked

the advance of the French to the north during a crucial period. By the time that occurred, as permitted by the Chinese-French treaty of February 28, 1946, the Viet Minh had substantially strengthened their political and military position. And even then, Ho Chi Minh's diplomatic genius further transformed the situation to the advantage of the Viet Minh, although he could not prevent the widening of the war with France later in the year. Essentially, Ho first negotiated with the French to get rid of the Chinese in the spring of 1946, and then undertook further negotiations with Paris, which failed but which nonetheless won another half year for the continued strengthening of the Viet Minh position and virtual elimination of their nationalist [Quoc Dan Dang] rivals.³³

The CP's strategy, the principle that Ho always emphasised, was that of fighting one enemy at a time, mobilising the maximum forces possible against it while neutralising other enemies who were of secondary importance at the time. That strategy failed in Saigon not because it was wrong, but because the CP wasn't strong enough there to ensure that it was applied. The noncommunist nationalist forces didn't understand the importance of neutralising the British (who had their own chestnuts to pull out of the fire in India), with the result that British troops became the main lever assisting the return of the French. The Committee of the South, with its noncommunist majority and ultraleft line, lost Saigon to British and French forces within a few weeks. The Viet Minh tried to save the situation by calling a general strike, which lasted for a month, but in the end the strike was broken by military force.

The CP was also being realistic and sensible when it attempted to establish a broad national united front that would confront those foreign powers as a securely established government, and when it made the compromises and concessions necessary to secure such an alliance. The main enemy at that time, the enemy who had to be defeated if the revolution was to go forward, was foreign imperialism, not Vietnamese landlords or capitalists — their turn would come later. This is why one southern party official, Nguyen Van Tao, issued the warning during August: "All those who have instigated the peasants to seize the landowners' property will be severely and pitilessly punished ... We have not yet made the communist revolution which will solve the agrarian problem. This government is only a democratic government. That is why such a task does not devolve upon it. Our government, I repeat, is a bourgeois-democratic government, even though the communists are now in power."

From our old ultraleft standpoint of permanent revolution, that quotation was sufficient to condemn the CPV from its own mouth: The first Feldman/Johnson article called it undeniable evidence of the communists' "class-collaborationist practice", adding rather pedantically that "Tao's statement demonstrates in addition the reformist

character of the [CPV's] theory when he relegates solving the agrarian problem to the 'communist revolution' when this is in fact one of the central bourgeois-democratic tasks of the colonial revolution".³⁴

That could serve as a classic illustration of the proverb about a little learning being a dangerous thing — particularly when that little learning is fitted into a ready-made schema. At a time when the objective situation demands maximum unity against the imperialist enemy, permanent revolution calls for destroying the anti-imperialist front for the sake of not being called "class-collaborationist" and in order to conform to textbook recipes about the class character of particular revolutionary tasks!

The role of the Saigon Trotskyists

During this extremely perilous period for the revolution, the Saigon Trotskyists appear to have outdone themselves in pursuing a sectarian, ultraleft line that would have prevented any real struggle against the imperialist enemy. During the mass demonstration on August 21, for example the Trotskyists "unfurled a huge banner of the Fourth International. According to an observer sympathetic to the International Communist League, they carried banners and placards reading:

"Down with imperialism! Long live the world revolution! Long live the workers and peasants front! People's committees everywhere! For the people's assembly! Arm the people! Land to the peasants! Nationalise the factories under workers' control! For a workers and peasants government!"³⁵

This grab bag of demands (which, incidentally, jumbled together bourgeois-democratic and socialist tasks!) represented nothing but dangerous and self-contradictory ultraleft posturing. "Down with imperialism" is no doubt a very fine sentiment, but realising it in Saigon in 1945 required a *national* alliance that included, for example, bourgeois forces who would not join a struggle for the nationalisation of their factories. And it is not difficult to understand that events like the following, described with evident approbation by a "Vietnamese Trotskyist eyewitness", would have driven other layers into the arms of the imperialists:

The peasants of the province of Sadec pillaged a dozen of the magnificent villas of their masters on August 19. They also set fire to a large number of granaries overflowing with rice. Many notables and functionaries were arrested by the peasants and a number of them were immediately shot. The community police had been hurled into the water without trial by the revolutionary masses; the former servants of the French and Japanese governments, labelled en bloc as enemies of the people, saw all their property go up in flames.

In Long Xuyen, a peasant province, some 200 notables and community police

were stabbed to death.³⁶

The hatred of the peasants for the wealthy landowners and the colonial apparatus is understandable. But a revolutionary party is required precisely because revolutions are defeated when the masses' hatred strikes out blindly instead of being focused against the main enemy. And what kind of worker-peasant alliance can be formed when peasants burn granaries while famine rages in the cities?

Furthermore, arming the people cannot be done with words; it requires material resources. As we will see, the Viet Minh government in Hanoi — which was a workers and peasants' government — used the time gained through its manoeuvres between the imperialists to create the material means for arming the people. But the Trotskyist banner wavers condemned those indispensable manoeuvres and made them more difficult to accomplish: The severe setbacks resulting from the Committee of the South's adventurism greatly weakened the Hanoi government's hand in its negotiations with the French.

But the Trotskyist provocations did not stop there. Feldman and Johnson report that the Trotskyists “responded to the imminent landing of British troops by holding meetings that demanded arms for the people. Under Trotskyist influence, the People's Committees issued a manifesto denouncing the treason of the Stalinists in allowing the British to land. The Stalinists responded with a massive campaign against the Trotskyists in the press, and on September 14 sent troops to disarm the Trotskyists.”³⁷

As noted, “arms for the people” were not available in sufficient quantity or quality to inflict a military defeat on the British army. When the ICP attempted to deal with this reality instead of sloganising about it, the Trotskyists denounced them as traitors! The decision to disarm the Trotskyists before they went from words to actions was obviously a wise and necessary one.

As a result of the ultraleftism and excesses that the Communist Party tried but was unable to prevent, the returning French forces and their British allies made extremely serious inroads in the South. On September 24, there were riots in which Vietnamese broke into the European quarter of Saigon and massacred 150 people. General Gracey used this as a pretext for suppressing the nationalist movement in Saigon and driving Viet Minh units out of the suburbs. French and British troops then struck outside the city, occupying a number of delta towns and provincial capitals. The 20,000 poorly armed and hastily recruited Viet Minh forces proved unable to do more than slow the imperialist advance and were forced to retreat into inaccessible rural areas. It was at this time that leaders of the Trotskyists and of the bourgeois and petty bourgeois nationalists were executed. According to most sources, the executions were ordered by Tran Van Giau.

The Trotskyists and their nationalist allies had made a major contribution to the near destruction of the revolution in the South. Preventing further damage, if necessary by physical containment, was imperative. It appears, however, that the Communist Party felt that Giau had used excessive violence in coping with the situation. Huynh reports:

Tran van Giau, Tran Ngoc Ranh, and several other Stalinists were made to go through *kiem thao* (self-criticism) in 1946 and were subsequently removed from leadership, partly and ostensibly because of the excesses (killings of Trotskyists and nationalists) committed under their command in the South in the aftermath of the August Revolution. Tran Ngoc Ranh was assigned to head the DRV delegation in Paris and died there. Tran van Giau became a professor of history and one of Vietnam's most prolific scholars. He is currently with the Institute of History, State Commission on Social Sciences, Southern Section, Ho Chi Minh City. As far as is known, the method of "purification" of the Vietnamese Communist Party, at least since 1945, lacks the violent character often associated with the Soviet and Chinese purges. Purged party leaders are usually made to undergo *kiem thao* and are then retired from decision-making positions. No violent death has been associated with any purged party leader since 1945.³⁸

'Dissolution' of the Communist Party & preparing resistance

The precarious situation of the revolution in late 1945 is indicated by the ICP's decision in November to "dissolve" — undoubtedly the first time in history that a ruling party has been forced to go underground. While the government of the DRV had the overwhelming support of the population — a fact which elections in January 1946 confirmed — the country was occupied by two imperialist armies and the anticommunist Kuomintang forces. "International support for the new Vietnamese government", Huynh observes, "was nowhere to be found. The Chinese communists were preoccupied at home in a struggle for power with the Kuomintang. The Soviets, in the words of an ICP leader then, had already exhibited 'an excess of ideological compromise' and shown no interest in the Vietnamese revolution. The French communists, too, had proved themselves loyal French first and communists second. While in France the PCF itself wasted no time on the ICP, the small group of French communists in Indochina urged upon their Vietnamese comrades a policy of 'patience' and avoidance of 'premature adventures'."³⁹

In this situation, the party decided to give up its name and some freedom of operation in order to preserve the revolutionary government. A Vietnamese history

explains:

Faced with the threatening pressure of the Chiang Kai-shek gang against the survival of our party, [self-dissolution] was a very good measure for our party to escape the butt of their attack. At that time, either the party continued to agitate publicly, thus inviting a suppression of the Vietnamese revolution and a destruction of our party by the Chiang Kai-shek gang which would use the “anticommunist” excuse, or else the party had to sacrifice its appellation in order to preserve its forces and continue to lead the revolution. The party’s Central Committee, headed by President Ho, quickly decided on the second course of action ...⁴⁰

Once again, tactical flexibility proved key to the survival of the party and the revolution. This flexibility gained precious time to strengthen the new regime against the coming French assault:

At the time of the Japanese capitulation, the Viet Minh managed to take administrative control in most locations without bloodshed. The DRVN was founded and functioning before Kuomintang troops could arrive in Hanoi to push their own Vietnamese candidates, and before the British and the French Gaullists could preempt the situation in Saigon. Although there would be tortuous negotiations with the Chinese and armed reversals in the South, it was already apparent by late September that Ho Chi Minh’s government enjoyed tremendous popularity, and that most villages were responding to official requests to form revolutionary councils, self-defence units, literacy classes, and welfare committees. This promising beginning made it possible for the government to levy taxes, expand the army, and establish a wide range of specialised institutions from weapons factories to counter intelligence teams, from broadcasting stations to theatrical troupes. Recruitment and training of new party members naturally proceeded apace.

As the French moved to reassert colonial authority, this entire apparatus swung into action to prevent them from succeeding.⁴¹

One important aspect of preparing the resistance was the undermining of the authority of bourgeois nationalist forces. The January 1946 elections, in which the Viet Minh received 97% of the vote, emphasised the bourgeois forces’ lack of a popular following. These forces were nevertheless included in the governmental coalition, a move which cut off the possibility of their gaining popular backing through demagogic attacks on the negotiations and diplomatic manoeuvres of the Ho Chi Minh leadership. The Vietnamese communists were thus spared the added disadvantage of an organised “left” such as hampered the Bolsheviks at the time of the Brest-Litovsk negotiations.

In March 1946, the government of the DRV signed an agreement with the French that Vo Nguyen Giap publicly compared with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. This

recognised the DRV as a “free” state within the “French Union” — an ambiguous formulation but, one indicating something less than full independence. The agreement permitted the stationing of 15,000 French troops in the North and called for a plebiscite in the South to determine its status.

The comparison with Brest-Litovsk was an apt one. Like that agreement, the March 1946 treaty reflected an existing but unstable balance of forces, one that each side immediately began seeking to alter to its own advantage. The French used their military presence in the North to attempt to provoke incidents that would provide justification for an all-out assault. In the South, they ignored the promised plebiscite and on June 1 declared a puppet Republic of Cochinchina.

The government of the DRV, however, made better use of the lull provided by the agreement. It rapidly built up its military forces, which reached the level of 50,000 regular and one million militia and guerrilla troops before the end of the year. Schools were set up to train guerrilla officers, and guerrilla base areas were established in the countryside. A number of French-owned factories were taken over and converted to manufacturing arms; later in the year, as open war became imminent, defence industries were dismantled and moved to the countryside. The militia of the QDD — a likely fifth column once war came — was forced to disband. In the South, the Viet Minh took advantage of the departure of French troops for the North and launched a guerrilla offensive that regained much of what had been lost in late 1945; by November, the Viet Minh controlled three-fourths of the area of the South.

The overall course of the Communist Party between August 1945 and December 1946 succeeded, in extremely complex and difficult objective circumstances, in creating the political, military and economic conditions for the subsequent victory in the war of resistance against French imperialism. The historic triumph at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 had its origins in the CP’s policies of 1945-46.

War & compromise

It is now generally recognised that Soviet and Chinese pressure — probably including threats of withdrawal of material aid — helped to force unwarranted concessions from the Vietnamese government at the Geneva negotiations which ended the war with France. The DRV delegation found it necessary to acquiesce in the promise of elections two years after the armistice rather than within six months, as it originally proposed; the temporary regroupment line was set at the 17th parallel despite Viet Minh military superiority extending much further south; the revolutionary forces of Kampuchea and Laos were not even formally seated at the conference.

Less widely acknowledged but at least equally important in extracting concessions

from the Vietnamese was the threat of US intervention if the war continued. The US funding of the French war effort, the now well-known proposal of the US administration to use nuclear weapons to relieve the siege of Dien Bien Phu and US opposition to the Geneva agreement itself sufficiently indicate the bellicose mood of US imperialism in regard to Indochina at this time. Ho Chi Minh called attention to the danger of US Intervention in a report to the CP Central Committee on July 15, 1954.

Still, it would be a mistake to exaggerate the Vietnamese concessions or to allow them to blind us to the fact that Geneva reflected a tremendous victory in the Vietnamese national liberation struggle. But such exaggeration and blindness were inseparable from our old, ultraleft view of the Vietnamese Communist Party. And we took the same attitude to the 1973 accords.

We criticised the Vietnamese leaders for calling the 1954 and 1973 agreements great victories. In regard to the 1973 accord in particular — by the time our party was founded, the 1954 Geneva agreement was history — we said that the Vietnamese had been forced to make concessions. We recognised that they were the ones being bombed by the imperialists and that only they could decide whether it was better to make those forced compromises or to continue the war. But we criticised the Vietnamese leaders for not saying publicly: “We don’t like this agreement, but we’re being forced to sign it by US aggression.” We objected to them calling the agreements a victory.

The line of the Feldman/Johnson articles which we followed put it like this. After describing the 1954 Geneva treaty as a compromise, they continued

The CPV leaders, however, hailed the treaty as a great victory. Regardless of how the leadership of the CPV may privately view the realities of Geneva, the fact remains that they still describe it to the party members and the Vietnamese people as a victory ...

The CPV leaders are using much the same glowing terms today to describe the most recent compromise settlement forced on them by American imperialism, with the help of the traitors in Moscow and Peking. That is a very dangerous practice. Spreading such illusions among the Vietnamese workers and peasants disarms them for future struggles. The fact that the CPV continues to do this is further evidence of its inability to break with Stalinism. Who benefits from describing these compromises as victories? It is no one but the imperialists and the conservative bureaucracies in Moscow and Peking, which want the revolution brought to an end.⁴²

But in the real world, compromise and victory are not such counterposed opposites as they are in mechanical, ultraleft schemas. More often than not, compromises ratify victories. When strikers win their demands, for example, they also compromise with the bosses by going back to work and producing profits for them. That doesn’t mean that the strike victory isn’t a victory — except to ultralefts who regard anything less

than instant world socialism as a defeat.

It should have been obvious, if we'd stopped to think about it at all, that any Vietnamese victory was going to involve negotiations and a settlement, an agreement — which means a compromise — with the United States. The Vietnamese, after all, never had and never would have the military strength to force the unconditional surrender of the United States. Even if they'd been able to drive every single one of those half million US soldiers into the sea, it would still have been possible for US warships to sit off the coast and send planes over and lob shells at them. So the only way that the war could have ended without negotiations would have been if the Vietnamese had had the strength to invade Washington and set up a new government there. Then negotiations wouldn't have been needed. Short of that, it should have been obvious that the war was going to end through negotiations, through compromise.

Victory for the Vietnamese necessarily involved two stages. One: getting the US troops out; and two: doing whatever needed to be done at that point to win the complete victory. The only real question was: On what terms would the Vietnamese get the best possible compromise settlement when negotiations with the United States took place?

Well, as we see from the result, they did very well. There is more than a little bit of truth to the idea — mostly put around by disappointed right-wingers in the United States — that the US government was only looking for a “decent interval” before Thieu went the way of all reactionaries. That's not 100% of the truth, but neither is it a complete fiction. US imperialism had been defeated; the accords ratified that defeat and gave the imperialists the face-saving concession of not having to take Thieu with them when they withdrew their troops. The Vietnamese leaders were right to call that a victory.

The same is true of the 1954 Geneva agreement, except that the relationship of forces, political and military, was more favourable to the Vietnamese in 1973 than in 1954. When the US was forced to withdraw, it didn't have a still-stronger imperialist power waiting in the wings to replace it.

One of the worst aspects of an ultraleft “all or nothing” view of the Vietnamese Revolution is that it leads to the slander that the CPV leaders wittingly or unwittingly betrayed the people and the party cadres in the South. Thus the first Feldman/Johnson article refers to what it calls “the disastrous effects of the CPV's illusion that the terms of the Geneva Accords would be respected by imperialism. Not the least of these disasters was the loss of many cadres of the CPV who were left to confront Diem's savage repression without aid from the North. The CPV even discouraged them from organising armed resistance ...” And the authors continued:

The party leadership, as is clearly shown in the documents of the Third National Congress of the CPV in 1960, were more concerned with building socialism in the North than leading the struggle in the South. This boils down to trying to build socialism in one small country as against trying to extend the revolution; thus Stalin's original revision of Leninism in 1924 still shaped the policies of the CPV leadership in the Second Indochina War.⁴³

The first thing wrong with that sort of argument is that it presumes that the CPV leadership, en bloc, were safely ensconced in Hanoi, while only middle-level or low-level cadres confronted danger in the South. The reality is quite otherwise: Throughout the '50s, '60s and '70s, the very highest leadership levels of the CPV were involved in the struggle in the South, whether it was predominantly political or military. They shared all the dangers and sacrifices of other fighters.

Political & military struggle

But the argument also contains a serious militarist error. It assumes that the military struggle was in some way inherently better or superior to political struggle. Fortunately, the CPV leadership didn't share that illusion. The reality is that, in general, the Vietnamese revolutionaries were on weaker ground than their enemies when it came to military conflict. Of course, they knew how to fight when that was necessary, as history abundantly proves; and they had the flexibility to shift the emphasis between different forms of struggle as circumstances required. But whenever and wherever it was possible, they had the good sense to try to shift the struggle to a terrain where they had the advantage: politics. That's why they tried to avoid responding to military provocations from the puppet regime set up in the South after 1954.

This was not a matter of "illusions" about the intentions of US imperialism. It was a question of a political struggle to prepare the overthrow of the puppet regime and prevent or at least delay US military intervention. It was hardly a secret that US imperialism didn't want the elections agreed to in the Geneva settlement, but it was not a foregone conclusion that it would get what it wanted. The CPV leadership, understanding this, moved immediately after Geneva to set up the political network and form the alliances that would be required to agitate for elections — and equally required if the elections were not held. Duiker describes this effort:

In public, party activists behaved as though elections would be held on schedule. The various national salvation associations ... which had been affiliated with the Vietminh since the August Revolution, were disbanded and replaced by apparently innocuous functional organisations representing the various interest groups in society. The major political effort to promote the implementation of the Geneva accords took place in

Saigon, where a movement among leftist intellectuals had operated with limited effectiveness during the War of Resistance. Less than two weeks after the signing of the agreement, a Saigon Cholon Peace Movement ... was formed by several Saigon figures long active in Vietminh circles, including the lawyer Nguyen Huu Tho. The movement was designed specifically to attract nonparty intellectuals with patriotic inclinations who were considered potentially hostile to the Diem regime. Similar groups were set up on a small scale in rural villages sympathetic to the communists.⁴⁴

The Central Office for South Viet Nam, which had directed the resistance war in the South since 1951, was reorganised to function in the new circumstances. It remained under the direction of Le Duan, based in hidden headquarters in the Plain of Reeds.

The strategy followed by the Vietnamese leadership had nothing to do with Stalin's conception of "socialism in one country", which involved betraying revolutionary struggles in other countries for the sake of Soviet diplomatic goals. The CPV didn't abandon cadres in the South because of illusions in imperialism, Stalinist theories or any other reason. Of course they set out to build a strong socialist state in the North — Marxists can hardly fault them for that. The fact that they did so later proved a decisive factor in the long struggle against the US military intervention.

In the post-1954 period, the CPV made good use of the conditions created by the victory over the French to develop the political struggle in the South. US imperialism proved very lucky and/or unusually perceptive in choosing Ngo Dinh Diem as its agent in Saigon, for Diem proved to be an unconventional and shrewd politician. Despite this, and despite the repression, the CPV decided, and decided correctly, to continue the struggle primarily on the political plane for as long as possible. That wasn't a decision that was made by some bureaucrat in Hanoi. That was the advice of the people who were carrying out the struggle in the southern half of the country:

Within the party leadership in the South, emphasis on the importance of political struggle was particularly strong. Several documents captured by ARVN units in South Vietnam during the early 1960s reflected this conviction. One, written sometime in early 1960, stressed that armed struggle should be used primarily to support the political struggle and should not take the form of guerilla warfare or a resistance war. Asserting that the chances of realising victory through a primarily political effort were excellent, it warned that a miscalculation by party leaders could lead to increased involvement by the United States and a long and costly armed conflict. A second, entitled "Situation and Tasks" and written sometime in 1961, took the same position, claiming that the combination of political and military struggle was working effectively in the South and would force the Saigon government into a passive position and ultimately lead to a general uprising. Because the primary weakness of the Diem regime was in the realm

of politics, the “political force of the masses”, rather than high-level military struggle, was more likely to succeed in the long run. By this reasoning, a gradual intensification of the political struggle against the Saigon regime, supplemented by selective armed violence, and using the full revolutionary power of the oppressed masses, would inevitably culminate at some future date in an uprising in urban and rural areas that would topple the Saigon regime. Armed struggle would be used to accelerate the decline of the enemy, but the primary focus would be on political struggle.⁴⁵

In point of fact, that general perspective proved quite accurate. The Diem regime was being undermined politically, so much so that the United States decided to organise the military coup that overthrew Diem. When the successive military puppet regimes failed to stem the tide, the US embarked on direct intervention — proof, if that was required, that the communists had won the political battle. And that political victory was the basis and precondition for the subsequent military victory.

After the 1973 accords and the withdrawal of US forces, the CPV again modified tactics to suit the new situation. Again, they shifted the primary emphasis to politics. A directive of the Central Office for South Viet Nam on January 19, 1973, described the tasks as “pushing back the enemy step by step ... bringing into play the masses’ political violence ... [and] political movement ... with the mission of achieving the national democratic revolution in the South ... [and] socialism in the North as a step toward the unification of our country ... [This meant efforts] to disintegrate ... the puppet army and government, take over control of the rural area, seize power at the base level: simultaneously to build and develop our political and armed forces ... revolutionary administration ... and ... smash all enemy schemes to sabotage the agreement, prevent large-scale conflicts, maintain peace, hold general elections ... We must closely combine political struggle with armed struggle and legalistic struggle, using political struggle as the base, armed struggle as support ... [and] combine the overt form of organisation with semi-overt and clandestine forms of organisation, using the clandestine form as a base.”⁴⁶

Hand in hand with the political struggle went preparations for the military offensive which would cap it.

During 1973, the PRG abandoned several hundred hamlets it had seized earlier, presumably in an effort to consolidate its territory and encourage the GVN to disperse its forces. According to the testimony of one defector, Hanoi was especially concerned to build a “Third Vietnam” along the border with Cambodia and Laos as a base for political struggle. During the first year of peace this new base area was built from Quang Tri Province into the heart of the Central Highlands, with the aid of 30,000 cadres sent from the DRV. A new highway was built from the DMZ to a camp north of

Saigon, with spurs running eastward to the edge of the lowland plains. The old US firebase at Khe Sanh was turned into a major communist logistics base. More and more modern weapons, such as Russian rocket launchers and SAM missiles, were moved south. On the other hand, the North Vietnamese presence did not immediately increase and at the end of 1973 was estimated at 170,000 regular force troops, to supplement 60,000 Viet Cong regulars and guerrillas.⁴⁷

The concern to prevent large-scale fighting was intended to avoid creating a situation in which US imperialism recovered the political capacity to intervene again. So they went slowly. They tested out the US reaction. At the end of 1974, for example, they launched an offensive in Phuoc Binh province which wiped out Thieu's forces in that province. But they didn't follow up that victory. They stopped and waited to see what would happen, to see if there were serious moves towards a renewed US intervention. Towards the end of 1974, when they decided to launch an offensive in 1975, the plan was that they would take roughly the northern half of South Vietnam and get the rest of it in the following year's offensive. But when the offensive proceeded much faster than expected, they quickly adjusted their timetable.

After the victory

It seems appropriate to conclude with a brief consideration of what happened in Saigon after April 30, 1975, because it shows a lot about what sort of party the Communist Party of Vietnam is. How did it behave in victory?

We know what other parties have done. We know what the Khmer Rouge did. In China, the Communist Party's armies entered the cities as conquerors and treated the working class as the conquered. Or think of how Stalin acted in victory at the end of World War II — not just in Eastern Europe but even in the Soviet Union, where whole nationalities, like the Crimean Tatars, were deported. That's how Stalin celebrated victory. That's how a bureaucratic caste behaves.

In Saigon, there was no revenge, no lording it over those who had sided with the puppet regime. The slogan was: "There are neither victors nor vanquished. It is the Vietnamese people, all the people, who have defeated American imperialism." There was a conscious policy of attempting to reconcile former enemies and begin building the new society.

You hear a lot in the bourgeois press about re-education, which we're meant to believe is nothing more than a euphemism for forced labour camps. We're supposed to feel sorry for the people there. *Giai Phong!* gives quite a different picture. Terzani asked a CP authority why former high officials had been sent to these re education camps in the countryside. He answered:

They study and work. That's what we did during the whole war. You can call it "brainwashing": It's a matter of definition. For us studying is a privilege, not a punishment.

As for manual work, that's something the country has an enormous need of. If you discuss it with the puppets, they all reassure you they want to participate in the reconstruction of the country; they discuss it in the cafes. But if you put a shovel in their hands and ask them to fill up the craters made by their own bombs and those of the Americans, then they tell you they're at forced labour.⁴⁸

Re-education is something that those people obviously needed. But re-education was something much more than that; it was a conscious policy applied to virtually all layers of society — not forced labour, but re-education. Here was a population that for almost two decades had been controlled by US imperialism. It was a humiliating experience, above all because it degraded people in their own eyes through the enforced daily collaboration with the enemy. Re-education aimed to overcome that humiliation by helping people to understand that they had been victims of a particular social system and that they now had the opportunity to change that, to get control of their lives for the first time. The process normally consisted of group discussions. People discussed what they had done during the occupation, and why they had done it. Terzani observed a number of these discussions. His conclusions are interesting:

Unlike superior officers and higher officials of the old regime, enlisted men and people like Loan [a low ranking civilian employee of the puppet government] had adhered to the old regime without any deep-rooted conviction; their anticommunist motivations were blunt, superficial, and fragile.

The overwhelming majority of "puppet" soldiers were young men born and raised in a country already at war; they had been formed in the regime's schools and inoculated against everything that came from the other side.

All of a sudden *hoc tap* [re-education] offered them an alternative way of seeing the world: the Vietcong were no longer aggressors but patriots, the Americans no longer protectors but enemies. Everything was turned upside down, but it all fell into place in a new pattern.

Those who thought they would be excluded, banished from this new scheme, the new society, realised that *hoc tap* gave them an opportunity to get back in and be accepted again. To let such an opportunity slip would have been a heedless waste.⁴⁹

Even tested party cadres were re-educated to ensure their understanding of this. The communists who had been prisoners in the Con Son tiger cages, you learn to your surprise, were not sent home immediately after liberation. They were all taken to a hospital in Saigon. Some of them of course needed medical treatment. But all of them

were kept there for several days, even those who were not ill. Terzani went to see them, looking in particular for a woman he had known, Thi Man.

“My family understands. The revolution begins now and I have still to make my contribution”, Thi Man replied when I asked her how she reacted to being liberated but not free to go home.

“First of all, we must explain the revolution’s policy of reconciliation to all our freed comrades”, the man in charge of the Hung Vuong centre told me. “We cannot take a chance on a prisoner returning to his village and avenging himself on the policeman who denounced him or on some member of the puppet administration who may still be there. After years and years of suffering it’s a very human and understandable reaction, but we must help them to overcome it and to understand the meaning of reconciliation.

“There may be politically weak prisoners who once they’re out of prison think they have rights over others or expect privileges. We must fight this attitude, explain that that’s not the way it is, that everyone in his own way has taken part in the revolution, and that now there are no accounts to be settled or debts to be collected ...”⁵⁰

No accounts to be settled, no debts to be collected: The Vietnamese people have good reason for pride in the party they have constructed, a party that acts in such a conscious, deliberate and humane way to start the building of a new society. This is a party that is and deserves to be an inspiration for revolutionaries everywhere.

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This 1984 report analyses the nature of the Vietnamese Communist Party and the decades-long revolutionary struggle which it led. The 1975 victory of the liberation forces over US imperialism and its local puppets was a triumph of epic proportions but it was bought at tremendous cost, with millions dead and the country utterly devastated.

But Vietnam was not allowed to recover in peace. The next 30 years brought still more hardship and great economic and political problems. In these circumstances, concessions to international capitalism were unavoidable, but the Vietnamese leadership has sought with some success to minimise the damage.

The introduction by Mike Karadjis sketches some of the impressive social indicators which the Vietnamese people still enjoy, despite the great pressures on the country.

Resistance books