

The Anti-Colonial Movement in Vietnam

Loren Goldner

This originally appeared in *New Politics*, vol. 6, no. 3 (new series), whole no. 23, Summer 1997.

NGO VAN IS A VIETNAMESE REVOLUTIONARY, LIVING TODAY AT AGE 84 in Paris. When his book* appeared in France in 1995, it immediately created a sensation, and the aim of this review is to bring it, however modestly, to the attention of an American audience¹. Ngo Van's book is unique, as his life has been unique; his book is the first full account of the anti-colonial movement in Vietnam from 1920 to 1945, by someone who lived much of that period as a Trotskyist militant. With all the contemporary post-modernist hue and cry about listening to "other voices," here at last is a Vietnamese revolutionary Marxist telling his story, not to assert his irreducible difference, but rather, quite the contrary, to contribute to a reconstitution of the kind of real internationalism that was buried in the 1960s and 1970s under Stalinist hoopla and flag-waving for the National Liberation Front (NLF), helping to set the stage for subsequent disillusionment and the resigned, comfortable cynicism of the academic post-modernists who have managed, at least in U.S. academia, to constitute themselves as the authentic voice of the Third World. Ngo Van paid his dues, not in the hustle for tenure on some Ivy League campus, but against the successive waves of French, Japanese and Vietnamese Stalinist repression of those, like himself, who launched a movement for the emancipation of workers and peasants against both the colonial powers and then against the totalitarian nationalist bureaucracy of Ho Chi Minh, which eventually won out.

Ngo Van is, moreover, something of a Renaissance figure. He was born outside of Saigon in 1913, went to work in 1927, and in 1932 became involved in anti-colonial, and ultimately Trotskyist politics. He was in jail with Ta Thu Thau, the Vietnamese Trotskyist leader, but unlike Ta Thu Thau, he survived the Stalinist massacre of the Trotskyists in Vietnam in 1945. He made his way to France in 1948, and for the next 30 years earned his living there as a factory worker. During that period he moved away from Trotskyism and into the orbit of the councilist *Information et Correspondance Ouvri(r)res* (ICO), in whose press he published articles on developments in Indochina through the years of the Vietnam War. He also managed, while still a factory worker, to write a study on divination, magic and politics in ancient China. In 1978, he was finally able to retire, and threw himself into 17 years of research and writing that resulted in this book. For good measure, the cover is a beautiful expressionist painting called "Saigon In Insurrection," by Ngo Van.

Readers of Ngo Van's book who lived through the peak years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and the anti-war movement here and in Europe,

will bitterly regret that it appears some 25 or 30 years too late to have its maximum political impact. (When I asked Ngo Van, perhaps impetuously, why he did not write it at that time, he replied that his factory job made that impossible.) The Third Worldism of the Western left of the 60s had as its idols Mao-tse Tung, Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, and awareness of the history of left oppositions to these Stalinists was almost specialist knowledge. In the case of Vietnam, in particular, the situation was complicated by the Western Trotskyists² themselves (above all in France and in the U.S.), who were so eager to appear as the "best builders" of the pro-NLF anti-war movement that the real story of their Vietnamese comrades was almost an embarrassment, "ancient history" of no relevance to the demands of the present.

What makes the case of Vietnam³ so interesting is that it is the one country where the Trotskyist movement, in the late 1930s, actually out-organized the Stalinists in mass politics.⁴

NGO VAN PROVIDES A LONG AND DETAILED ACCOUNT OF THE 1920S FERMENT in the Vietnamese intelligentsia⁵, much of it in Paris exile, in their evolution (common to a number of Asian countries) from nationalism to communism. The Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) was founded out of this ferment in 1930. Thus the history of the anti-colonial movement in Vietnam, as in most other countries, became necessarily tied up with the vicissitudes of the Communist International (CI). The CI's debacle in China in 1927⁶ set the stage for the Comintern's so-called "Third Period" (1928-1934), "a class against class" policy portraying Social Democrats and other reformists as "the main enemy," which in the colonial world, after the previous period of excessive flirtation with bourgeois nationalism, sent the Communist parties off on aggressive adventurist policies. The Yenbay insurrection of February 1930, organized by bourgeois nationalists, allowed the ICP to throw itself into three years of these types of actions, all drowned in bloody repression, which almost led to the party's disappearance. All in all, the balance sheet was 4,000 arrests and 1,760 killed in repression. In the course of the 1931-33 period, a dissident current, influenced by the International Left Opposition, solidified around Ta Thu Thau, in opposition to Third Period putschism.

Just as the Shanghai massacre of 1927 had set the stage for the "Third Period," the catastrophe of Hitler's triumph in Germany marked its end. Following the fascist riots in France of February 1934, a new phase of Comintern collaboration with bourgeois parties against fascism, the Popular Front, was under way. In Vietnam this period was the backdrop of the unusual condominium between Stalinists and Trotskyists⁷ around the newspaper *La Lutte*, until in 1937 a directive from Ho Chi Minh brought the ICP militants into line against the "twin brothers of fascism," setting aside all anti-colonial agitation in the service of the Popular Front. This period saw a phase of electoral activity in which both Stalinists and Trotskyists won seats on the Saigon city council, a powerless body which nonetheless afforded them a certain public tribunal, while obliging them to

tone down their politics. In 1936-37, however, the massive strike wave in France had its counterpart in Vietnam, where workers won the largest gains ever under the colonial regime. This worker explosion engendered a more radical Trotskyist current around a new paper, *Le Militant*. Ho Chi Minh's May 1937 directive ordering the ICP to break with *La Lutte* was a direct response to the radicalization of the strike wave, and in lockstep with the conciliatory orientation of the Popular Front and with the French Communist Party (PCF) in the metropolis and general Comintern policy. In 1938, after the Stalinists regrouped around their own newspaper *L'Avant-Garde*, the Trotskyists, riding the energy of the strike wave, won the Saigon municipal elections, and in 1939 won 80% of the vote for the Cochinchina Colonial Council, the high-water mark of their influence prior to the 1945 insurrection. To my knowledge, this constitutes 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.

THE OUTBREAK OF WORLD WAR II PUT AN END TO THIS PERIOD of legal opposition. The French colonial authorities ruthlessly repressed the ICP and the Trotskyists alike. After the fall of France, the Japanese took control of Vietnam but allowed the pro-Vichy police and military to continue to administer the colony. In December 1940, the ICP attempted another insurrection, like those of 1930-31, which was again bloodily put down. For various reasons, the ICP survived World War II more intact than the Trotskyists, who had no international resources to fall back on. (By 1945, on the other hand, Ho Chi Minh's forces were working with the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS).)

With the impending defeat of Japan, Ngo Van's story arrives at its denouement, the Saigon insurrection of August-September 1945. (It is also at this point that his book overlaps with David Marr's, ^{**}to be discussed momentarily). In the vacuum of power at the end of the war, the Vietnamese population thought the hour of independence had struck. In this mood, two perspectives collided: that of the Trotskyists, who attempted to apply a policy of "permanent revolution," based on the workers and poor peasants, and that of the Stalinist ICP, now reconstituted as the Viet Minh, who believed, or at least said, that independence could be won through negotiations. The concrete question, in August-September 1945, was armed resistance to the Chinese, English and French expeditions sent to restore Allied colonial authority. (It must be remembered that with Communist ministers in the provisional government in Paris, the ICP could plausibly argue that independence was negotiable, at least before the massacres in Algeria and Madagascar carried out by this same government showed the PCF's true stance on the colonial question. The ICP must also have known that there was no stipulation for Indochinese independence in the Yalta agreements.)

Although the Trotskyists had been weakened by the war, they re-emerged in the streets directly expressing a powerful popular mood for immediate

independence and armed resistance to colonial restoration. The Viet Minh resistance movement, however, had seized local government in much of the country, and was maneuvering for position against all comers. On September 2, 1945 the Viet Minh declared independence, and a week later welcomed the arrival of British troops.⁸ On September 23, the Saigon population rose up, and for days had the foreign forces surrounded in the center of the city, cut off from supplies, but by October the French had fought their way out and re-established control. During this period Viet Minh hit squads were eliminating Trotskyists, their main serious left-wing rival, wherever they could find them. Months of international maneuvers followed, during which French control was re-established over Indochina. The Viet Minh strategy of negotiated independence had been a failure. Ho Chi Minh travelled to France for further negotiations, which also failed. In March, 1946, Ho had to confront a crowd in Hanoi, stunned by the re-establishment of French power, crying out "I swear, I have not sold you out!" Almost immediately thereafter, 30 years of war, first against the French, then against the U.S., began.

Ngo Van's book is above all a homage to several generations of anti-colonial fighters and revolutionaries, now forgotten, or calumniated as "traitors" in official Stalinist history, or relegated to footnotes in more academic studies. Its narrative is heightened by the (unobtrusive) autobiographical backdrop. One can only hope for a complete English translation, for there is no better book on the Vietnamese revolution up to 1945.

NGO VAN'S BOOK ALSO OFFERS A PERSPECTIVE FROM WHICH TO CONSIDER, in counterpoint, an altogether different kind of study written by the Australian professor David Marr, *Vietnam 1945*. While it would be quite unfair to criticize Marr for not being a Vietnamese revolutionary, it is certainly remarkable that he is able to write a 600-page book on many of the same events recounted by Ngo Van (although, of course, much more focused on the crucial year 1945, and on the international context) while making a grand total of 20-odd references to Vietnamese Trotskyism, virtually none of substance. The dust-cover photo of the author in amiable conversation with the Stalinist bureaucrat, Tran Van Giau, who organized the Viet Minh takeover of Saigon and who ordered the physical elimination of many Trotskyists, also gives pause. Marr's book will therefore be considered, in this review, primarily as it bears upon the political questions raised by Ngo Van.

Marr had previously written two quite interesting studies on the formation of a nationalist intelligentsia in Vietnam and its subsequent history up to 1945.⁹ His new book presents a mass of equally interesting material on this one decisive year and the relevant immediate background. The author has consulted sources in all relevant languages, including Vietnamese, Chinese and Japanese. He is certainly no naive fellow-traveler of the current Vietnamese regime, and says flatly that the great majority of Hanoi's official historical sources "spun angel hair" in their presentation

and interpretation of these events. Probably the most original part of Marr's book is his social history of the 1945 insurrection outside Hanoi.

Marr's book begins with the Japanese "coup" of March 1945, in which Japan put an end to French police and military administration of Indochina, in effect since 1940.¹⁰ A situation of social crisis and impending collapse was created not merely by the looming defeat of Japan, but also by the massive famine during the unusually cruel winter of 1944-45, which Marr estimates killed one million Vietnamese, largely due to the breakdown of transport under Allied bombing and also to the indifference of both Japanese and French authorities.

Marr also provides interesting material on the attempts of the Japanese to present themselves to the Vietnamese as liberators of Asia from "white" colonialism, and the profound impression the state-of-the-art military technology and dynamism of an Asian power made on a long-colonized population. He devotes a long chapter to the wartime activities of the ICP and the Viet Minh, particularly in the run-up to the August-September insurrection. As social history drawing on many original sources, this account, like his subsequent account of the insurrection itself, is probably unsurpassed in breadth and depth in contemporary writing on the subject¹¹ (it is hard to imagine too many other writers having access to sources in as many languages as Marr). Yet it is precisely here that one feels the acute absence of the "partisan" viewpoint of Ngo Van, not to agree or disagree, but merely to be aware of the issues as they were posed for many actors. Marr is not, as shall be seen in a moment, writing the kind of contemporary "new social history" which relegates all politics to epiphenomena and footnotes, but one has the sense (assuming good faith) that he has simply never considered, or been confronted with, the idea that there was another current of serious dimension among the anti-colonial forces in Vietnam, and that the destruction of that force by the Viet Minh decisively shaped the whole history he is narrating. Thus, in a couple of paragraphs, he refers to the execution of Ta Thu Thau "by a local Viet Minh group,"¹² and says that "his frantic efforts to mobilize an anti-imperialist alternative to the Viet Minh in the north bore little fruit."¹³ And that, with 20-odd other passing references of no import, is all that Marr has to say about the intervention and physical elimination of a political force which in 1938-39 was defeating the ICP in elections and which in 1945 Marr's dust-cover companion Tran Van Giau was rounding up and executing by the dozens.

Marr says in his preface:

History is not all epic events: "small" people doing seemingly inconsequential things can sometimes influence the course of affairs. Even where there is no demonstrable effect, we need occasionally to remember that lives are being pursued...Without by any means endeavouring to write a history of the "underside," I have presented

occasional views from below when the sources admit." (p. xxv)

However, in the case of the Trotskyists, there was a visible effect, there are sources (starting with reams of Stalinist vilification of them) and yet they somehow don't make it into Marr's book.

IT WOULD BE SILLY TO SAY THAT MARR'S MASSIVE RESEARCH stands or falls on its failure to show Vietnamese Trotskyism in its true dimension, but that failure does show a lack of political judgment which should raise questions about other sections, about which I have no special competence to comment. His long chapters on the maneuvers of China, the U.S., Britain and France as they pursued their respective agendas in Vietnam in 1945 are full of rich detail; as indicated earlier, his chapter on the 1945 insurrection outside the big cities (to which most previous accounts have been limited) is probably a real advance in research. Marr thinks, moreover, that if the insurrection had occurred only in Hanoi, it could have been defeated by the Chinese or the French; undoubtedly the ability of the Viet Minh to eliminate the Trotskyists with so few negative consequences for themselves had something to do with the depth of their rural organization (the ICP had in fact always been more effective in the rural population, and the Trotskyists in the cities, prior to the war).

Yet, once again, Marr never confronts head-on the failure of the Viet Minh strategy of negotiated independence in 1945-46, and nowhere mentions the March 1946 Hanoi rally at which Ho Chi Minh had to plead with a skeptical crowd to believe that he had not betrayed them. The Vietnamese Trotskyists may well have been wrong to think that it was possible, in August-September 1945, to carry through "permanent revolution" against the combined force of the Allies, but the Vietnamese Stalinists were certainly wrong to think that they could negotiate independence with the French provisional government and its PCF ministers. That Marr never considers the rich material at his command in light of this problem is a sure sign that he has not sought out all the "demonstrable effects" of the thoughts and actions of Ngo Van 's forgotten revolutionaries.

NOTES

* Ngo Van, *Vietnam 1920-1945, Revolution et contre-revolution sous la domination coloniale*, Paris, L'insomniaque, 1995, 444 pp.

** David G. Marr, *The Quest for Power*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995.

1. A very abridged version of Ngo Van's book, lacking much of the rich historical background and detail, and never correcting the impression that the author is an orthodox Trotskyist, is available in English under the title *Revolutionaries They Could Not Break: The*

Fight for the Fourth International in Vietnam, (London, Index Pr. 1995). The subtitle alone, quite foreign to the spirit of the French original and to Ngo Van's current political viewpoint, says everything.

2. It should be made clear that neither the author of this review nor Ngo Van is a Trotskyist. Ngo Van *was* a Trotskyist prior to 1945, i.e. in a situation where international Trotskyism, still living on the energies of Trotsky himself, seemed to be virtually the sole left opposition to Stalinism, particularly in the colonial and semi-colonial worlds. Although Trotsky was wrong on a number of questions in the last phase of his life, starting with the nature of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Russia, he never sank to the level of the proto-Stalinist hurly-burly that Trotskyism became in the epoch of Mandel, Frank and Hansen.
3. It should be pointed out that in the 1930s, the area today known as Vietnam was made up of three distinct areas: Annam, Tonkin and Cochinchina, all under French administration. This review will use the name "Vietnam" throughout. (Indochina, of course, refers to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia).
4. Trotskyists also made a serious impact in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Bolivia, and Argentina; prior to 1945, however, the case of Vietnam was unique, to my knowledge.
5. The core of this group was the so-called "Five Dragons," Nguyen ai Quoc (later famous under the name Ho Chi Minh), Phan van Truong, Nguyen an Ninh, Nguyen the Truyen, and Phan chau Trinh.
6. Under the leadership of Stalin and Bukharin, the CI pushed the Chinese Communist Party into a close alliance with the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang of Chiang Kai-Shek who, in 1927, disarmed the Shanghai working class and massacred thousands of workers there.
7. As Ngo Van put it in an interview after the publication of his book, "Indochina under the French was a prison, and there was nothing to do but unite against the jailer." It has also been suggested that the influence of the independent Marxist, Nguyen an Ninh, one of the "Five Dragons," made possible this unusual collaboration, as both the Stalinist and Trotskyist intellectuals had been deeply influenced by him.
8. One criticism that can be made of Ngo Van's book is the absence of discussion of the confusion of some of the Trotskyists about the Stalinist repression against them, possibly having its roots in the 1933-37 period of collaboration on *La Lutte*. Here was a case where theoretical disarmament preceded literal disarmament. The

backdrop of this confusion was the Trotskyists' belief that the Stalinists were "Mensheviks," to which they were the Bolsheviks. On September 12, 1945, for example (an incident not related by Ngo Van) the Viet Minh police in Saigon surrounded the headquarters of the pro-Trotskyist People's Councils. The Trotskyists surrendered without a fight. "We conducted ourselves as true revolutionary militants. We let ourselves be arrested without using violence against the police, even though we were more numerous and well-armed. They sacked our office, breaking furniture, ripping our flags, stealing the typewriters and burning all our papers." (quoted in R.J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, Durham 1991, p. 970).

9. These are *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (1971) and *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (1981).
10. Japan's aim in 1940 was mainly to close off the border with China to prevent supplies from reaching Chiang Kai-Shek's armies, without having to shoulder the full costs of an occupation. The French thereby continued to administer Indochina much as the Vichy regime administered the "free zone" of France after June 1940. After the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the tables were turned and the Japanese army was used by the Allies to police parts of Indochina.
11. I must point out, for clarification, that I am no specialist in Southeast Asia and know its history only from standard accounts available in English and French, and from the debates in the 1960s anti-war movement mentioned earlier. I was similarly motivated to write this review not for scholars but in the light of the political questions, of international interest, raised by Ngo Van's book.
12. There are conflicting versions of the death of Trotskyist leader Ta Thu Thau. Ngo Van only says (p. 344) that he had probably been killed by a local people's committee by September 9; Marr has him (pp. 434-435) arrested and executed in Quang Ngai after a "perfunctory trial"; Alexander has him tried and acquitted three times by people's committee's and finally "executed on orders from the southern Stalinist leader Tran Van Giau" (op. cit. p. 971), (the latter being the same figure appearing on the dust cover of Marr's book in conversation with the author). Better known and documented are the comments of Ho Chi Minh on Ta Thu Thau's death during his trip to Paris for negotiations at the end of 1945. Asked about it by French Trotskyist Rodolphe Prager, Ho "replied that Ta Thu Thau and the other Trotskyist leaders were really revolutionaries and that it was a great shame that they had been killed, but that it was done by local Viet Minh officials under conditions in which it was impossible for those in Hanoi to control what all the local leaders were doing." (ibid.) Later during the same trip, however, Ho was asked the same question by Daniel

Guerin. Guerin recorded Ho's reply: "Thau was a great patriot and we mourn him," Ho Chi Minh told me with unfeigned emotion. But a moment later he added in a steady voice: "All those who do not follow the line which I have laid down will be broken." (ibid.)

13. Marr, p. 137. Marr's 90-page chapter on the ICP and the Viet Minh, while naturally focused on the war and above all 1945, makes no mention of the complicated history of relations between Stalinists and Trotskyists in Vietnam before 1939, nor any mention of Trotskyist dominance in the 1938 and 1939 elections. Throughout, the Trotskyists are merely mentioned as another current.