

# Sky Without Light: A Vietnamese Tragedy

NGO VAN'S MEMOIR of "those other movements and revolts caught in the crossfire between the French and the Stalinists" in the years before the American commitment in Vietnam reminded me, painfully, of an "editorial" I wrote on the fall of Saigon. Drawing largely on an excoriation of Vietnamese Communism (the betrayal of the 1945 "Saigon Commune," the cynicism and brutality of collectivization in the North) produced by Solidarity (a London conduit for the councilist ideas of [\*Socialisme ou Barbarie\*](#)), I had taken aim at the already battered target of "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh!" identification with the regime in Hanoi. "Not Our War" was my unfortunate title. But if I was thankful that scarcely anyone read our group's "paper," it was not simply because, a 19-year-old, I had been disclaiming on wars we might, or might not, "own." What I had recoiled from was precisely what Ken Knabb in his introduction identifies as the real value of Ngo Van's "hidden history": the implication that "there were other currents and other strategies that might have led to different results." A hazard of age, I had at some point ceased to question the "judgment of history." In the anti-imperialist struggles of the past century, "socialism" was never going to be more than a more or less ruthless strategy of national mobilization. Testaments to the ideals and sacrifices of those "caught in the crossfire" could be read only as unrelieved tragedy.

Like Voline's *The Unknown Revolution* or Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, the publishers suggest that *In the Crossfire* is "one of those rare books that almost single-handedly unveil moments" in history "when people break through the bounds of the 'possible' and strive to create a life worthy of their deepest dreams and aspirations." The appearance of popular councils and of an independent workers' militia in the

September 1945 uprising in Saigon may have amazed and appalled the Communist-led Viet Minh as much (or more) than it did the French. But whether, and how far, their audacity enlarged the realm of the possible we can scarcely calculate. What is certain is that, as in Russia and in Spain, the resourcefulness, discipline, and violence of the Communist Party stood in the path of an alternative history. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how "other currents" could have coexisted with a nationwide movement willing and able, where betrayal to the French Sûreté failed to eliminate its rivals, to engage in systematic assassination and terror—a policy that was to drive Ngo Van into exile in 1948.

Tellingly, the recollections of a "resolutely independent individual" reveal little about the origins and gathering strength of the party that, despite its bewildering twists and reverses, was able to secure absolute direction of the anti-colonial struggle.

In his history of the years in which, at the price of imprisonment and torture, he engaged with workers in protests and insurgency, *Vietnam 1920-1945: Revolution et contre-revolution sous la domination coloniale*, reviewed here by Loren Goldner (*New Politics* Vol. VI, No. 3), Van underscores what was surely a condition for the triumph of what he decried as "Bolshevik nationalism." For those of us whose impression of the colonial Vietnam might be colored by vignettes of what remained of "Parisian Saigon" during the American years, it is as well to be reminded by Van of the sheer savagery of French rule. The greater part of the population was enserfed by the theft of communal land and by the imposition of crushing taxes, with many displaced on large cotton and rubber estates where conditions resembled nothing so much as the plantations of Saint-Domingue.

But Van has no inside perspective on the party of Ho. Even as a founder member of the League of International Communists for the Construction of a Fourth International, it

is not clear that he ever participated in the cult of a revolutionary vanguard. His early identification with Trotsky he explains as a "natural" reaction to policy whose "full horror was glaringly evident with the Moscow Trials" (on which, "with a sense of urgency," he wrote a pamphlet in Vietnamese). Once in France, where he found "new allies in the factories and elsewhere" including anarchist and Poumist refugees from Spain "who had gone through parallel experiences," Van "permanently distanced" himself "from Bolshevism-Leninism-Trotskyism," and from "anything," he believed, "that might turn into a machine," anything that could be seen as "embryonic forms of the state," or "the nucleus of a new ruling class."

At the same time, while in Vietnam, Van had only limited access to developments in the Viet-Minh/Communist heartlands to the north. This is painfully clear when in August 1945 he and his comrades find they have "no way of finding out what was happening" following reports that in the Hongai-Campha coal region north of Haiphong 30,000 workers (under the indifferent gaze of the defeated Japanese) had elected councils to run mines, public services and transport, and were applying the principle of equal pay. (For this revolutionary commune, Van remains the only source of reference I can find on the web, whether in English or in French).

### **Confronting an Elephant**

IN VIETNAM Van's activism was confined to the far-south region of his peasant birth, encompassing Saigon and the Delta. In "Cochinchina" French rule had the distinction of being direct and, sensitive to political shifts in Paris, of being punctuated by periods of relative liberalization. It was a circumstance that allowed Van's comrades to secure, if briefly, what was denied the Communists in the north: an independent electoral mandate. In April 1939, in a poll for the Colonial Council, the whole "united workers and peasants" slate was elected, trouncing both the Stalinists and bourgeois

Constitutionalists alike.

In "Annam" and, in the far north, "Tonkin," the French govern<sup>8</sup>ed under the nominal authority of the Emperor [Bao Dai](#), and through the traditional agency of Confucian scholar-gentry. Noting an "irresistible and persuasive" comparison with China, this is the distinction critical to William Duiker's understanding of *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (1996). As in Vietnam, in China the early Communist leadership drew heavily on intellectuals descended from the rural scholar gentry of the interior, while the pioneers of constitutional nationalism (and Duiker might have added, of the labor, and other democratic, movements later suppressed by the nationalist Kuomintang) tended to be from the more commercial, more "Westernized," coastal south.

In Vietnam, as in China, Communism presented itself as a root and branch rejection of Confucianism, condemned for its ritualism, inherent conservatism and resistance to change. Yet Duiker argues many were to find the new ideology "congenial" precisely because of its similarities with the teachings of the old Master: "the belief in one truth, embodied in quasi-sacred texts"; in "an anointed elite, trained in an all-embracing doctrine and responsible for leading the broad masses and indoctrinating them in proper thought and behavior"; in "the subordination of the individual to the community"; and in the perfectibility, through corrective action, of human nature (all of which, he suggests, were in some manner present in the aura of the new Master, Chi Minh, "the bringer of light," "Uncle Ho"). Vietnamese Marxism developed, in effect, as a kind of "reformed Confucianism" revised to meet "the challenges of the modern era" and, not least among these, of total mobilization in the struggle for national independence and state power.

Against a revolutionary movement that could redeploy these elements traditional to the exercise of control and authority in Vietnamese society, it hard to see how Van was to

make headway with polemics against a "judicial farce" in Moscow, or the intrigues of the Laval-Stalin pact. Van broke with comrades who for four years to 1937 (when most of the leadership of the then Communist Party of Indochina was either abroad, with Ho, or in prison) cooperated with Stalinists on a French-language paper, *La Lutte*, and in elections to the Saigon City Council. Yet Van and his internationalist League seemed powerless to respond to an organization that, clearly, drew on exceptional reserves in sustaining its "line"—committing workers to "national salvation" and suppressing, where it failed to preempt, an independent awakening of the peasantry. While convinced of the need to eliminate the Trotskyites (survivors of the *La Lutte* group were among the first victims of Viet Minh terror in 1945), we can imagine Ho and his command dismissing them in the spirit of Prosecutor Vishinsky's condemnation of the Old Bolsheviks, as "little dogs yapping at an elephant."

### **Internationalism in an Anti-Colonial Struggle**

FOR VAN, the call to "permanent revolution" was above all a refusal to accord precedence to the demands of national unity, in deference to which the Vietminh denounced as "treason" "premature" challenges to the property and rights of landlords and employers. It was the same principle, elevating class over nation that he was to see reversed again in exile – in May '68. Van objected to the Communists unfurling the tricolor next to the red banner his co-workers had raised over their factory gate: "the flag of the Communards should not be associated with the flag of Versailles," with the colors under which "the bourgeoisie has exploited the workers" and "enslaved the peoples of Africa and Asia." Yet Van seems to have had few illusions about the immediate appeal of proletarian internationalism, whether in France or in Vietnam.

Goldner accounts the spectacular results of the '39 Cochinchina Council elections "the only instance prior to 1945

in which the politics of 'permanent revolution' oriented to worker and peasant opposition to colonialism won out, however ephemerally, against the Stalinist 'stage theory' in a public arena." Van is less convinced.

The "Workers and Peasants" slate had triumphed at a point when, placed by the Comintern under the tutelage of the French Communist Party (of which Ho, in Paris, had been a founding member), the party in Vietnam had dropped out of, and behind, the broad front of nationalist opinion. In deference to Stalin's continuing courtship of a French alliance, its "Democratic Front" candidates had to support the colonial government's campaign for the defense of French Indochina against the Japanese. Hence, Van suggests, the "the paradox" of revolutionaries being elected "by a suffrage based on income tax": as the Stalinist organization in Saigon split, his comrades rode a wave of protest against the new "war taxes."

Van's account also invites us to reevaluate the significance of the so-called "Saigon Commune." Following the Japanese surrender in August 1945, Trotskyists paraded the streets under the banner "Land to the Peasants! Factories to the Workers!" and responded to nationalist anthems with the Internationale. According to Van it was in this "internationalist spirit" that sixty workers at Go Vap streetcar workshop formed an independent "'Workers' Militia,' a name inspired by the Spanish Civil War."

Again, we do not know what "dreams or aspirations" might have been served by the militia, or by the various improvised district "people's committees," had they not been "caught in a crossfire." But in the militia, Van found himself attached to the much larger, nationalist, forces of the so-called Third Division and about their purpose there was little doubt. It was to save the Fatherland from the Vietminh's "anti-fascist allies." A policy of cooperating with the Allied Control Commissions, successful in the north in persuading the

(Kuomintang) Chinese to withdraw on terms consistent with the sovereignty of the newly proclaimed Democratic Republic of Vietnam, in the south allowing the British, employing the Japanese as auxiliaries, to clear a path for the vengeful return of the French. (For Ho, who remarked that he would "rather smell French shit for five years than eat Chinese shit for [another] thousand," the policy must have appeared a cruel, but necessary, bargain).

### **Tell Me about Your Agrarian Program**

THE TROTSKYISTS WERE ABLE TO CHALLENGE the Stalinists in the city, in its factories and on the waterfront: one reason, perhaps, that the unprecedented cooperation around *La Lutte* was tolerated. The crucial weakness was out in the provinces where, in contrast to the Trotskyists, the Stalinists had real organization, albeit one they employed entirely in accord with their own high-political agenda. After the Hitler-Stalin pact reversed their policy of defense collaboration with the French, they had led peasants in Cochinchina in a disastrous insurrection (one in which, having been exiled to the Delta, Van found himself caught).

In the south, however, the Party had to contend with powerful and, from the last year of Japanese occupation armed, indigenous movements. Reflecting the greater colonial dislocation of the region, these presented a heady patriotic-religious mix: the syncretistic Cao Dai church (with a pantheon that, alongside Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed, elevated Jules Verne) and, among the poorer peasants, the Hoa Hao, followers of "the Mad Monk," the prophet of a liberating Buddha king (who astonishingly, in a brief courtship with the Vietminh, put themselves forward as Social Democrats).

These movements (which today, after decades of repression, between them still command 4 to 5 million adherents) were in spirit and organization as alien to partisans of the Fourth International as they were to those of

the Third. But Van, undeterred, found himself drawn to an extraordinary figure whose name he heard "whispered with respect" when he first moved to Saigon in 1926: a combative journalist who seemed able, as no other, to bridge the gulf between the radical politics of the city and the restive millenarianism of the countryside.

Educated in France, on his return to Vietnam in 1923, Nguyen An Ninh had rejected a government offer of land and position, to champion the cause not only of independence but also of the debt-oppressed land-hungry peasantry with whom, in Gandhi-like wanderings through the countryside (head shaved like a monk), he seems to have developed a profound relationship.

In 1929 more than a hundred peasants and day laborers were convicted in Saigon for membership of "Nguyen An Ninh Secret Society," according the Sûreté, an insurrectionist conspiracy that promised the initiated "some kind of agrarian socialism." Whether, as Van believed, the "Society" was a figment of "denunciations and torture-induced confessions," or whether Ninh had any organizational legacy, even one, as Van suggests in his history, "far removed from a disciplined and structured organization," is unclear. The French cut short his career and ultimately his life, casting him into the penal system, which is where Van (arrested at a clandestine factory meeting) was finally to encounter him in 1936.

"Burning with naïve curiosity," Van approached Ninh ("alone and silent, leaning against the bars," and seeming to contemplate "the tops of the tamarind tree that rose above the prison walls") and "blurted out: 'Brother Ninh, could you tell me about your agrarian program?'" Ninh turned his head in surprise, looked at Van for a few seconds, then "raised his eyes again toward the tamarind trees and began to sing:

*Dans les jardins de mon père les lilas sont fleuris,  
Tous les oiseaux du monde viennent y faire leur nid:*



*Auprès de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon, fait bon, fait bon,  
Auprès de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon dormir.*

*[In my father's gardens the lilacs are in flower, all the  
birds of world come there to nest. Lying beside my darling is  
sweet, so sweet, lying beside my darling, that's the sweetest  
sleep.]*

A few days after this "wretched encounter," perhaps noticing that Van was reading Malraux's *Le Temps du mépris* [*Days of Wrath*], Ninh hands him Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* [*Journey to the End of the Night*]-"read this!"

For Van, Céline "exploded like lightning," a "formidable howl of rage" against "all deadly hypocrisies of the prevailing society." He drinks in the words that "so splendidly debunked patriotism and religion." They are words that his friend (and English translator) Hélène Fleury recalls returned to him some sixty years later when on his first visit to Hanoi they kept running into Ho Chi Minh's huge mausoleum. At "the top his lungs" Van sang Céline's "Le Règlement" [Payback]:

*Mais la question qui me tracasse  
En te regardant:  
Est-ce que tu seras plus dégueulasse  
Mort que vivant?*

*[But looking at you, I can't help asking myself: Will you be  
any more rotten dead than alive?]*

But, of course, with Céline, Ninh was offering Van anything but a "program":

*Notre vie est un voyage  
Dans l'Hiver et dans la Nuit,  
Nous cherchons notre passage  
Dans le Ciel où rien ne luit*

*[Our life is a journey through winter and night, we seek our passage in a sky without light]*

*—the epitaph on the first page of Voyage au bout de la nuit.*

## **History of an Unfinished Struggle**

THE PASSAGE DOWN WHICH Ho, the "bringer of light," led Vietnam, Van regarded as a dark tunnel and he disowned the war that gouged it with none of my subsequent embarrassment. The "Socialist" republic, for which millions had sacrificed, was "a criminal and barren travesty" (*The Internationalist* 17, 1996). With their "cultivated middle-class" background, the "mandarins" of a hyper-bureaucratic regime (more functionaries to be found in one province than the whole of the Indochinese colonial apparatus) "rule over producers who still do not enjoy collective ownership of the means of production, nor time for reflection, nor the possibility of making their own decisions, nor means of expression, nor the right to strike."

On his visit in 1997, Fleury reports that Van got close to "the daily lives and working conditions of present-day Vietnamese people thrust by the 'new' economy into development projects funded by South Korean, European, American and Japanese capital"—foreign owners "pleased at how easily the exploited workers can be kept in line by the police-state machinery."

Had he survived but another year (Van died in 2005), events might have reminded him of the Saigon working class of his youth. In 2006, export plants were hit by a wave of strikes involving tens of thousands of workers, emboldening calls for the dissolution of the Party/state controlled unions and workplace Party cells. Beginning in Korean-owned shoe factories, a further strike wave rolled north across the country from Saigon in 2007.

After more than three decades of unity and independence much, of course, has changed. Made the exclusive preserve of the Party and State, it is no longer possible for nationalism to masquerade as the language of progressive social change. On the contrary, even as the Party and State embrace globalization, its narrative thread of continuity is being reinforced (as in China) by a rehabilitated Political Confucianism that abjures reforms that "deviate from the mainstream of the national cultural heritage."

The stage is reset, and a new generation may yet discover, in the work of Ngo Van, the history and recollection of an unfinished struggle.