

Vietnam: Miscarriage of the Revolution

[This prescient and important unsigned article appeared in the magazine Revolution, vol. 4, #7-8, July/August 1979, published by the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA. It has not (so far as we know) been reprinted or made available elsewhere online. There were several photo-montages which accompanied this article which are not included here. (Their reproductive quality was quite poor.)]

For fifteen years Vietnam was a storm center of revolutionary struggle against U.S. imperialism. It brought the U.S. bourgeoisie to its knees and rallied the support and sympathy of many millions the world over. The defeat in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia dealt a powerful material blow to U.S. imperialism. And for this reason, no matter what happened in Vietnam after the triumph over U.S. imperialism, the war of liberation waged by Vietnam was an historic progressive struggle.

Yet something most definitely has happened in Vietnam, something very foul. The revolution of the Vietnamese people has been aborted by many of the very same people who led the struggle against French and U.S. imperialism. The goal of independence has been replaced by the reality of serving as a pawn of the Soviet Union; the hopes of advancing on the road of socialism and communism have been shattered by the realities of continuing class exploitation.

The war of liberation fought by the peoples of Indochina showed how revolutionary violence can overcome counter-revolutionary violence. It demonstrated the power and effectiveness of just wars of liberation against wars of aggression and subjugation waged by the imperialists. The decades-long struggle in Vietnam irrefutably proved the revolutionary potential and power of the masses in waging an anti-imperialist war of national liberation and showed that this potential is indeed a factor of great importance in weakening the entire imperialist system.

The war of liberation fought by the peoples of Indochina became a tremendous force inside the U.S. itself, throwing millions into struggle against their own ruling class. It drew hundreds of thousands into conscious opposition to U.S. imperialism. It helped give impetus to the formation of new revolutionary organizations in the U.S., including organizations out of which developed the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA. The struggle against the war in Indochina by the people of the U.S. shook the citadels of power of the bourgeoisie. They fumed with anger and frustration as they saw “enemy flags” carried in anti-war demonstrations and witnessed their own bloody imperialist flag joyously burned on countless occasions.

Today, however, Vietnamese troops, once an army of liberation, have become an army of aggression and occupation in Kampuchea. In the past four and a half years the Soviet social-imperialists have moved into Vietnam in a big way, tightening their claws around the necks of the Vietnamese people and dragging them into their superpower war bloc. In June of 1978 Vietnam was brought into the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), the instrument of Soviet economic domination of its Eastern European satellites and Cuba. In November of 1978 Le Duan, Pham Van Dong and other Vietnamese leaders went to Moscow where they signed a treaty of “friendship and cooperation” with the Soviets—the centerpiece of which was military alliance and cooperation. Since the end of the war against the U.S., the Soviets have poured large quantities of arms into Vietnam, along with thousands of advisors and technicians. Vietnam has become a pointman for Soviet penetration of the region, a role that conveniently corresponds with the Vietnamese leaders’ ambitions to be a “great power” in Southeast Asia.

Vietnam is being drawn ever more tightly into a neo-colonial relationship with the Soviet imperialists. The Soviet-armed and financed troops that were sent marauding into neighboring Kampuchea to set up a pro-Hanoi and pro-Soviet puppet regime are the principal and most striking example of this neo-colonial relationship. But other facts, large and small, hammer home the same point.

After the fall of Saigon, Vietnam and the Soviet Union concluded an economic agreement which provided for Soviet participation in the future economic planning of Vietnam. And the Soviets were not long in exacting payment for their “generosity.” Over the past several months Soviet technicians have been placed in the U.S.-built base at Danang to maintain and refuel long-range Soviet reconnaissance aircraft. In March, several hundred Soviet maritime workers and experts arrived in Vietnam to work at Cam Ranh Bay, the former U.S. multi-billion dollar naval port, and they are in the first stages of transforming it into a Soviet naval installation. In addition, the Soviets have constructed two electronic eavesdropping complexes in Laos and have set up a radar tracking system in Kampuchea. No wonder Brezhnev & Co. have described Vietnam as a vital “outpost” in Southeast Asia.¹

But the work for their new overlords does not stop there. In line with their efforts to draw other Southeast Asian countries into the Soviet net, particularly the U.S. imperialist-dominated countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Vietnamese leaders have taken to denouncing the liberation struggles in those countries, specifically those that have not sided with Vietnam in its contention with China, although not all of these groups have gone along completely with the Chinese revisionists either. In January of this year the Vietnamese-dominated Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, with obvious Vietnamese support if not instigation, is reported to have issued an ultimatum to the Communist Party of Thailand to abandon its long established sanctuaries in Laos. During his tour of the ASEAN nations last year, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong laid a wreath at a shrine to reactionary government forces killed in fighting communist insurgents in Malaysia and publicly foreswore any further aid to the Malaysian Communist Party, which Vietnam subsequently denounced. And public radio broadcasts from Hanoi have attacked the New People’s Army in the Philippines, the military arm of the Communist Party of the Philippines, calling it an “outlawed extremist organization” and characterizing its revolutionary work as having “increased its subversive activities in the Philippines.”²

What went wrong in Vietnam? How did it move from waging revolutionary war against imperialism to waging reactionary war against Kampuchea? How could it be that this country that once inspired millions could now come to generate disgust and cynicism among so many?

I. The Nature of the Vietnamese Revolution

The revolution in Vietnam, as in China, of necessity had to be a two-stage revolution. The first stage, as Mao Tsetung described such revolutions in the oppressed and colonial countries, was a *new-democratic* revolution—one that is bourgeois democratic in that it is anti-feudal and that it aims at creating a unified and independent nation—necessary conditions for a rapid development of capitalism. But at this point in history the force which was both keeping feudal (or semi-feudal) production relations alive and preventing national independence in a country like Vietnam was *imperialism*. Thus, although this stage of the revolution was bourgeois in its social character, in order to achieve these aims, it had to be directed against the imperialists. Furthermore, Mao pointed out that the new democratic revolution clears the way for capitalism, but clears a *still wider* path for socialism. Thus as Mao, following Lenin and Stalin, pointed out regarding China, since the outbreak of the first imperialist war in 1914 and the founding of a socialist state on one sixth of the globe as a result of the Russian October Revolution of 1917, “the Chinese bourgeois-democratic revolution has changed, it has come within the new category of bourgeois-democratic revolutions, and as far as the alignment of revolutionary forces is concerned, forms part of the proletarian-socialist world revolution.”³ It was this “new category of bourgeois-democratic revolutions” which Mao called the new-democratic revolution.

But in the years immediately following the victory in 1954 of the Vietnamese anti-French war, there was a dramatic change in the concrete alignment of revolutionary forces in the world. The emergence of imperialism as well as the triumph of proletarian revolution in Russia had previously set the world stage and conditions for the revolutionary struggle in Vietnam and other colonial and semi-colonial countries. Now the revisionist coup in the Soviet Union led by Khrushchev & Co. and the defeat of proletarian revolution by the forces of counter-revolution set important new questions and conditions for the revolutionary struggle worldwide.

Just as earlier the dividing line for Marxist revolutionaries had been the recognition of the Leninist analysis of imperialism, repudiation of the opportunism of the Second International and support for the dictatorship of the proletariat in the USSR, so now the struggle waged by the revolutionary forces in the international communist movement, led by Mao Tsetung, to expose and attack the Soviet revisionists became the decisive question facing Marxist-Leninist parties around the world. This historic struggle between revolution and counter-revolution greatly affected the course of, and the context of, the anti-imperialist struggles throughout the world. Not only was the question of capitulation to imperialism very much a part of the fight against modern revisionism, but the struggle shed new light and understanding on the nature and difficulties of the transition to the second stage of the revolutionary struggle in these countries, the socialist stage, the period of socialist transformation and construction and moving towards communism.

In summing up the experience of the democratic stage of the revolution in China, Mao wrote in 1937:

“... it is history’s verdict that China’s bourgeois-democratic revolution against imperialism and feudalism is a task that can be completed not under the leadership of the bourgeoisie, but only under that of the proletariat. What is more, it is possible to overcome the bourgeoisie’s inherent vacillation and lack of thoroughness and to prevent the miscarriage of the revolution only by bringing the perseverance and thoroughness of the proletariat in the democratic revolution into full play. Is the proletariat to follow the bourgeoisie, or is the bourgeoisie to follow the proletariat. This question of responsibility for leadership in the Chinese revolution is the linchpin upon which the success or failure of the revolution depends.”⁴



Vietnamese Party leader Le Duan embracing Brezhnev, cementing Vietnam’s neo-colonial relationship with the USSR—complete with membership in COMECON, a 20 year military alliance, and Soviet-backed invasion of Kampuchea. The Vietnamese revolution has been betrayed from within, and the people delivered into the clutches of yet another imperialist power.

Experience in Vietnam and elsewhere has shown that the process of development of the bourgeois-democratic revolution and the socialist revolution involves extremely complex and difficult tasks, and there are many pitfalls and obstacles. Because the struggle must go through the first stage of fighting for national liberation and because the working class and the communist party must try to unite all the sections of the nation, including many capitalist elements, who will fight for this goal, there is a tremendous spontaneous pull toward the ideology of nationalism, to view things from the standpoint of the interests of the nation (actually the capitalists of the nation) rather than from the point of view of the working class and its ultimate goal of wiping out exploitation and oppression all over the globe and

building a world without classes. Nationalism is a form of bourgeois ideology, the outlook of the capitalist class. And it was this bourgeois ideology, first in the form of nationalism and later as out-and-out revisionism, which infected and ultimately led the leadership of the Vietnamese revolution down a blind alley—with the consequence that even the first stage of the revolution was not accomplished, and Vietnam fell into the willing arms of yet another imperialist power.

In the 1970s, as the struggle with the revisionists was intensifying again in China, the revolutionaries under Mao's leadership made a penetrating analysis of the material and social basis for bourgeois elements which had arisen within the Chinese Communist Party—an analysis which has implications and applicability far beyond the Chinese revolution.⁵ Many of these bourgeois forces do at one point, especially before the seizure of state power and the completion of the bourgeois-democratic stage of the struggle, play a positive role and make positive contributions. But once the revolution enters the socialist stage, and especially the more deeply it develops in this stage, they turn against it and oppose its further advance. These are bourgeois democrats who turn into capitalist roaders—veteran Communist Party members who hold high posts but who actually become a target of the socialist revolution as it develops and deepens. It was shown that these people had been, in essence, bourgeois revolutionaries who had joined the Communist Party organizationally but not ideologically. They had failed to make the leap beyond a bourgeois world outlook, and they viewed the Chinese revolution from this perspective. To them the ultimate goal of the struggle was not the liberation of the masses from all forms of oppression and exploitation, although they would occasionally mouth words to that effect, but the transformation of China from a backward country mired in feudal productive relations to a modern and powerful country rivaling the advanced capitalist countries and cast in their image. They groveled before the technology of the capitalists and envisioned a similar future for China, regardless of which class held power. (Of course, the fallacy of this bourgeois vision can be seen by its results in China today, only three years after the capitalist-roaders seized power.)

There was a difference between China and Vietnam, however. For in China these bourgeois elements were not able to seize power and control the Party until after Mao's death, and a revolutionary line overall dominated the Party until that time. In Vietnam it was the bourgeois democrats and capitalist roaders who held sway from the beginning, and they never met with significant opposition at the top levels of the Party, at least not opposition that represented a serious challenge.

In Vietnam the revolutionary leadership came principally from the radicalized intelligentsia who hated the imperialist domination of their country and who, like Ho Chi Minh,⁶ embraced Marxism-Leninism precisely for these reasons. The modern Vietnamese revolutionary struggle against colonial domination began in the post-World War I conditions of a world divided into the camp of imperialism, and the camp of revolution headed by the Soviet Union. The peoples of Indochina suffered under the strangulating grip of French colonialism. And the revolutionaries who emerged in the struggle against it gravitated, pulled as by the force of a magnet, to Marxism and the illuminating beacon of the Russian Revolution as the only political movement that thoroughly supported the liberation struggle in the colonial countries. In 1960 Ho Chi Minh wrote an essay entitled "The Path that Led Me to Leninism," in which he recalled:

“After World War 1 I made my living in Paris.... I used to distribute leaflets denouncing the crimes committed by the French colonialists in Vietnam. At that time I supported the October Revolution only instinctively, not yet grasping all its historic importance. I loved and admired Lenin because he was a great patriot who liberated his compatriots; until then I had read none of his books...”⁷

The extent of Ho’s bourgeois illusions and outlook was seen in his trip to the Versailles Peace Conference after World War 1, where he attempted to plead with Wilson to listen to the eight-point program for the emancipation of Vietnam he had drawn up and modeled on the U.S. president’s own Fourteen Points. Ho was unceremoniously showed to the door.⁸ Ho goes on to explain:

“The reason for my joining the French Socialist Party was that these “ladies and gentlemen”—as I called my comrades at that moment—had shown their sympathy toward me, toward the struggle of the oppressed peoples. But I understood neither what was a party, a trade union, nor what was socialism nor communism...”⁹

In going on to describe where he came down on the struggle inside the Socialist Party between the supporters of the revisionist and social-chauvinist Second International and the new Third International headed by Lenin, Ho went on to say:

"What I wanted most to know—and this precisely was not debated at the meetings—was which International sides with the peoples of the colonial countries? ...

“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.”¹⁰

But as was to be demonstrated in the course of the Vietnamese revolution, Ho and the other leaders never really made the leap—certainly not thoroughly nor completely—from bourgeois nationalism to Marxism-Leninism. Organizationally Ho became a communist, but ideologically he remained, to a great degree, at Versailles.

It is a well verified fact that calling yourself a Marxist-Leninist, even studying Marxism-Leninism and adopting the forms of “Leninist organization” does not make you a Marxist-Leninist, any more than calling yourself a physicist or biologist and setting up a laboratory makes you one. For Marxism-Leninism is a science, a living science which must be applied to the concrete conditions of any society and developed in the course of struggle, but which nonetheless operates according to certain universal principles. It is also true that people who are revolutionaries at a certain stage and under certain conditions can turn into counter-revolutionaries at another stage and under different conditions. Like anything else, proletarian ideology does not exist in some pure distilled form in individuals or political movements. It exists in contradiction to other outlooks or ideologies, such as bourgeois ideology. The question is which is principal, what overall, at any given time, characterizes the outlook of revolutionaries. In the case of the Vietnamese revolution and the leaders of that revolutionary struggle, an examination of their political line

and practice over a long period of time—and particularly at decisive junctures when the question of which line, proletarian or bourgeois, was the sharpest and most critical—shows that bourgeois ideology won out, that it was principal. In essence, under the conditions of fighting imperialist domination, they remained revolutionary nationalists. But at a certain point (after the victory over the U.S.) they turned into their opposite—they became reactionary nationalist tools of imperialism, and straight-out counter-revolutionary elements.

As Comrade Bob Avakian pointed out in his recent book, *Mao Tsetung's Immortal Contributions*, generalizing from the study of the counter-revolution in China:

“Is it not a widespread phenomenon in many countries today which have not yet been liberated from imperialism, and have not completed the democratic revolution, that there are many people who claim to be socialists, even communists, who are in fact nothing of the kind and are (at most) bourgeois revolutionaries?”¹¹

Continuing, Avakian explained that the goal of these bourgeois democrats is to overcome the backwardness and near total strangulation of their countries by the imperialist powers. Therefore, they turn to “socialism”—public ownership—as the most efficient and rapid means of turning their countries into industrialized, modern states.

And further, he noted that the experience of the liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America since World War 2

“...has clearly demonstrated that, while it is an arduous task to win victory in the struggle to end colonial (including neo-colonial) domination, it is far more difficult to carry forward the struggle to establish socialism and then continue to advance in the socialist stage—and this has proven true even where the struggle has been led by a communist party. The greatest number of these movements, even where led by organizations declaring themselves Marxist-Leninist, have not gone forward to socialism and therefore have, in fact, failed to even win complete liberation from imperialism, falling instead under the sway of one or another imperialist power—generally one or the other superpower in this period.”¹²

For the leaders of the Vietnamese revolution, their nationalism led them to Marxism, but their Marxism was only a veneer covering a reality of opportunism and eclecticism. For Ho Chi Minh and the other leaders of the Vietnamese party, Marxism-Leninism was not a living science that was a guide to the ultimate goal of the complete emancipation of mankind. It was a grab bag of nostrums and solutions, mostly organizational, that could be employed to further their own nationalist aims. In fact, Ho expressed it in this way in so many words:

“There is a legend in our country as well as in China, about the magic ‘Brocade Bag.’ When facing great difficulties, one opens it and finds a way out. For us Vietnamese revolutionaries and people Leninism is not only a miraculous ‘Brocade Bag,’ a compass, but also a radiant sun illuminating our path to final victory...”¹³

And although at times they expressed this final victory in terms of socialism and communism, their grab bag approach and their bourgeois ideology blinded them to what path they were following.

Lenin made the point that the substitution of eclectics for dialectics—the failure to penetrate to the essence of the contradictory nature of a thing and see the principal aspect at any given time, or the attempt to reconcile two mutually exclusive things, is the most usual form of falsifying Marxism in an opportunist fashion and the “easiest way of deceiving the masses.” “It seems to take account of all sides of a process, all tendencies of development, all the conflicting influences, and so forth, whereas in reality it presents no integral and revolutionary conception of the process of social development at all.”¹⁴

Eclecticism, hand in hand with pragmatism, has characterized the opportunism and revisionism of the Vietnamese party and its top leadership. This can be seen in an examination of their line on the relationship between the two stages of the revolution, in particular in their line on the role of the party in the united front; in their line and actions around unity and struggle in the socialist camp and in the party; in their military line and strategy; and in their line on socialist construction and the nature of the class struggle under socialism.

2. Role of the Party in the United Front

The Vietnamese Party, formed 1930 as the Indochinese Communist Party (the name was changed in 1951 to the Vietnam Workers’ Party and again in 1976 to the Communist Party of Vietnam), went through its early birth pangs and stages of growth in the pre-World War 2 period, as once again the imperialist powers began to lunge at each other’s throats to force a redivision of the world. The war conditions, the defeat of the Japanese who occupied Southeast Asia, and the temporary collapse of the French colonial apparatus in Indochina, provided the Vietnamese in 1945 with what party histories describe as a “golden opportunity,” a once in 1000-year chance.¹⁵ Through the military and political struggle of the newly formed Vietnamese Liberation Army and popular uprisings in the North, the national liberation forces were able to move into the temporary power vacuum in the North and establish, on September 2, 1945, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. However, a weakened, but no less determined imperialist France, backed by Britain and the U.S., moved almost at once to re-establish its colonial rule throughout Indochina. From 1945 to 1954 the Vietnamese people fought an heroic and successful war of resistance against the French colonialists.

One of the first problems and tasks set for the Vietnamese struggle against French colonialism was how to unite the broadest number of people in the struggle against the common enemy.

At the time of its formation, the Indochinese Communist Party made a generally correct assessment of the situation in Vietnam:

“First of all, our Party took the view that Viet Nam was a colonial and semi-feudal country. Agriculture occupied the major part of the national economy. Foreign imperialists relied on the feudal landowner class to oppress and exploit our people. The peasantry accounted for about 90 percent of the population. For these reasons, in Viet Nam two fundamental contradictions had to

be solved: *first*, that between the Vietnamese people and the imperialists who had robbed them of their country; and *second*, that between the broad masses of the people, the peasants especially, and the feudal landowner class. The essential contradiction, for the solution of which all forces should be concentrated, was that between the Vietnamese people on the one hand, and the imperialist aggressors and their lackeys on the other. Imperialism was relying on the feudal landowner class to rule over our country; on the other hand, the feudal landowner class was acting as an agent of the imperialists and relied on their protection to maintain its interests and privileges. That is why two tasks were set for the Vietnamese revolution:

“1. To drive out the imperialist aggressors and win national independence—its anti-imperialist task.

“2. To overthrow the feudal landowner class, carry out land reform, and put into effect the watchword ‘Land to the Tiller’—its anti-feudal task.

“These two tasks were closely linked together and could not be separated: to drive out the imperialists one had to overthrow the feudal landowners; conversely, to overthrow the feudal landowners, one had to drive out the imperialists.... Imperialism and the feudal landowner class were the two main targets of the people’s democratic national revolution, the two main enemies to overthrow, but the more essential enemy was imperialism.... For this reason, it [the Party] must rally all forces struggling against the imperialists and their lackeys, and carry out a policy of broad national union.”¹⁶

However, in 1936, influenced by the directives and United Front Against Fascism strategy of the Comintern (set at its Seventh Congress in 1935), the Indochinese Communist Party changed its immediate program, and broadened the scope of those included in the national united front.

Even though the focus of the struggle against German fascism was half way across the world and had virtually no direct significance in Vietnam, and the Japanese fascist move to occupy Indochina was still several years away, the ICP dropped the independence struggle and geared itself to the formation of a popular front-type collation against Japan in Vietnam. To this end Ho Chi Minh declared that:

“1. For the time being the Party cannot put forth too high a demand (national independence, parliament, etc.) To do so is to play into the Japanese fascists’ hands. It should only claim democratic rights, freedom of organization, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press and freedom of speech, general amnesty for all political detainees, and freedom for the Party to engage in legal activity.

“2. To reach this goal, the Party must strive to organize a broad Democratic National Front. This front should embrace not only Indochinese but also progressive French people residing in Indochina, not only the toiling people but also the national bourgeoisie. . .

“5. To increase and consolidate its forces, to widen its influence and work effectively, the Indochinese Democratic Front must maintain close contact with the French Popular Front which also struggles for freedom and democracy and can give us great help.

“6. The Party cannot demand that the Front recognize its leadership. It must instead show itself to be the Front’s most loyal, active and sincere element. It is only through daily struggle and work, when the masses of the people have acknowledged the correct policies and leading capacity of the Party, that it can win the leading position.

“7. In order to carry out this task the Party must uncompromisingly fight sectarianism and organize the systematic study of Marxism-Leninism in order to raise the cultural and political level of the Party members. It must help the non-Party cadres raise their standard. It must maintain close contact with the French Communist Party...”¹⁷

The First Congress of the ICP in the summer of 1936 “temporarily put aside” the slogan “Overthrow French imperialism,” and set out to organize an Indochinese Anti-imperialist Popular Front. But according to a Party history, “this form of organization could not split the ranks of the French in Indochina, isolate the aggressive French fascists and reactionary colonialists. For this reason, the Indochinese Anti-imperialist Popular Front was later changed into the Indochinese Democratic Front.”¹⁸

Leaving aside the question of the general applicability of the United Front Against Fascism as conceived by the Comintern, the decision of the Party to drop its demands for national independence is very questionable, to say the least.

Although the Party later criticized itself for being “too reserved to declare its own stand on the question of national independence,”¹⁹ the decision reflected serious weaknesses in the Party’s conception of its own role in the united front, and in its understanding of the nature of the imperialist enemy and its tasks in relationship to it. Some of Ho Chi Minh’s zeal for the Comintern’s policy was most likely influenced by his role for many years as a Comintern functionary in Indochina. And it should also be pointed out that it was precisely during this period of the popular front that many weaknesses and revisionist tendencies in communist parties throughout the world began to sharply surface.

The Party conference in June 1936 even distinguished between the “ultra-imperialists and the anti-fascist imperialists.”²⁰ This reflected the same kind of effort that was made by many of the communist parties in the imperialist countries of the west to draw a line of distinction between the “democratic” and the “most reactionary” wing of their own bourgeoisie and to base their strategy on this.

As for the Vietnamese, the stand taken by Ho and the ICP at this point, specifically around the role of the party in the united front (failure to declare its own stand on the question of independence, that it must be the “most loyal ... and sincere element,” but loyal to what, sincere about what; and the failure to really make a sharp distinction between its own line and program and that of the national bourgeoisie with which it was correctly attempting to unite) reflected tendencies that were to come out more strongly later. Politically it represented a certain pragmatism, and the whole formulation quoted above, including the exhortation to the “systematic study of Marxism-Leninism,” while failing to actually make a rigorous and thorough Marxist-Leninist analysis of the situation, betrayed their eclecticism. And it must be asked whether the instruction to study Marxism did not have something to do with the fact that there was strong opposition, among Party cadre, the masses and some other nationalist forces, to a policy that called for unity with the colonialist masters, i.e. study “Marxism” to justify opportunism.

Also in this period, in an interesting twist of the colonial relationship, the Comintern transferred the supervision of the Indochinese Communist Party from the Comintern staff in Moscow to the French Communist Party, whose enthusiasm for the popular front cannot be questioned, even if its motives for promoting unity with French colonialism in Vietnam can be.

With the outbreak of the war in 1939 and the collapse of France before the invading German armies and the establishment of the collaborator Vichy government in 1940, the French colonial government in Indochina, headed by Admiral Decoux, the official Vichy representative, settled in to keep French control of the region, working out a convenient arrangement with Japan.

In 1941 a new broad national united front, the League for Vietnamese Independence (Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh, or Vietminh) was established for the purpose of “uniting all patriots, without distinction of wealth, age, sex, religion or political outlook so that they may work together for the liberation of our people and the salvation of our nation.”²¹ The Vietminh carried out armed propaganda and guerilla struggle against both the Japanese fascists and the French colonialists and succeeded in carving out liberated zones in the northern Pac Bo region along the Chinese border.

By 1944 the localized guerrilla units had been pulled together into the rudiments of the Liberation Army, under the command of Vo Nguyen Giap, one of Ho’s closest collaborators. When the Japanese turned on the French colonialists after the fall of France to the allies and imprisoned most of the military and administrative leaders of the colonial apparatus, the Vietnamese seized their chance. Ho issued an appeal for general insurrection in August 1945 and the Vietminh forces marched into Hanoi. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh, president of the new Democratic Republic of Vietnam, read a Declaration of Independence at a meeting of half a million people in Ba Dinh square.

The government formed in the north, and correctly so at that stage of the struggle, was a coalition government which included many openly non-communist nationalist forces. But it was often difficult to distinguish between the outlook of these forces and that of Ho Chi Minh himself.

In the proclamation of Vietnamese independence which Ho wrote, he mimicked the hollow words of the American Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of the French bourgeois revolution of 1791.

“All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

“... All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights.”

And Ho castigated the French bourgeoisie for trampling on *their own principles*:

“Nevertheless, for more than eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, have violated our Father land and oppressed our fellow citizens. They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice.”²²

These declarations of the rights of man, even when they were written, were nothing more than the efforts of the rising bourgeois classes to rally the masses of laboring people around them in their struggles against the British and French monarchies. As early as 1878 Engels wrote scornfully of such declarations of the rights of man as put forward by the bourgeois revolutionaries in France:

“... superstition, injustice, privilege and oppression were to be superseded by eternal truth, eternal justice, equality based on nature, and the inalienable rights of man.

“We know today that this realm reason was nothing more than idealized realm of the bourgeoisie; that eternal justice found its realization in bourgeois justice; that equality reduced itself to bourgeois equality before the law; that bourgeois property was proclaimed as one of the most essential rights of man; and that the government of reason, Rousseau’s Social Contract, came into being and could only come into being, as a bourgeois democratic republic.”²³

What possible meaning could it have, even in the context of a united front with bourgeois forces, to put this bourgeois deception forward in the era of imperialism and proletarian revolution? What was he trying to accomplish by his apparent attempt to “expose” the French bourgeoisie for failing to live up to “its own standards”?—other than to conciliate with the French bourgeoisie (and pander to the Vietnamese national bourgeoisie as well), implying that somehow if they had acted right, none of this would be necessary. Leaving aside the question of whether that declaration was the time or place to denounce the French for what they were, imperialists, and expose the nature of imperialism, the fact is that Ho did just the opposite. He covered over and obscured the nature of the imperialist enemy. And at this critical juncture in the Vietnamese revolution he revealed the extent of bourgeois nationalism in his own outlook and that of the Party, and demonstrated how far they were from giving revolutionary proletarian leadership to the democratic revolution in their country. This is not just a matter of quibbling over words, it was borne out in action as well.

The French imperialists, of course, were not at all impressed by these bourgeois pretensions on the part of Ho and the ICP, any more than they were halted in their determination to reassert their colonial rule over Vietnam by Ho’s subsequent expression of willingness to keep Vietnam in the French Union and the Indochina Federation.²⁴ The French colonial army of occupation marched on Hanoi, and despite months of negotiations, it became clear soon enough that the only road to independence for Vietnam lay through armed struggle. By the end of 1946 hostilities had broken out. The new government and the Party leadership withdrew from Hanoi back into the countryside to begin another stage in the war of liberation to drive out the colonial overlords.

Once again the Vietnamese leaders acted to broaden the united front against the French. An official Party history states that “under the leadership of the Party and President Ho Chi Minh, the entire Vietnamese people rose up in a resolute fight to preserve national independence and unity, and to defend and develop the gains of the August Revolution.”²⁵

But their first step in exerting Party leadership in this struggle was a curious one: they formally dissolved the Party. There would remain only a Marxist Study Association. Apparently there was at least some objection and controversy over this move, because in his political report to the Second Congress of the Vietnam Workers’ Party in February 1951 Ho argued:

“At that time the Party could not hesitate: hesitation meant failure. The Party had to make quick decisions and take measures—even painful ones—to save the situation. The greatest worry was about the Party’s proclamation of voluntary dissolution. But in reality it went underground.

“And though underground, the Party continued to lead the administration and the people.

“We recognize that the Party’s declaration of dissolution (actual withdrawal into the underground) was a good measure.”²⁶

This excerpt from Ho’s speech was taken from a collection of his works published in 1970 by the revisionist CPUSA’s publishing house, and there is no reason to doubt its accuracy. But there must have been some later evaluation inside the Vietnamese Communist Party that this was in fact not such a “good measure,” or at least not one that they should make much of at a time when they were trying to proclaim their Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. For in a 1977 Hanoi edition of Ho’s selected works,²⁷ this entire section is left out of the speech. No ellipses, no footnotes of explanation. All reference to the dissolution of the Party is simply eliminated.

This is not just an exercise in “textual criticism,” nor are we implying that the Party actually was dissolved. It obviously was not, at least not completely. And Party documents state flatly that in reality the Party was not dissolved, but went underground. Party leaders did continue to give leadership to the liberation war; the Party apparatus, at least at some levels, continued to function; and certainly at the highest levels the Party bodies continued to meet regularly. In fact, large numbers of people were, apparently, recruited into the Party during the period between 1946 and 1951 when it was supposedly dissolved. But the question is *why* did they do it? What political understanding did it reflect on the nature of the struggle, the tasks of the party and its role in the united front, that they felt the necessity to announce that the Party had been dissolved, even if it was necessary to go underground? The Communist Party USA under the revisionist Earl Browder dissolved itself for a period of months in 1944 also, although the Party structure in some form continued to function. This action represented a revisionist outlook and political line.

The conditions that the Party faced at that point were difficult. French troops occupied the southern part of the country and had marched on Hanoi in the north. Several divisions of KMT troops, under the guise of an allied mandate to accept the Japanese surrender, had moved into the northern part of the country in 1945, and although they had agreed to turn control over to the returning French, they had been busy pillaging and looting. The KMT leadership would have liked nothing better than to crush the ICP and eliminate any possible alliance or mutual action between it and the Chinese Communist Party in the civil war that was raging in China. And the Party was small, only about 5,000 members in 1945.

But was this dissolution maneuver meant to fool the French or the KMT? Hardly. Was it meant to play to world opinion? To say “nobody here but us nationalists”? That in itself would be revealing. The question, of course, is not whether it’s incorrect in principle to go underground—many parties have faced the necessity of functioning secretly in the face of adverse conditions—but even then these parties have tried to find ways to conduct illegal secret communist agitation and propaganda. Within the context, however, of a struggle which had presumably established base areas in the countryside, areas where the revolutionary forces have relative freedom to operate, to hint at the presence of foreign troops as the reason for dissolving entirely the public face of the Party (even if most members kept their membership secret) is no argument, or rather a wrong argument.

Most likely this move was aimed at other nationalist forces and was an attempt to unite broader anti-French forces who they felt were queasy about linking up organizationally in a united front with communists. This is hinted at in Ho's statement concerning the need for "time to gradually consolidate the forces of people's power and to strengthen the National United Front." But the only thing this pragmatic approach to achieving unity in the patriotic struggle could accomplish, besides the abandonment of Marxist principle, was to virtually guarantee that the politics of those forces that sought to limit the struggle to the confines of nationalism would go unchallenged. In some ways they were quite similar to the line of Fidel Castro in the Cuban revolution: to fight the anti-imperialist war as nationalists, win popular support on this basis, and then after they are recognized as leaders and supported by the masses as such, announce that they are also "communists"—while in fact remaining bourgeois nationalists.

There is a parallel in this period to the approach the leadership of the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP) took during the war against the U.S. in south Vietnam. Everyone is familiar with the National Liberation Front, which correctly included Vietnamese from all classes who were opposed to U.S. imperialism. But although it was occasionally mentioned in VWP and NLF documents, little was ever heard of the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP) of south Vietnam. Formed in 1962, this was supposedly a separate party in the south, giving leadership to the NLF. Certainly the organizational leadership of the PRP did (under the direction of the VWP) in fact give leadership to the struggle in the south. But the point is, independent or branch, the PRP's role was very downplayed and its leadership was on the basis of organization of the struggle, not political line—through its communist agitation and propaganda pointing the direction beyond the immediate struggle, and through the application of Marxist theory mapping the way forward to socialism and communism.

This in no way implies that the Party's principal task during the war of national liberation should have been to "fight for socialism," as Trotskyites asserted. Nor does it mean that the national struggle should have been subordinated to the class struggle. Even so, a genuine communist party has the responsibility to play an independent role, politically as well as organizationally, in the united front and not to capitulate to the bourgeoisie in either sphere.

The stand of the Vietnamese party leaders stood in stark contrast to the position of Mao Tsetung and the Chinese Communist Party during their united front in the War of Resistance against Japanese imperialism.

"In short, we must not split the united front, but neither should we allow ourselves to be bound hand and foot, and hence the slogan of 'everything through the united front' should not be put forward ... Our policy is one of independence and initiative within the united front, a policy both of unity and of independence."²⁸

Later, during the war against U.S. aggression, VWP literature does speak of the independent role of the Party in the united front and the necessity of solving

"all problems related to the Front policy from a class stand ... One-sided unity, unaccompanied by struggle, in practice leads to the disruption of unity and the liquidation of the Front. If one knows

how to conduct a principled struggle, i.e. one that is based on the common political programme and aimed at implementing it, far from breaking up unity and weakening the Front, one will have done the only thing that could strengthen unity and consolidate the Front.”²⁹

However, the practice of the VWP in the first part of the war against the French (1946-51) in officially dissolving the Party, and the limitation of the Party’s agitation and propaganda to the national goals of the struggle, fly in the face of these later formulations. And even then, during the war against the U.S., when the Party was larger and clearly the undisputed leadership of the struggle, their approach remained that of stage-managing the united front. To the extent that they did have “principled” political differences with the openly proclaimed national bourgeois elements in the revolution, it was not around the ultimate goals of the struggle, but around a revisionist view of how best to develop the country, through public or private ownership of the means of production. (See section 5 below.) And while there is plenty of discussion of the patriotic tasks of the united front and the Party, there is no sense of the whole, of the process of social development in the period and the real relationship of the class forces to one another or of the various tasks of the Party to one another.

3. Unity in “Socialist Camp”

After nine years of protracted and heroic struggle the Vietnamese defeated France and put an end to French colonialism in Indochina. But the Vietnamese now faced a new imperialist vulture trying to tighten its claws around their necks. The U.S. had financed 80% of the French war and were determined to step in where the French left off.

The Geneva Accords signed between the Vietnamese and France provided for the temporary division of the country in half and for elections to unify the country in 1956. (An analysis of these arguments is beyond the scope of this article.) But the U.S. had already begun to consolidate its foothold in the south, installing its own trusty, bloody puppet regime of Ngo Dinh Diem—previously best known for his collaboration with the French colonialists.

The immediate task taken up by the Party and the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north was to secure enough food for the people and basic reconstruction of their war-ravaged land: restoration of communications and transportation, re-establishment of basic industries, etc. By 1957 this task had been completed, including land reform, rebuilding the dikes so crucial to agriculture, etc. They now faced the decision of what course to follow. As Truong Chinh, a leading Party member put it: “... should we wait for the reunification of the country to be achieved before engaging in socialist revolution? ... our Party’s answer was No.”³⁰ On the other hand, it was clear that driving the U.S. imperialists out of Vietnam and completing the democratic revolution was still a major task confronting the Party and the people.

The question was: what is the relationship between the task of socialist construction and transformation in the north and the liberation of the south. And further, what is the correct path of building socialism in the north. These questions were to be debated and decided against the backdrop of a

great storm that was approaching in the international communist movement and blew wide open in the next few years. It was to have a tremendous impact on the course of the Vietnamese revolution.

In 1956 Khrushchev had grabbed power and begun the process of dragging the first socialist state back to capitalism. The key to advancing to communism, he declared, was the development of the productive forces of society in order to create the wealth and abundance that would provide the material basis for communism. He trumpeted the theory of the dying out of the class struggle under socialism, while at the very same time he and the new bourgeoisie in the party and the state apparatus were destroying the forms of working class rule and turning the masses of people into slaves of profit, and offering them a bowl of goulash in recompense.

Internationally Khrushchev and the Soviet revisionists put forward the line of the “three peaceful”: peaceful transition, peaceful competition and peaceful co-existence. According to these “modernizers” of Marx and Lenin, violent revolution against the capitalists was no longer necessary. Neither was imperialist war any longer inevitable, as Lenin had said. Khrushchev held that a new world war was out of the question, imperialism having become so reasonable, and that in fact all wars, including those waged for national liberation from imperialism, could and should be prevented. Further, the meaning of “peaceful coexistence” for these new revisionists was that the socialist countries should offer “all-round cooperation” with the imperialists, making this the general line of their foreign policy, coupled with the assertion that imperialism was now willing to cooperate with socialism. And the socialist system, by the very nature of its growing strength, would defeat imperialism through peaceful competition. In fact, not only was violent revolution unnecessary, it was positively dangerous. Because, according to Khrushchev & Co., the advent of nuclear weapons had changed everything. National liberation struggles, as in Vietnam for example, could touch off a “world conflagration” that might end in a nuclear holocaust.

The bourgeois logic and the link behind the Soviets’ international line and their brand of “socialism” was stated quite starkly in an August 1960 editorial in *Pravda*:

“Why construct, build, create, if one knows in advance that all the fruits of one’s labor will be destroyed by the tornado of war?”³¹

Khrushchev set out to whip the international communist movement into line behind his rotten revisionism. He was met by an iron wall of proletarian resistance from revolutionaries in the Chinese Communist Party led by Mao Tsetung. (For a more detailed analysis of the historic struggle see the June, 1979 issue of *Revolution*: “CPC’s Struggle Against Khrushchev: 1956-1963”).

“. . . The bourgeoisie will not step down from the stage of history voluntarily. This is a universal law of class struggle. In no country should the proletariat and the Communist Party slacken their preparation for the revolution in any way...

“To the best of our knowledge, there is still not a single country where this possibility [peaceful transition] is of any practical significance.”³²

And they exposed the end result of Khrushchev’s line: collaboration and conciliation with U.S. imperialism.

“... the ‘peace’ they talk about is in practice limited to the ‘peace’ which may be acceptable to the imperialists under certain historical conditions. It attempts to lower the revolutionary standards of the peoples of various countries and destroy their revolutionary will.”³³

Throughout the international communist movement this struggle drew a sharp dividing line between revolution and counter-revolution, between Marxism-Leninism and revisionism. The Vietnamese tried to straddle this line. But they could not. Their centrism and “brocade bag” eclecticism cannot mask the fact that, when the chips were down, revisionism triumphed over Marxism inside the Vietnam Workers’ Party.

The first indications of this came in 1957 when they decided to place top priority on reconstruction of the north, *in opposition to* continuing to carry out the struggle to liberate the south, and within this to give main emphasis to the development of heavy industry as the key link in building socialism. The political and ideological battle between China and the Soviet Union threw what was from their point of view an untimely and very unfortunate wrench into their plans.

In embarking on their ambitious plans for industrialization and modernization, it was obvious that they were going to need a great amount of financial and technological aid. But not only were the Chinese averse to the plans they were laying, they were not in a position to provide the kind of aid the Vietnamese leadership demanded. On the other hand, there was certainly some strong opposition in the VWP to openly siding with the Soviets against the Chinese, and even the dominant pro-Soviet revisionist forces saw nothing to be gained in openly opposing China’s line. And there must have been some hesitancy and lack of confidence about the reliability of Soviet support.

This sentiment could only have been heightened by Khrushchev’s proposal in early 1957 that *both* north and south Vietnam be admitted to the United Nations. This attempted betrayal and sellout of the Vietnamese people in south Vietnam brought a strong and outraged response from Ho Chi Minh and the Party leadership. Khrushchev was forced to quickly withdraw his suggestion. But it did not divert the Vietnamese leaders from the course they were charting.

Publicly Ho, in particular, and the rest of the leadership began to play the role of the great conciliators, arguing for “unity in the socialist camp” and studiously refusing to take an open position on this monumental two line struggle. As late as 1964, after the split between the revolutionaries and the revisionists had become absolutely clear and irrevocable, Ho Chi Minh stated in an interview in the French daily *Le Monde*: “Disputes of this kind among the revolutionary parties have always been settled satisfactorily.” And in his last will and testament in 1969 he said: “I am firmly confident that the fraternal parties and countries will have to unite again.”³⁴

Typical of the Vietnamese approach was their role at the Romanian Party Congress in 1960, which was attended by representatives from many parties around the world, including Khrushchev, who used the meeting to launch a vicious attack on the Chinese Communist Party. While China blasted the Soviets for their revisionist “peaceful co-existence” line, Le Duan, a leading VWP politburo member, carefully avoided this cardinal question, delivering instead a marshmallow speech which failed to venture beyond some mundane details of relations between Vietnam and Romania. At the congress of the eighty-one

communist parties in Moscow in December of 1960 Ho once again made a strong pitch for unity in the “socialist camp” and offered to play the role of arbiter of the struggle. But the dispute was over fundamental political principle and was not “arbitrable.” At one point the Chinese delegation walked out of the meeting—in protest of Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin—and laid a wreath at Stalin’s grave. Ho also left the meeting, not in protest, but to go sight-seeing in the Soviet Union. Jean Lacouture, a French bourgeois biographer of Ho, describes another characteristic scene at the Third Congress of the VWP in September of 1960, also confirmed by others present: Ho laughingly took the Soviet and Chinese delegates by the hand and “before the incredulous diplomatic corps, bade the assembled delegations join in an ‘All Put Together’ type of refrain.”³⁵

To their credit, though consistent with their public centrism, the VWP did refuse to go along with a Soviet-orchestrated denunciation of the Albanian Party of Labor at the 22nd Congress of the CPSU a year later in Moscow. But at the same time, Ho made yet another bid for unity and offered his services as mediator.

Many people describe Ho Chi Minh as a great diplomat, brilliant mediator, “middle of the roader” and astute politician, trying to keep Vietnam free from entanglement with either of the “two communist giants.” Nothing could be further from the truth, or more of a bourgeois analysis. Others argue that the Vietnamese position was dictated by objective conditions. Faced with the necessity to build their country and the threat of the U.S. and its puppet regime in the south, the Vietnamese had to avoid alienating or jeopardizing the support of either China or Russia. But this doesn’t hold water either.

Obviously the Vietnamese leadership must have seen it this way, to some extent at least. And it is not a question of dictating to them how they should have handled this contradiction on the basis of a correct line, if they had had one. It was not the case that the VWP discussed and debated this decisive question, adopted an internal position in support of Marxism-Leninism, and for practical and diplomatic reasons decided not to publicly side with the Chinese and attack the Soviet revisionists at that point. Just the opposite. Although there most certainly was some sharp struggle and differing lines, none of which has ever been officially reported out, their centrism boiled down to opportunism, and in the final analysis an embrace of Soviet-style revisionism. When they did take a clear-cut position, which they did during 1960 and 1961 on numerous occasions, they sided with the Soviets, and the Soviet line which argued for cooling out the liberation struggle in the south.

In a speech given in early April of 1960 Le Duan, a few months later appointed General Secretary of the Vietnam Workers’ Party, argued for restricting the struggle in the south.

“The Northern people will never neglect their task with regard to one half of their country which is not yet liberated. But in the present conjuncture, when the possibility exists to maintain a lasting peace in the world and create favorable conditions for the world movement of socialist revolution and national independence to go forward, we can and must guide and restrict within the south the solving of the contradiction between imperialism and the colonies of our country.”³⁶

He was forced to admit that this would cause “complications” for the struggle in the south. But basing himself on Khrushchev’s peaceful competition line, he argued that the overall strength of the “socialist camp” would prevail:

“In the world, the socialist forces are becoming stronger than the imperialist forces. In our country, the socialist forces in the North are also being developed strongly. Though this situation has created a number of complications for the revolution in the South, the advantages are fundamental. We must know how to make use of this supremacy of the socialist forces adequately and in good time to help the revolution in the South develop favorably.”³⁷

Khrushchev could have used Le Duan as a back-up in his “Kitchen Debate” with Nixon a year earlier.

Behind all this lay the argument that, through maintaining “peaceful co-existence” the Diem regime would collapse in the south and the U.S. would be forced to withdraw—and meanwhile the north could proceed apace with its construction plans:

“If peace can be maintained, the aggressive schemes of the United States-Diem clique will rapidly fail, and their totalitarian fascist regime will rapidly decay. If peace is maintained, the revolutionary forces will enjoy necessary conditions to develop strongly. *Hence to maintain peace is a revolutionary slogan.*”³⁸

Since when is “maintaining peace” a “revolutionary slogan”? Lenin spoke of imperialist war as inevitable as long as imperialism exists. Of course, Lenin, Stalin and the Chinese revolutionaries spoke of the possibility of preventing the outbreak of such a *particular war for a period of time*. But what about wars of national liberation, armed insurrections and revolutionary wars in general? Are these also to be avoided in order to “maintain peace”?

Certainly that is what Khrushchev meant. And at a speech on September 1, 1960, just before the opening of the Third Party Congress in Hanoi, and only a few months before the escalation of the struggle by the liberation forces in the south brought about the formation of the National Liberation Front, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong openly proclaimed the VWP’s alliance with the Soviets on the question of peaceful co-existence and peaceful transition:

“Nowadays the Soviet Union and other socialist countries are successfully building socialism and communism and have become an invincible force. Along with peace loving people all over the world they are able to prevent war, to check the bloodstained hands of the imperialists, preserve peace and save mankind from a new world war, a nuclear war.”³⁹

Again, Pham Van Dong speaks of “preventing war.” This is an exact echo of the Soviet line, which said that all wars must be prevented—in order to “save mankind from a nuclear war.” Pham, like the Soviet revisionists, makes no distinction between the imperialist war, which must be opposed, and revolutionary wars, which must be supported and which, given the nature of imperialism, are inevitable if the people in the oppressed countries are to win their liberation.

The Third Congress offered numerous examples of how far the Vietnamese Workers' Party had gone in embracing the Soviet line, and opposing the revolutionary line of which Mao Tsetung was the most outstanding exponent. In his report on the new Party constitution, Le Duc Tho took a heavy swipe at "dogmatism." While this was ostensibly aimed at forces within the Party who are accused of "mechanical study and application of foreign experience," the Chinese are clearly the target of the attack as well. "Dogmatism" and "sectarianism" had become buzz words directed at China by Khrushchev and friends. The Chinese delegate to the Congress did not miss the point. In responding to a speech by the Soviet representative Mukhitdinov, he charged that "It is absolutely impermissible to relinquish fundamental theoretical positions of Marxism-Leninism on the pretext of opposing dogmatism."⁴⁰

Since these more or less open attacks on the Chinese line and siding with the Soviets did mark a break with the VWP's previous (and subsequent) centrism, it is interesting to note that just before the opening of the Congress, Ho Chi Minh flew to Moscow where he spent over a week in discussions with Soviet leaders. While there are no official reports of these discussions available, it does not seem unduly speculative to suggest that this attack on the Chinese line may have been the trade-off demanded by Khrushchev for Soviet commitment to back the ambitious Five Year Plan unveiled at the Congress.⁴¹

But on another score the Congress position marked somewhat of a modification of Le Duan's earlier call to restrict the struggle in the south, and his claim that the Diem regime would fall of its own rot. Instead, the Congress adopted a more eclectic two-point position on the relationship between reconstruction in the north and liberating the south:

"In the present stage, the Vietnamese revolution has two strategic tasks:

"Firstly to carry out the socialist revolution in the North.

"Secondly, to liberate the South from the rule of the American imperialists and their henchmen, achieve national reunification and complete independence and freedom throughout the country."⁴²

But in his speech at the Congress Vo Nguyen Giap, Commander in Chief of the Vietnam People's Army (PAVN) and Minister of Defense of the DRV, made clear the emphasis:

"At present, economic construction in the North has become the central task of the Party. That is why our defense budget must be reduced and military effectiveness cut."⁴³

But not surprisingly, there are also other formulations from the Congress that seem to "balance out" or give the other side of the picture regarding north/south question. In the same speech Giap says:

"... while speaking about our Party's policy of peaceful reunification, a number of our comrades are not fully aware of the plots of the United States imperialists and their lackeys; they do not understand that while our policy is to preserve peace and to achieve peaceful reunification, we should always be prepared to cope with any maneuver of the enemy. That is due to the fact that a number of our comrades have no all-sided understanding of the present world situation; they see only the possibility of winning a lasting peace and not the danger of war which still exists. ...they are not fully aware of the plots of imperialism..."⁴⁴

While an argument can be made that the different formulations at the Congress reflect a line struggle inside the VWP, it is also quite understandable that “a number of our comrades” did not seem to understand or follow the Party’s policy of peaceful reunification. The formulations were so “all-sided” in their eclecticism, and the earlier Party pronouncements on “peaceful co-existence,” including some at the Congress were so clearly arguing against a war of liberation in the south that it would be hard to imagine how many couldn’t help but be confused.

Whatever the hopes and plans of the Party leaders, the next two years brought a rapid escalation in the struggle in the south, that made it virtually impossible not to see that the U.S. was not about to pull out, nor agree to some sort of “neutralization” plan for the south that would leave the liberation forces in place, as it seemed (erroneously) that they later did with the Laos agreement in 1962. In response to the rising resistance movement the NLF was formed in December of 1960 and Kennedy began to escalate U.S. military intervention in the south. Open war was not only inevitable, it had already begun.

The reality, and necessities, of the intensifying war in the south ran flat in the face of Khrushchev’s insistence that the Vietnamese try to keep everything cool. No matter what the VWP leadership may have wished, this was not possible. As it became evident that aid would not be forthcoming from the Soviets for the war, a noticeable shift took place in 1963 and 1964 towards the Marxist-Leninist line being fought for most strongly by the Communist Party of China. In a speech in March of 1963 Le Duan conceded that:

“... the Marxist-Leninist parties—seek to achieve the revolution by peaceful means, but in any event, the two alternatives, peaceful and non-peaceful, should be considered, if the exploiting classes resort to violence against the people, the possibility of non-peaceful transition to socialism should be borne in mind.”⁴⁵

In December he signaled an even sharper break, arguing for the necessity of the violent revolutionary struggle.⁴⁶ His speech was printed in full in the Chinese *People’s Daily*.

In July of 1963 the Army newspaper *Hoc Tap* published an article by the military commander Nguyen Chi Thanh which openly repudiated earlier positions:

“We do not have any illusions about the United States. We do not underestimate our opponent—the strong and cunning U.S. imperialism. But we are not afraid of the United States ... If, on the contrary, one is afraid of the United States, and thinks that to offend it would court failure, and that firm opposition to United States imperialism would touch off a nuclear war, then the only course left would be to compromise with and surrender to United States imperialism.”⁴⁷

And on the question of the role and the relation of building the north to the struggle in the south, there was a definite change:

“A powerful North Vietnam will be a decisive factor in the social development of our entire country. But this does not mean that simply because the North is strong, the revolutionary

movement in the South will automatically succeed ... the building of the North itself cannot replace the resolution of the inherent social contradictions of South Vietnam.”⁴⁸

Finally, Le Duan, of all people, began warning of the danger of international revisionism, and its influence on the VWP:

“Some comrades in our Party have come under the influence of modern revisionism. Although their number is small, it is not a good thing and we must pay attention to it.”⁴⁹

Unfortunately this new clarity on the dangers of revisionism and the denunciations of it by the Vietnam Workers’ Party did not last long.

Khrushchev was ousted by Brezhnev in October, 1964 and although there was no fundamental change in the Soviet revisionist line, it did mark the beginning of some new developments, i.e. initial moves away from a policy of open and shameless conciliation and collaboration with U.S. imperialism to one of more contention. As far as Vietnam was concerned, the new Soviet bosses were most concerned that the necessities of the war and Russia’s own lack of support would push them even closer to the Chinese, who remained staunch supporters of the armed struggle against U.S. aggression.

In February of 1965 the U.S. began bombing the north and the next month the “Americanization” of the war in the south began with the first major troop escalation. Soviet Premier Kosygin visited Hanoi at the same time with new promises of aid to defend against the U.S. air war and ground troop escalation. Underscoring that there had been no basic change in Moscow’s position, however, Khrushchev was allowed to speak publicly from banishment in August of 1965 to again warn that “trouble starts with small things like Viet Nam and ends with disaster.”⁵⁰

The Vietnamese leaders seemed satisfied that with Khrushchev gone everything was fine in the USSR once again and quickly eliminated their attacks on “modern revisionism.” By 1966 they were back to their talk of unity of the socialist camp and praise of developments in the Soviet Union. The immediate motivation for their decision that revisionism was no longer a problem in the Soviet Union was the new offers of aid, and Vietnam’s recognition that the Soviets would supply them some of the heavy weapons, planes and rockets for the kind of war they wanted to fight against the U.S. at that point. But if pragmatism and opportunism was the immediate motivation, the underlying cause was their fundamental unity with the Soviet line.

To the extent that they were concerned about the struggle that had split the international communist movement and made talk of a “unity of the socialist camp” an absurdity, it was only from the point of view of how it was going to affect their own national struggle. This is one of the clearest examples of how the Vietnamese leaders not only subordinated the class struggle to the national struggle in the context of a war of liberation, but saw these two struggles as virtually identical. They were determined to maintain unity in the socialist camp so that their national struggle would not be adversely affected.

But it also went deeper than that. For them “socialism” was merely the best form for obtaining their goal of national liberation and building Vietnam into a modern, powerful, industrialized country. And

this was made synonymous with the long-term interests of the working class. They were not able to see anything wrong with Soviet revisionism because they were not Marxists. The battle that the Chinese revolutionaries were leading to expose the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union and the abandonment of the revolutionary goal of the working class and the class struggle by most of the communist parties of the world was seen as a dogmatic and sectarian disruption of the unity which they saw as so central to obtaining their objectives.

This same bourgeois outlook existed in their line on unity in the Party itself. Le Duan stated in 1973 that “we are resolved to ‘preserve the unity of the Party as we would the apple of our eye.’ The Party will never tolerate any manifestation of factionalism, *the gravest crime against the revolution.*”⁵¹ So it is not the abandonment of Marxism-Leninism or a counter-revolutionary line that is the greatest crime against the revolution, but factionalism that disrupts the monolithic unity of the party! But if a revisionist line dominates in a communist party, the task of revolutionaries is precisely to wage sharp struggle and if necessary to try to split it. The absence of sharp, vigorous political struggle within a party is the surest sign that a revisionist line has in fact triumphed.

The Vietnamese Communist Party is notorious for its lack of internal political struggle. What there is instead is what they call “criticism-self criticism,” which in practice amounts to aiming the spearhead of criticism down at the cadre. You could quote pages and pages of the constant refrain of the Vietnamese leaders down through the years about the weaknesses and shortcomings of the cadre. Ideological unity, says Le Duan, “is firmly ensured through democratic centralism...” but “... ‘Ideology by itself can realize nothing.’ Turning ideology into action must of necessity be done through organization.”⁵² True. But the fact is that in the Party, as in the international communist movement, they put the question of unity above the necessity to struggle for the correct political line. Their ultimate criterion for the party is not its political line but its organizational unity. The demand for organizational unity becomes a method of preventing struggle for the correct line. There is no reference in the writings of the Vietnamese leaders to the fact that class struggle in society between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is reflected, much less concentrated, in the party. Hence for the leaders of the Vietnamese Party, like the current rulers in China, “unity” around a bourgeois line, not the practice of Marxism-Leninism and the struggle against revisionism and bourgeois ideology, becomes the operating principle.

Mao Tsetung point out in 1958 that:

“To talk all the time about monolithic unity, and not to talk about struggle, is not Marxist-Leninist. Unity passes through struggle, only thus can unity be achieved. It is the same within the party, as regards classes, and among the people. Unity is transformed into struggle, and then there is unity again. We cannot talk of monolithic unity alone, and not talk about struggle, about contradictions. The Soviet Union does not talk about the contradiction between the leaders and the led. If there were no contradictions and no struggle, there would be no world, no progress, no life, there would be nothing at all. To talk all the time about unity is ‘a pool of stagnant water’ ...”⁵³

The line of the Vietnamese leaders on unity in the socialist camp and unity in their own Party is the measure of the extent to which they had sunk into this stagnant pool of revisionism. Their eclectic

formulations and positions around the cardinal issues facing the communist parties of the world at this point were a facile way of attempting to mask their own opportunism—and also probably a sop thrown to try to pacify revolutionaries within the Party and around the world, whose support they still needed. But the issues and principles at stake were impossible to negate by a stance of neutrality. And, as came out in the early '60s, they were not neutral at all. Fundamentally they sided with modern revisionism led by the CPSU, even though the intensity of the national struggle in Vietnam dictated following a “centrist” policy. Because bourgeois nationalism and not Marxism-Leninism triumphed inside the Vietnam Workers’ Party at this critical juncture, it is not surprising that in the future they would find increasing unity with the bourgeois line of the Soviet Union.

IV. Military Line

In Vietnam military line was decisive; that is, it was the concentrated expression of ideological and political line in the concrete conditions of the struggle in Vietnam over several decades. For the greater part of the last 50 years, war was the main form of the Vietnamese revolution. Hence, an analysis of the military line and strategy of the Vietnamese leadership is key to understanding, and must of necessity reflect, the roots of the political and ideological line that led them into the camp of revisionism and social-imperialism.

In his work *On Protracted War*, Mao Tsetung pointed out that:

“In the struggle, correct subjective direction [i.e. correct direction by the subjective factor, leadership in the war] can transform inferiority into superiority and passivity into initiative, and incorrect subjective direction can do the opposite. The fact that every ruling dynasty was defeated by revolutionary armies shows that mere superiority in certain respects does not guarantee the initiative, much less the final victory. The inferior side can wrest the initiative and victory from the superior side by securing certain conditions through active subjective endeavor in accordance with the actual circumstances.”⁵⁴

There is no question that in terms of military and technological might, the Vietnamese were vastly inferior to the French and U.S. imperialists. The imperialists and all their military masterminds could never figure out how it was possible for the people of Vietnam to win against such odds, how a small country fighting a just war of liberation could defeat imperialists fighting a war of aggression. In a 1969 article on the war, General Giap referred to Lenin to put a finger on the basic reasons for this. Lenin, he said, pointed out that “in the final analysis, victory in any war is determined by the willingness of the masses to shed blood on the battlefield. The masses’ awareness of the cause and objectives of the war is of very great significance and is a guarantee of victory.” Further, he quoted Lenin’s analysis that “whichever has more reserves and human resources and whoever can stand more firmly among the masses and people than others will win victory in a war.”⁵⁵

The heroic and selfless resistance of the Vietnamese people in their millions in both the north and the south is testimony to their willingness to shed blood on the battlefield and of their awareness, to a large extent at least, of the causes and objectives of the war. And together with the low morale, the constant disintegration and the open rebellion of the French, U.S. and puppet troops, coupled with the growing

hatred towards the war and the unwillingness to continue aggression among the masses in the imperialist countries themselves and the world-wide support for the just revolutionary struggle, is proof that what Lenin said applied to the victory of the Vietnamese people.

But there is another, and today more immediate question that must be answered. How is it that a country that fought so long and so valiantly to drive out Japanese, French and U.S. imperialism could fall so quickly into the clutches of Soviet imperialism, defeated not by armed might, but betrayed from within?

We have already begun to show that overall and at key junctures a revisionist line increasingly dominated in the Vietnam Workers' Party. And the next section will demonstrate that far from building socialism, the VWP has locked the country into a neo-colonialist relationship to the Soviets and has turned the country into a swamp of capitalist relations of exploitation.

But how could a Party so infected with revisionism and opportunism lead the people to victory over French and U.S. imperialism?

First of all, bourgeois or petty bourgeois nationalists, as opposed to proletarian, Marxist-Leninist forces can and have led successful military struggles against reactionary regimes and colonialist and imperialist armies. To cite just a few examples, this was true in Cuba⁵⁶, Algeria, South Yemen, Angola, Mozambique and Nicaragua. But the decisive factor, as is also shown in these countries, is that, despite the fact that the leading parties and organizations in many of these countries call themselves Marxist, only a party thoroughly rooted in and guided by a Marxist-Leninist line can lead the struggle to complete victory, i.e. to real independence from imperialism and carry through the struggle to build a society free from exploitation and oppression. In almost every case cited above of a victorious national liberation struggle in an underdeveloped country, the liberation war has led to new forms of colonial dependence and subjugation to imperialist countries, principally the U.S. or the Soviet Union.⁵⁷

Secondly, the objective conditions and contradictions in these colonial and semi-colonial countries largely determine the form the struggle will take, as well as giving them their overall progressive, anti-imperialist character. Lacking the sophisticated military and technological capability of the oppressor, which results in a decided initial balance of forces in favor of the enemy, it is generally necessary for the popular forces to wage a protracted, people's war. That is, even to accomplish the defeat of the immediate enemy, let alone to win complete emancipation, even bourgeois revolutionaries must, to a certain degree, rely on the mobilization of the masses of people and the strength of the masses, who are largely armed with only the most primitive weapons. They are able to mobilize the masses because the struggle is objectively in their interests, yet are also able to assert bourgeois leadership because the bourgeois nationalists have a common battle with the masses: to get rid of the colonialist regime.

Generally the struggle has initially taken the form of guerilla war, where small, highly mobile popular forces hit the enemy where they can defeat it, quickly and decisively, and in every battle gradually strengthening the popular forces and weakening the enemy. This war must be waged over a long period of time because the enemy, due to its superiority, will not weaken easily and quickly. As the balance of forces begins to shift, and the popular forces grow stronger, regular military units can be formed, and the

enemy can be taken on successfully in larger engagements. Since most of the colonial and neo-colonial countries are primarily semi-feudal, with predominantly peasant populations concentrated in the rural areas, while the enemy forces and strength are concentrated in the cities, these wars have usually taken the form of surrounding the cities from the countryside.

Mao Tsetung summed up the theory and strategy of people's war, and carried it to its highest level, in the course of the Chinese Revolution. He described the protracted people's war as overall a war of attrition. But within this overall war of attrition, it was key to fight battles of annihilation, to wipe out the enemy's forces bit by bit and gradually change the balance of forces. He did not argue for protracted war for the sake of dragging it out. His point was that the struggle must be waged in a way that deals the heaviest blows to the enemy while conserving and strengthening the people's forces. He stressed the importance of luring the enemy in deep, surrounding it with the masses, cutting off its forces into various parts and annihilating them; he insisted on the principle of concentrating a superior force against a numerically inferior force to wipe it out in any particular battle or campaign.

Mao did not look at the strategy of people's war from a purely military standpoint—it was based on an overall evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the people and the enemy—militarily, politically and economically. This strategy was important in weakening the enemy politically and in strengthening the people's forces politically, both to win military victory and to carry through and build on that victory so that, having driven out the imperialists and their domestic lackeys, the masses of people could move forward to construct a socialist society.

Mao put the strategy of people's war in the context of the two-stage revolution necessary in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, a revolution that required and was defined by proletarian leadership. Without such leadership it is impossible to carry through the first stage of the struggle to completion and to advance to the second, socialist stage. Both waging people's war and building socialism require educating, mobilizing and relying on the masses of people. The bourgeoisie and those imbued with a bourgeois line, even if at the time they do not constitute a bourgeois class as such, are able to do this only in a limited way and around limited, i.e. nationalist, aims. This is because of their fundamental contradiction with the masses, because they want to get rid of the old rulers and exploiters so that bourgeois class interests can develop and hold sway. At every step their orientation is to look for some other means of victory or shortcut to victory that will forestall or reduce the necessity of mobilizing and relying on the masses, for even when forced to rely on the masses to a degree, their bourgeois outlook makes them recoil at the sight of the people aroused in revolutionary struggle.

This bourgeois orientation comes out very sharply today in the line advanced by the USSR and embraced by bourgeois nationalist forces who have led liberation struggles in many of the colonial and semi-colonial countries. They say that it is only possible to defeat U.S. imperialism by relying on Soviet aid and arms—and paying the political price that will be extracted for such aid. And after initial victory has been won, this line argues that the only way to successfully develop and “modernize” the economy and the country as a whole is to rely on aid, imports of technology (including military) and advisors from more advanced and industrialized countries of the Soviet bloc. This is a tried and tested neo-colonialist line. The U.S. imperialists ran a similar line as they sought to replace European colonialism in Asia and Africa after World War 2.

But the Chinese revolution had great influence on Vietnam and the leadership of the Vietnamese resistance, as they themselves admitted. Early in their struggle against French colonial domination, the Vietnamese leaders adopted the strategy of people's war. From their writings it is evident, at least early on, that there was some ideological unity with Mao's line on the question of people's war and new democracy. And even from the standpoint of the pragmatism that increasingly dominated their own outlook, they had to admit that it worked. As Le Duan said in summing up the method of proceeding step by step to victory: "Nothing succeeds like success..."⁵⁸

But while they made use of the Chinese experience, the Vietnamese leaders during the course of the war against U.S. imperialism also expressed sharp disagreement with key aspects of it. Of particular significance was their opposition to Mao's formulation of the tactic of concentrating a superior force to defeat a numerically inferior force. As Le Duan put it, "... our troops and people have invented unique tactical methods which enable a lesser force to attack a larger force." This was not just a question of military tactics, but involved, as we shall see, the question of which is principal, relying on the masses vs. reliance on weapons and technology and the extent to which it is necessary to mobilize and politically educate the masses.

Of course, it is not the case that the revolutionary struggle in one country should mechanically and slavishly follow the example and experiences of another country, nor is it that one country should not creatively adopt a generally correct strategy to the particularities of its own situation. Neither is it a matter of looking at differences in military strategy and tactics and saying the Vietnamese leaders must be revisionist because they deviated at this or that point from Mao's policies. What has to be assessed is how the Vietnamese leaders looked at the struggle and the military strategy and tactics overall, and what orientation and political line was expressed in their military policies. Some of the roots of their military line could be seen in the war against the French, but these tendencies became full-blown in the war against U.S. imperialism.

When the war against France began, the balance of forces was clearly in favor of the colonialists. As a Party history describes the situation:

"Our resistance war began in extremely difficult conditions. The horrible famine caused by the French and the Japanese in 1945 had almost exhausted our people. The enemy possessed air, naval and land forces with modern weapons. We had only a newly organized infantry with little experience and lacking everything."⁵⁹

The Party quickly adopted a three-stage plan of protracted people's war.

"Early in 1947, Comrade Truong Chinh wrote *The Resistance Will Win* The fundamental principles were laid down as follows: our people were fighting against imperialism—an enemy possessing a strong army and plenty of weapons. That is why we had to fight a protracted war in the course of which we were to put out of action an increasing number of enemy effectives while preserving and developing our own forces.... To fight a protracted resistance war, we had to rely on our own forces....To win victory, it was necessary to unite the entire people, mobilize their

manpower, material resources and intellectual capabilities for resistance, and struggle in all fields-military, political, economic and cultural. Our people's protracted resistance was to go through three stages: strategic defensive, active attrition and general counter-offensive."⁶⁰

As can be seen, this approach generally corresponded with the people's war strategy Mao developed for China. The first years of the war were battles of movement and position, with the Viet Minh preventing the French from consolidating their hold on the countryside. The guerrilla force units grew in strength and the mobile regular force units were welded together. The French first tried the strategy of lightning attacks to wipe out concentrations of Viet Minh troops and prevent the establishment of base areas in the north. The victory of the Chinese revolution in 1949 marked an important advance in the war, for it gave the Viet Minh ready access to a steady supply of arms and a base area for the training of troops. There then began a series of musical chairs changes in the French command and battlefield strategies for defeating the Viet Minh.

Finally the French decided to abandon their attempts to extend their forces and occupy the countryside, and instead hit upon the strategy of concentrating their troops in the population centers of the Red River Delta and the cities of Hanoi and Haiphong in the North, where most of the military action was centered. In mid-1953 the French generals and their U.S. advisors and financiers hit upon their "war to the end" plan. The Navarre Plan, as it was called, aimed on the one hand to launch a mopping-up campaign to destroy the Viet Minh guerrilla bases and to attack the Vietnamese free zone on the Chinese border in order to attract and exhaust their main forces. Simultaneously, the French intended to create new battalions of puppet soldiers and regroup new units in the Red River Delta.

Giap describes the Viet Minh strategy to break the Navarre plan:

"The concrete problem was: the enemy was concentrating forces in the Red River delta and launching attacks on our free zones. Now, had we to concentrate our forces to face the enemy or to mobilize them for attacks in other directions? The problem was difficult. In concentrating our forces to fight the enemy in the delta we could defend our free zone: but here the enemy was still strong, and we could easily be decimated. On the other hand, in attacking in other directions with our main forces, we could exploit the vulnerable points of the enemy to annihilate the bulk of their forces; but our free zone would thus be threatened.... Keeping the initiative, we should concentrate our forces to attack strategic points which were relatively vulnerable. If we succeeded in keeping the initiative, we could achieve successes and compel the enemy to scatter their forces, and finally, their plan to threaten our free zone could not be realized."⁶¹

That describes what happened. In the winter-spring campaign of 1953-54 the Viet Minh launched rapid-fire major campaigns throughout the length of Vietnam and even in Laos and Cambodia. The French were forced to break the Red River Delta concentration to run troops from one place to the other to block the offensive. When the battle centered in northern Laos, the French began building up their troop concentration at Dien Bien Phu, an eleven-mile long plateau in the mountainous northeastern section of Vietnam which they had already been fortifying to serve as a springboard to an offensive against the free zone in the northeast. Dien Bien Phu became the focus. The French considered it an

impregnable fortress. Almost twenty thousand troops were concentrated in three heavily fortified bases, protected by heavy artillery placed in the foothills above.

The Vietnamese decided to take Dien Bien Phu, to attack the enemy's strongest fortified entrenched camp and win a decisive victory. It was a classic siege battle, and in 55 days of blistering warfare, beginning March 13, 1954, the Viet Minh broke the enemy defenses and dealt the French a devastating defeat. The losses were tremendous on both sides, but it broke the back of the French and their determination to carry on the war.

Dien Bien Phu was the culmination of eight years of people's war in which the Viet Minh wore down the strength of the enemy while building up their own. The sole criterion for the decision to launch the battle, said Giap, was whether they could win. Based on a range of factors, they determined they could—and they were right. Given the conditions, the strategy of taking Dien Bien Phu was correct. But in looking back on Dien Bien Phu from the perspective of the war against the U.S. imperialists that began on a full scale ten years later, and the military line that emerged during that war, it seems clear that an outlook accompanied that victory, and grew, which was far from entirely correct. The Vietnamese leaders' summation of Dien Bien Phu was an important factor, as an overall revisionist line increasingly held sway, in orienting them towards a strategy of quick and decisive victory won with regular troops in major battles and away from thoroughly mobilizing the masses in people's war. And further, a declining French imperialism in 1954 was not the same enemy as U.S. imperialism in 1965 or 1968.

U.S. designs on Vietnam were not subtle. In the months leading up to the Geneva accords in July 1954, the U.S. imperialists pushed a plan to get Britain and France to go along with a "united action" invasion of Vietnam to block a Viet Minh victory. Failing in that, they were the ramrod for the eventual settlement which, in effect, divided the country at the 16th parallel, and they moved swiftly to consolidate the U.S. puppet Ngo Dinh Diem regime in the south.

When John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1960, the U.S. faced a major crisis in its efforts to maintain its stranglehold on south Vietnam. Despite all its efforts, the Diem regime was in a shambles. His ruthless and bloody measures to reimpose landlord rule and feudal conditions on the people in the regions that had been liberated by the Viet Minh during the war against the French, and the overall rampant decay and degeneration, corruption and oppressiveness of the regime, with its U.S.-trained and supplied police and military, had given rise to an intense wave of popular resistance and struggle.

As the resistance to Diem's government became increasingly active, and non-communist as well as communist anti-imperialist forces felt the brunt of his oppressive measures, it became clear that the struggle was moving, largely spontaneously, to a higher and more organized level. The leaders of north Vietnam, despite their line about cooling out the struggle in the south and concentrating on the construction of the north, clearly understood that not to play a more active and supportive role in the south possibly risked losing leadership to non-Party elements. Their decision to take a more active role in the growing resistance war in the south was manifested both in the resolution at the Third Party Congress in late 1960 that the struggle in the south was one of the two major tasks of the Party, though the secondary one, and in the formation of the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam.

The NLF was formed in December 1960. It united and galvanized many nationalist forces and the masses of people in growing political struggle and open guerrilla warfare against the U.S. and its puppet Diem. The American ruling class called for new measures to reassert its control, and Kennedy responded with his “special war” in south Vietnam devised by General Maxwell Taylor, who eventually became the U.S. ambassador in Saigon.

This special war brought a drastic increase in U.S. military “advisers” in the south and greatly increased military and economic aid to Diem. One of the special features of this special war was the U.S. “strategic hamlet” plan, a forerunner of Johnson’s pacification program for the countryside, which boiled down to turning villages in the rural areas where the liberation forces were strong and active into concentration camps.

Even before LBJ took over, Kennedy’s special war was a proven failure in the face of NLF victories, and Diem had shown himself increasingly useless to U.S. objectives. So the U.S. imperialists had Diem assassinated and installed another puppet. Later, Johnson replaced the “special war” with his own escalation, termed “limited war.”

During this period the Vietnamese leadership in the north attempted to follow the line set at the Third Party Congress of “restricting” the war in the south while building the north as a “strong base area.” It would be silly to suggest that the NLF was formed in opposition to, or even completely independent of, the leadership in the north. On the other hand, between the settlement at Geneva and the formation of the NLF in 1960, the resistance movement in the south had developed self-reliantly, uniting not only former Viet Minh cadre and supporters, but other anti-Diem, nationalist forces. The practical effect of these developments and the fact of minimal aid from the north was that the struggle waged by the NLF against the U.S. and its puppets developed as a people’s war, and at this stage, a guerrilla war. And it began to rip apart U.S. dreams of stabilizing the situation and consolidating its grip.

By 1964 the U.S. faced the decision of accepting a defeat in the south or escalating the war. Needless to say, it chose escalation. Using the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964 as a pretext, Johnson soon ordered the bombing of the north and by early 1965 had begun “Americanizing” the war by sending in the first huge waves of U.S. troops that would eventually reach a force level of over half a million men.

The developments in the struggle in the south and the U.S. escalation and bombing of the north forced a change in the priorities and military approach of the Vietnamese leaders in the north and, at least temporarily, in their public stance regarding the political and ideological struggle between China and the Soviet Union, as described above.

The Chinese revolutionaries had continued to stress to the Vietnamese the aggressive nature of U.S. imperialism and the fact that it would stop at nothing to maintain and extend domination of Indochina, and this had an aspect of sharp two-line struggle between them over the line of de-emphasizing in practice the struggle in the south.

As it became more apparent to the Vietnamese leaders that the policy set at the Third Party Congress could not work in the way they had envisioned, and that the U.S. imperialists left them no option but

military struggle, Ho, Le Duan and the other Vietnamese leaders did their flip-flop towards the Chinese. In 1962 they took a more open and direct hand in the leadership of the NLF with the formation of the People's Revolutionary Party in south Vietnam and increased their statements about the necessity of armed people's war—as well as their attacks on “modern revisionism.”

The bombing of the north and the ground troop escalation in the south brought a new turn, however, and revealed the extent of the Vietnamese leadership's unity with the Soviets, not only on the questions of socialist construction and the major issues at stake in the Sino-Soviet debate, but on questions of military strategy as well. For when Kosygin came to Hanoi in 1965 with promises of aid, and received the warm reception that resulted in dropping Hanoi's attacks on modern revisionism, he was promising Soviet-style aid on Soviet terms—fighting a Soviet revisionist kind of war, which de-emphasized the mobilization of, and reliance on, the masses in people's war. And behind the new Soviet willingness to supply military aid for the Vietnamese there was no intention of seeing the struggle through to military victory. The aid was coupled with a renewed and continued Soviet pressure for a negotiated settlement with the U.S.

In contrast to the kind of military aid supplied by the Chinese (mainly AK-47's and other small arms needed to fight a people's war—although they also supplied anti-aircraft artillery as well as manpower for road-building, etc.), Soviet aid did not predicate a protracted people's war—just the opposite. The Soviets described their aid in a letter against the Chinese circulated at the 23rd Congress of the CPSU in 1966:

“The Soviet Union delivers large amounts of weapons to the D.R.V., including rocket installations, anti-aircraft artillery, airplanes, tanks, coastal artillery, warships and other items.... The D.R.V. is receiving support in the training of pilots, rocket personnel, tank drivers, artillerymen and so on.”⁶²

This was not the type of military aid required for the kind of war that the Vietnamese would be forced to fight, but it was the kind of aid that would make them dependent on the Soviets for training, technology and replacements. And if the Vietnamese became enmeshed in the web of Soviet aid, it would give them considerable leverage, if not outright control, over the military policy and goals of the Vietnamese struggle. It was military aid for fighting large-scale regular troop engagements with the enemy—in line with the Soviet hopes of quickly forcing the struggle to a negotiated settlement when the battlefield situation would have been decisively against the Vietnamese. The approach and intentions of the Soviets were seen in their scurrilous attack on and distortion of the Chinese position in the 23rd Congress letter:

“... the Chinese leaders need a lengthy Vietnam war to maintain international tensions, to represent China as a ‘besieged fortress.’ There is every reason to assert that it is one of the goals of the Chinese leadership to originate a military conflict between the U.S.S.R. and the United States. They want a clash of the U.S.S.R. and the United States so that they may, as they themselves say, ‘sit on the mountain and watch the fight of the tigers.’”⁶³

What the Chinese feared and fought against was the Vietnamese getting themselves in a position where they could be sold out by the Russians. For Soviet aid was not in contradiction to continued Soviet collaboration with the U.S. imperialists. The Chinese were, and correctly so, worried about the joint efforts of the U.S. and the USSR to encircle and perhaps even attack China. And in fact, there were at the

time important sections of the U.S. bourgeoisie who thought that it might not be such a bad thing at all if the Vietnamese became dependent on Soviet-style aid, or even if there were a direct Soviet presence in the north. Zbigniew Brzezinski, long a major imperialist spokesman on such matters, voiced this opinion in 1965:

“... eventually, an arrangement might be contrived involving the stationing of Soviet troops in North Vietnam ... while American troops remain in South Vietnam ... one of the paradoxical advantages of more direct Soviet military involvement would be the establishment of a direct American-Soviet bargaining relationship in this area.”⁶⁴

In fact, in the first stage of the war after the U.S. escalation and the sending of north Vietnamese army regulars to the south, the Vietnamese approach was principally one of seeking decisive victories against the U.S. puppet troops in regular unit pitched battles. A secret memo from the Undersecretary of Defense to MacNamara in 1967, when the U.S. was trying to evaluate the troop levels they thought would be necessary to defeat the NLF, makes this clear:

“From reliable detailed accounts of 56 platoon-sized and large fire-fights in 1966 we have classified these fights according to how they developed. The first four categories in the table all represent cases in which the enemy willingly and knowingly stood and fought in a pitched battle, these categories include 47 (86%) of the 56 battles.”⁶⁵

In other words, the Vietnamese tended towards a strategy of slugging it out with the U.S. with regular forces—and of course relying on the type of Soviet aid that would push them even more in this direction. Why? For one thing we must look at the link between the Vietnamese leaders’ approach towards socialist construction in the north and their initial military strategy in 1965-66. At a stage when the completion of the democratic revolution in the south was clearly still the principal contradiction facing the people of Vietnam, the leadership focused instead on the industrialization of the north. Not that it was wrong to move rapidly to build up the economy of the north, and to make it as strong as possible a base area for the war that was inevitable. But was that really the outlook of the VWP? Rather, their embrace of the Soviet pollyanna talk about peaceful coexistence and restriction of the struggle in the south indicates that their outlook was more one of seeing an outbreak of struggle in the south as an interference to carrying out the principal task of modernization of the north. Hence a desire for a quick and decisive victory over the U.S. in order to prevent the destruction of the new industrial base that would result because of the U.S. air war. At least they hoped that there might be some chance of a quick negotiated settlement.

But despite their search for a shortcut to victory, it was soon apparent to the north Vietnamese leadership that the conditions were unfavorable for a negotiated settlement at the time. With the U.S. troop build-up in the south in full stride in 1966 and ’67, the military struggle was far from resolved, and negotiations could only lead to consolidation of the U.S. grip on the south. In late 1966 the Vietnamese leaders also seem to have summed up that a policy of attempting to meet U.S. forces head on with regular army units would not work.

In 1966 the chairman of the reunification department of the VWP analyzed the line on the military struggle and negotiations promoted by different forces:

“The Americans find it necessary to negotiate, but negotiate from a strong position.... A number of countries want us to enter into negotiations, any form of negotiations—so that a big war does not break out and that the war can be ended—regardless of the interests of Vietnam. Some other countries wonder whether we can defeat the Americans, and if not, [they think] we should enter into negotiations. (Most of these countries are nationalist countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.) A number of East European socialist countries hold the view that [proper] conditions [for negotiations] do prevail, and are ripe for achieving success.... China holds the view that conditions for negotiations are not yet ripe [and will] not [be] until a few years from now, and, even worse, seven years from now. In the meantime, we should continue fighting to bog down the enemy.... Our policy: to continue fighting until a certain time when we can fight and negotiate at the same time.”⁶⁶

But although they were forced in practice to oppose Soviet (i.e. “Eastern European”) pressures and turn again more towards the people’s war strategy, which was called for by the conditions and necessities of the war, their inclination to look for a quick and decisive victory and the tendency to emphasize high-technology warfare remained.

Throughout the writings of General Giap and other Vietnamese leaders, there is a potpourri of formulations describing the kind of war that they were fighting. What emerged from all this, in theory as well as practice, was not something absolutely and in every case incorrect. But theirs was an overall orientation which, while not by any means eliminating the role of the masses in the struggle, tended to glamorize and put increasing emphasis on the highly technical operations of “a new type” of people’s war, “the method of independent fighting by the crack special units, whose numbers are small, but whose quality is high.” And this concept was posed as an alternative in opposition to Mao’s line of always concentrating a superior force to defeat an inferior force. This strategy did lay “special emphasis on developing the highest efficiency in the use of all kinds of weapons and equipment.”⁶⁷

In brief, the military strategy and line developed by Giap and the other leaders after 1966 can be summarized as follows: The heart of the fighting force is the regular unit army, and particularly independent fighting by each armed branch. “Aside from the infantry force, the other armed branches of the liberation armed forces, such as the artillery units, the crack special units, the engineer units, the anti-aircraft units, and so forth, have their fighting methods.”⁶⁸ The masses armed with more primitive weapons are mobilized to provide a fighting force auxiliary to these forces and to supply the necessary logistical and production support. Hence Giap states: “Our Party advocates the necessity of associating modern and relatively modern weapons with rudimentary weapons, and of continually improving and modernizing our weapons and equipment in such a way that the fighting power of our three forces and all our people will increase.”⁶⁹ But other statements, such as “Arms and equipment are the material and technical base of combat armies, the basic element of their strength,”⁷⁰ along with the growing emphasis on these well-equipped crack units, reveal what the Vietnamese leaders actually saw overall as key to victory.

According to Giap, the front of the battle is everywhere—the mountainous areas, the rural areas (plains and deltas), and the towns. Throughout, there is no differentiation as to which is principal and

why. This is related to the strategy of constant offensive, whether with the crack units in smaller engagements, or with full regular units in larger battles. And while there was clearly an accompanying strategy of guerrilla actions trapping and ambushing the enemy, there was much less emphasis on luring the enemy in deep and surrounding it with the masses, part of what Mao described the strategic defensive.

In the development of the stages of people's war, the final phase of general counter-offensive takes the form of general insurrection. In this view of the final stage, Giap seems to draw heavily on the experience of the August 1945 revolution when the enemy stronghold in Hanoi collapsed from within, accompanied by a general uprising.

The Vietnam war showed the inexhaustible enthusiasm of the masses for a people's war. But this lesson was lost on the Vietnamese leaders who continually sought for one shortcut after another to victory, hoping to avoid a protracted conflict.

It is interesting to note the assessment of a bourgeois, but sympathetic, French military expert in 1970. He comments that Giap's ideas about the crack, elite military units are closer to Che Guevara's concept of a guerrilla elite than to Mao's theories. These highly mobile small groups, composed primarily of various types of specialists and armed with high-quality equipment and artillery, were the spearhead of the Tet offensive.

However the Vietnamese leaders actually viewed the balance of forces in 1966 and most of 1967, by the end of 1967 they began to say that the conditions were favorable for launching an all-out offensive that would spark a general uprising in the south and lead to final victory in a short period of time.⁷¹ On January 29, 1968, during the Tet Lunar holiday, such a coordinated general offensive was launched throughout south Vietnam. Liberation forces attacked every major city in the south. In Saigon they hit the Military High Command headquarters and the U.S. Embassy itself. NLF and DRV forces occupied the old capital city of Hue for 25 days. But if the military leadership expected a general popular uprising to follow, such did not occur.

The Tet offensive was a stinging political defeat for the U.S. imperialists and their puppet regime. It exploded the garbage that the U.S. rulers had been pumping through the American media that the Saigon regime had the support of the masses of people, that the NLF was virtually defeated and incapable of mounting an offensive. In the U.S., Tet gave increased momentum to the growing anti-war movement.

In Vietnam itself the Tet offensive had a significant demoralizing effect on U.S. troops and marked a new wave of resistance to the war inside the U.S. military. And it was a severe blow to the puppet regime. During the Tet offensive, large numbers of Saigon government agents and lackeys were executed, which had a decisively chilling effect on those who might have considered following in the same line of work.

It forced a massive “A to Z” re-evaluation of the U.S. war strategy, particularly the efficacy of pouring in hundreds of thousands more troops as General Westmoreland urged, and a new estimation of the growing anti-war sentiment among the American people. The 45-day Tet offensive led to the recall of Westmoreland, the U.S. commander in Vietnam, and forced the resignation of LBJ, whose whole Vietnam strategy, with its “pacification” and “search and destroy” campaigns, was thoroughly discredited; and finally, it pushed the U.S. to make an offer to open negotiations.

But the liberation forces also suffered heavy losses and in the end were unable to hold any of the cities. Much of their infrastructure of underground cadres in the cities of the south was either forced to withdraw with the PLAF troops or, if they remained in the cities, now exposed, were wiped out by the U.S. and its puppet forces.

How should the Tet offensive be evaluated militarily and in terms of the line guiding it? U.S. military “experts” to this day insist that the Tet offensive was a military defeat for the Vietnamese forces, that although caught by surprise, the puppet army fought well. They claim that it was only the hysterical negativism of the U.S. press that portrayed the battle as a defeat for the U.S. and Saigon regime. But this view of Tet was countered even by Pentagon analysts themselves at the time:

“The political reality which faced President Johnson was that ‘more of the same’ in South Vietnam, with an increased commitment of American lives and money and its consequent impact on the country, accompanied by no guarantee of military victory in the near future, had become unacceptable to these elements of the American public. The optimistic military reports of progress in the war no longer rang true after the shock of the Tet offensive.”⁷²

The fact however, is that the Tet offensive did not achieve a military victory for the Vietnamese in the sense of toppling the Saigon regime with a general uprising and driving the U.S. out. But it did have a tremendous impact and was really the turning point in the war.

But what was the outlook and orientation of the Vietnamese leadership in launching Tet, what were their objectives and how was this reflected in their further conduct of the war? On the surface, there seem to be two possibilities: either they actually thought that they could win a decisive victory in the Tet offensive and grossly miscalculated, or, they never had any intention of winning a military victory but instead saw it as a negotiating ploy in hopes of getting the U.S. to start peace talks.

Neither interpretation, however, gets to the essence of the situation. Much more likely, and consistent with the VWP’s efforts to win quick and decisive victory, is that they were looking back at Dien Bien Phu and aiming at a military action that would deal a severe blow to the U.S. imperialists and destroy their will to continue the war. And they did not look at this in purely military terms either. For some time the Vietnamese leaders had given particular attention and importance to the growing anti-war sentiment in the U.S. It seems that what they hoped for was a military victory, not on the scale of Dien Bien Phu (massive and decisive), but at least one that would severely weaken the puppet government’s position in the south and dramatically change the battlefield conditions to such an extent that, coupled with its impact inside the U.S., it would force the Johnson administration (or its successor, as the timing of Tet with the 1968 elections was hardly coincidental) to negotiate a quick end to the war.

Militarily and politically this represented two errors. First it was an overestimation of the effectiveness of the “crack elite units” and their ability to take on and decisively defeat U.S. and puppet troops in large-scale and extended confrontations. And second, it was a definite underestimation of the determination of the U.S. imperialists to hold on to Indochina. For, as pointed out earlier, U.S. imperialism in 1968 was not French imperialism in 1954.

A strong argument for the degree to which the Vietnamese leaders failed to understand the nature of the U.S. ruling class and its determination to win victory in Vietnam is the way they approached “exploiting the contradictions within the ranks of the enemy camp.” On the one hand they spoke of the contradiction between the American government and the American people,⁷³ but the way they dealt with this in practice was to try to concentrate on the contradictions they saw within the bourgeoisie itself, for example, between Johnson and McCarthy in 1968, or in 1972, between Nixon and McGovern. And at the same time, they actually helped to promote some of these bourgeois forces as leaders of the anti-war movement and as representatives of the opposition of the masses of people to the war.

Here, as well as in their general assessment of the strength and determination of the enemy in launching the Tet offensive, they were blinded by their desire to find a shortcut to victory and by their failure to apply materialist dialectics to the analysis of the concrete conditions.

The fact of the matter is that the positive accomplishments of the Tet offensive, the demoralization of the enemy ranks, the impetus given to the anti-war movement in the U.S., and so on, could have been achieved in the course of continuing to wage protracted people’s war, including waging major battles—but on a correct basis. Nor would it necessarily have taken years to accomplish.

This whole period in the war reveals also how the VWP understood mobilizing and relying on the masses. For while they certainly did rely on the masses—from the role the people played in the arduous, and what the French thought be the impossible, task of pushing heavy artillery pieces through the mountains to attack Dien Bien Phu, to the heroic work of hundreds of thousands of people ferrying thousands of tons of equipment and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh trail under intense U.S. bombardment—they saw the masses’ role (in an overall sense, not merely militarily) as secondary and supportive to the role played by the well-armed regular units, to the brilliance of military logistics and tactical planning, and really, to the arms supplied by the Soviets and other countries.

Seen in its best light, the Tet offensive was a shining testimony to the power of the struggle of the masses and wars of national liberation fought by the whole people. The Chinese emphasized those aspects of Tet that spoke to the power of the correct strategy of people’s war. A March 25 report in the Chinese news agency *Hsinhua* stated: “The great Tet victories of the P.L.A.F. and people are eloquent proof of the fact that people’s war is an effective magic weapon in dealing with U.S. imperialism and its lackeys. In the sublime spring offensive, the south Vietnamese people were mobilized and organized in tens of thousands in the city and countryside and they joined the P.L.A.F. in besieging and wiping out the enemy.”⁷⁴

Yet the political and military line of the Vietnamese leadership represented by the Tet offensive was something considerably less than “sublime.” And the Chinese gave ample evidence of their view with a sort of backhanded complimenting of the offensive that was all that circumstances would let them say (or would be correct to say) publicly at the time. *Hsinhua* commented on March 19: “At present the U.S. aggressors are engaging in unbridled massacre and persecution of the people rising up against them in the cities and towns in the fond hope of reversing the situation. However... as our great leader Chairman Mao has pointed out, ‘all military adventures and political deceptions by U.S. imperialism are doomed to fail.’ So long as the south Vietnamese people... follow up their victories and press ahead, surmount every difficulty, persevere in protracted war, give full play to the matchless might of people’s war and continuously wipe out the enemy’s effective strength, they are bound to win final victory.”⁷⁵

This and subsequent statements by the Chinese were hitting at the “short-cut” outlook and any attempt by the Vietnamese leaders to try to pull a victory out of the U.S. imperialists at the negotiating table when it had not yet been won on the battlefield.

Of course there is nothing wrong in principle with negotiations. Sometimes they are a necessary and correct form of, as Mao said, “giving tit for tat.” And there is nothing wrong in principle with the liberation forces of a country like Vietnam waging offensives on the scale of Tet. But what is decisive throughout any of the phases and stages of the struggle is the political line which leads the struggle; whether the leaders strive to keep the initiative in the hands of the masses and in a thoroughgoing way rely on the masses and their conscious activism as the *only* force capable of completely defeating the enemy, or instead go in for schemes and idealist notions that the enemy can be defeated by any method short of this mobilization of the masses and perseverance in struggle. The way in which the Vietnamese leadership approached the question of negotiations, as well as any of the possible explanations of the Tet offensive, display their unwillingness to really rely on the masses to carry the struggle through to the end.

The Chinese took an extremely dim view of the negotiations which began in 1968.⁷⁶ They saw behind them, with good reason, the sinister hand of U.S.-Soviet collaboration to put an end to the “dangerous situation” in Vietnam. Throughout 1967 the Soviets had been exerting heavy pressure to get negotiations started. “This,” said the Chinese, “is a vain attempt to coax and coerce the Vietnamese people into laying down their arms and capitulating to the U.S. aggressors in the midst of their tremendous and many victories in the war against U.S. aggression and for national salvation.”⁷⁷

But there was an objective contradiction between Soviet and Vietnamese interests. For while the former would have been willing to settle for an agreement that left the U.S. power intact in the south, the Vietnamese were not. And neither were the U.S. imperialists looking at the negotiations as a “way out” in 1968. Their aim was to force the DRV forces to withdraw from the south and use the negotiations to strengthen their puppet troops against the NLF. As part of their negotiating strategy, the U.S. alternated between “pauses” in the war in the south and greatly intensifying both the ground and air war. And the slackening of the war in the south was accompanied by an intensification of the war in Laos and Cambodia, where the U.S. had two objectives: destroying NLF sanctuaries and interdicting the flow of supplies coming down the Ho Chi Minh trail; and propping up the puppet regimes in those two countries and dealing blows to the Pathet Lao and Khmer Rouge forces.

While the war continued to rage in the south, at varying degrees of intensity, what came to characterize the Vietnamese strategy was fighting geared mainly to influence the negotiations, and to try to make breakthroughs at certain junctures in the negotiations with more large-scale engagements. During the next few years the focus of the fighting shifted to Laos and Cambodia. In the U.S., opposition to the war reached flood-tide proportions. Nixon began the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the “Vietnamization” of the war, coupled with intensification of the air war.

After Tet, the tendency it represented was strengthened—to go along with the Soviet line of big battles, and fighting geared to negotiations and U.S. political elections. The liberation forces did not launch another major offensive until the spring of 1972, which again clearly seemed tied to the upcoming elections in the U.S. Again it was a large-scale, regular troop confrontation, with most of the battles taking the form of fixed positional warfare. One of the most intensive battles was for An Loc northwest of Saigon, just inside the Laotian border. Like Tet, while it was not militarily successful in the sense of taking and holding key cities and provinces, it did accelerate the demand for withdrawal and an end to the war in the U.S. And it was coupled with Vietnamese efforts to promote the election of McGovern.

Despite their hopes of quick victory through decisive battles, the approach the Vietnamese leadership tried to follow could not bring the quick settlement that they were looking for. In fact, the actual peace agreement was not signed until five years after negotiations began, and the final victory took seven years.

So in the final analysis, despite the efforts in the opposite direction, the Vietnamese leaders were forced to rely on a strategy more in keeping with people’s war against the U.S. imperialists. They were required to a certain extent to mobilize the masses of people. But the military line implemented by the VWP and what followed after the victory over the U.S. underscores what the Chinese Party had written on this subject: that while people’s war can be led, at least to some degree, by various class forces, and forces representing classes other than the proletariat can, to varying degrees, mobilize the masses to defeat the immediate enemy, the struggle cannot be carried through to ultimate victory under their leadership. And in the case of Vietnam, these bourgeois forces that were in control of the revolutionary struggle betrayed the victory and the people to the Soviet imperialists.

For their nationalist reasons, the Vietnamese leaders were prepared to fight the U.S. imperialists to the end. With the same nationalist outlook, they believed that they could accept massive military aid from the USSR and not fall completely under Soviet domination. But while this was possible to a certain extent during the war itself, imperialist aid never comes with “no strings attached,” as the Vietnamese were to find out fully after the defeat of the U.S., when the Soviets called in their chips. And when the Vietnamese leadership was relieved of the constraints of fighting a people’s war against the U.S., its own revisionist outlook came to full flower, both in terms of its overall policies for Vietnam, and military, as it quickly transformed its army into a “mighty force” to hurl against the Cambodians—and to *de facto* occupy Laos.

The Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea is vivid proof that, while they were forced to wage people’s war against the U.S., these bourgeois leaders never really understood it or thoroughly based themselves on it. In their effort to extend Soviet domination in Southeast Asia and advance their own “great power” ambitions, the Vietnamese launched what they thought would be a blitzkrieg attack to bring down the

government and party of Democratic Kampuchea and install their own puppet regime, just as the U.S. had attempted to do in Vietnam. Instead, just like the U.S., they have won some temporary success because of their initially superior military might. But they have themselves now become bogged down and enmeshed in combating a people's war waged by the people of Kampuchea. The Vietnamese revisionists could well find this war as difficult to win as the U.S. found its war in Vietnam to be.

5. Socialist Construction and the Class Struggle

The revisionist tendencies that existed in the Vietnam Workers' Party throughout its history came to full bloom after the defeat of the U.S. and the reunification of the country. They were concentrated in its line on socialist construction and the class struggle under socialism. To some extent the outlook and line which the Vietnamese leaders are now openly applying to their version of socialist construction was obscured, at least for a time, by certain necessities they faced in the struggle against the U.S. However, countless examples can be cited to show that before and during the war, their view of how to proceed with the development of the economy was essentially bourgeois and revisionist. Typical is the speech delivered by Le Duan at the Second National Congress of the Vietnam Federation of Trade Unions in 1961:

“In the last analysis, the wealth accumulated comes from productive labor. With our manual labor, backward technique and low productivity we cannot accumulate and concentrate big funds for socialist industrialization. *For that reason, we have now no other way than relying ourselves on the peoples' revolutionary movement, and on the enthusiastic efforts of the entire people in working to increase productivity through improvement of organization of labor and of technique,* making full use of the possibilities existing in production, at the same time efforts must be made to practice strict economy, resolutely to fight waste and corruption, to make use of manpower, materials and finance in the most rational way so as to be able to concentrate the necessary funds for socialist industrialization. Only by accumulating capital can we gradually endow the national economy with new technique and replace the backward manual labor by modern mechanization having a high productivity which will enable us to make bigger accumulations for the acceleration of the industrialization of our country.”⁷⁸ (our emphasis)

The most striking thing about this quote is that even when the author speaks of the need to mobilize the masses, he says this is because of Vietnam's current “backward technique and low productivity.” Just as was the case with their mobilization of the masses for the military struggle, mobilizing people was not seen by the Vietnamese leaders as an essential requirement, but as something that had to be done because of the conditions, almost a necessary evil (“we now have no other way”!). And in talking about relying on the revolutionary movement he does not mention politically unleashing the initiative of the masses or relying on their conscious activism. Rather he emphasizes increasing productivity through “improvement of organization of labor and of technique.” With this kind of line in command, the accumulation Le Duan speaks of can only take place on a *capitalist* basis.

Fifteen years later, in his Political Report for the Central Committee to the Fourth Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Le Duan made the same point:

“In the final analysis, the decisive factor for the success of the process of advancing to large-scale socialist production is the *constant increase of social labour productivity, economic efficiency and the quality of production.*”⁷⁹

The terminology is somewhat changed, but the essence is not much different from what can be found in any National Association of Manufacturers manual on increasing labor productivity.

With this kind of view, the “enthusiastic efforts of the entire people” to raise productivity become just another factor in developing production—like a lump of coal, a draught animal or a well-oiled piece of machinery. If this is the view of the role of the masses in the process of production (and it is), it is not hard to see the role the masses will be allotted in the actual running of society as a whole.

How do the Vietnamese leaders see getting from their current level of small-scale production to their vision of socialism, i.e. large scale industrialized production? The answer lies in planning and in giving full play to the law of value. As Le Duan puts it:

“Large-scale socialist production can only take shape through conscious and planned construction. Therefore the *plan* is the main instrument to manage and direct the process of advancing from small-scale production to large-scale socialist production.... what we must first of all care for and attach importance to is the use-value of the products.... we must use every means available to create an ever bigger volume of use-values with ever higher quality. In particular, we must work out efficient plans in all fields on the basis of which to mobilize our most valuable and abundant asset at present which is the work force, and to organize the whole country into a construction site.... On the other hand, we must attach importance to *value* and the *law of value* which still exist objectively in socialist society; we must make flexible use of the law of value and many other economic levers to strengthen economic and financial management, encourage labour and promote the increase of labour productivity, reduce the consumption of labour, materials and equipment per unit of product, and ensure the production of the most use-values with the lowest expenditures. In this spirit, we must make proper use of the *market, prices, wages and credit* to improve the quality of the plan, better serve the working out and implementation of the plan, and in proper measure to complement the plan.”⁸⁰

Again, we see the classic eclecticism of the Vietnamese leaders in practice. Le Duan recognizes the two-fold nature of commodities—of having use-value and exchange-value—and even gives lip service to the production of use-value being principal in building a socialist economy. But nowhere does he point out that use-value and exchange-value comprise a *contradiction* inherent in the nature of a commodity, which carries within it the seeds of classes, exploitation and capitalism as Marx so brilliantly analyzes in *Capital*. He does not say that commodity production itself, and the law of value which is inherent in it, are bourgeois categories which must be steadily restricted and eventually eliminated to advance to communism. Rather, Le Duan presents a picture of socialist planning based on the needs of society (the production of use-value) existing harmoniously with the commodity production and the law of value. Of course he speaks of planning, but the question of planning on what *basis* must be asked.

Nowhere is to be found anything about restricting the area of operation of the law of value and the other remnants of capitalist society that continue to exist after the system of ownership has been changed. Instead, along with the constant re-emphasis that “we must attach importance to the organization and management of labour” is the refrain that “wages must be closely connected with labour productivity and have a stimulating effect on production and technical progress in conformity with the characteristics of each branch of trade.”⁸¹ In fact, what receives emphasis is just the opposite:

“At present we should strive to improve the wages system in order to reflect *more fully* the principle of distribution according to labour, viz., more work, more pay, less work, less pay, no pay for those who can but do not work; jobs which require high technical skill, heavy or unwholesome jobs, and work in regions where natural conditions are difficult must be duly remunerated.”⁸²

In the course of the struggle to build the socialist system as a transition to communism and to prevent capitalist restoration, Mao, while making clear that the principle of distribution under socialism was “from each according to his ability, to each according to his work,” made clear where the untrammelled bowing to this principle would lead:

“In a word, China is a socialist country. Before liberation she was much the same as a capitalist country. Even now she practices an eight-grade wage system, distribution according to work and exchange through money, and in all this differs very little from the old society.... Our country at present practices a commodity system, the wage system is unequal, too, as in the eight-grade wage scale, and so forth. Under the dictatorship of the proletariat such things can only be restricted. Therefore if people like Lin Piao come to power, it will be quite easy for them to rig up the capitalist system...”⁸³

The difference in Vietnam was that people like Lin Piao *were* in power.

Like Teng Hsiao-ping and the other capitalist roaders in China, the Vietnamese leaders also give particular emphasis to the role of the central bank and other financial institutions in promoting and evaluating the efficiency and productivity of labor:

“Besides, the financial and banking services must through their activities strengthen their control and supervision over the various branches, regions and production units.”⁸⁴

But while underscoring the need to “bring into play the law of value” (as if it didn’t happen spontaneously), “practice cost accounting and use the levers of prices, profit, wages and credit,” Le Duan cautions that “we should not view profits and losses with the petty mind of the small individual producer.” No, it is necessary to think big, to view things like a growing, ambitious, big bourgeois:

“In our present conditions, the greatest profit lies in expanding production, multiplying branches and trades, increasing the quantity of products, and raising labour productivity in each branch and in the whole of our national economy. Only on that basis [!] can we speak of profits and reconcile profit-making with the socialist nature of our economy.”⁸⁵

The Vietnamese leaders have found themselves in a dilemma. They recognize the backwardness of the economic forces and want to do something about it. But like a bourgeoisie anywhere, they don't see the creative power of the working class and the masses as fundamental to the only road forward for the development of society on a new basis. Instead they see the development of technology and modern industry as the fundamental way out, and the unrestricted implementation of capitalist methods and principles (in the form of state ownership) as the best means of achieving their goals. But this, despite all their fine phrases, can only lead to new exploitation of the masses, and in Vietnam's condition of underdevelopment, to dependency and subjugation to imperialism.

Their view on the centrality of technology, as opposed to the transformation of the relations of production and the role of the masses of people, is seen in their often repeated concept of the "three revolutions": "the revolution in relations of production, the scientific and technological revolution, and the ideological and cultural revolution, *of which the scientific and technological revolution is the kingpin.*"⁸⁶ Believe it or not, this formulation of the "three revolutions"—including the singling out of the technological revolution as the key link—was decided upon as early as 1970, *before* the end of the war with the U.S. and when to talk of anything other than the seizure of nationwide political power as being central was the height of absurdity (and revisionism). The relationship between their view of the task of building and modernizing the economic base and revolutionizing the superstructure, and what they see as waging the "class struggle" to prevent the emergence and dominance of the forces of capitalism, is brought out particularly sharply when Le Duan defines this triple revolution in relation to the dictatorship of the proletariat:

"... we in the North have invested the people's democratic State with the historic role of the *dictatorship of the proletariat* in order to move the North forward to a transition to socialism through the simultaneous accomplishment of a triple revolution: revolution in production relations, technical revolution, and ideological and cultural revolution, *with the technical revolution as the keystone.*"⁸⁷

The path now being followed by the Vietnamese is the well-worn rut made by the revisionists in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and they are running down it in the company of the new rulers in China. In the Soviet Union in the '20s and '30s there were those, like Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev, who argued that it was impossible to move to socialist construction because the country was still economically and technologically too backward. The later Soviet revisionists, led by Khrushchev, and their followers, including the Vietnamese, add a twist to this "theory of the productive forces," arguing that the main task under socialism is the development of the productive forces, science and technology. Coupled with their theory of the dying out of the class struggle under socialism, what this means is that the path to building socialist society and moving to communism equals the development of large scale "socialist" industry. The Vietnamese are quite as open about all this, stating that socialist industrialization is the central task of the whole period of "transition to socialism."⁸⁸ (It is important to note that when the Vietnamese talk about revolution in the relations of production, the questions of ownership and the relations between people in the productive process or in distribution receive lip service at best.)

To bolster their line, the Vietnamese leaders are fond of quoting Lenin's statement that "communism equals Soviet power plus electrification." For the revisionists, "Soviet power" means public ownership of the means of production. This particular formulation of Lenin's is at best one-sided and incomplete and reveals the circumstances in which it was said—when socialist construction in the USSR was only beginning. But in the hands of these fellows it becomes a formula for capitalist development.

But what about the class struggle? If "socialist" industrialization is the central task, what happens to the struggle to carry through the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat? The Vietnamese formulation of their central task is very similar to that of Liu Shao-chi, Lin Piao and other revisionists, that the principal contradiction in China was "between the advanced socialist system and the backward productive forces." According to the Chinese revisionists, once socialist relations had been in the main established through the elimination of private ownership of the means of production, the key thing was not the class struggle but concentrating on raising the level of technological and economic development of the country. (The same argument was made by Hua Kuo-feng at the recent Fifth National People's Congress meeting in China.) In opposition to this, as early as 1957, Mao stated that even after the establishment of socialist ownership,

"Class struggle is by no means over. The class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the class struggle between the various political forces, and the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the ideological field will still be protracted and tortuous and at times even very sharp. The proletariat seeks to transform the world according to its own world outlook, and so does the bourgeoisie. In this respect, the question of which will win out, socialism or capitalism, is not really settled yet."⁸⁹

Mao's famous rejoinder to Teng Hsiao-ping in 1975 would read as well directed against the Vietnamese leadership and their "three revolutions": "What! 'Take the three directives as the key link!'... Class struggle is the key link and everything else hinges on it."

The Vietnamese pay lip service to this question: "The dictatorship of the proletariat in any country has to solve this question: 'Which wins?—capitalism or socialism?'" They make a distinction, however, between the task of the dictatorship of the proletariat in developed capitalist countries and in underdeveloped, agricultural countries like their own:

"In developed capitalist countries the bourgeoisie is a big foe; capitalism consists of a system of production relations covering all fields of the national economy and a colossal superstructure at the service of that regime of oppression and exploitation. That is why after the seizure of power and the setting up of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the class struggle against the bourgeoisie and other reactionary forces continues with unabated fierceness in various forms, 'bloody and bloodless, violent and peaceful, military and economic, educational and administrative', in order to build socialism.... In countries advancing to socialism without passing through the stage of capitalist development [like Vietnam—*Revolution*], one has to abolish the capitalist economic sector and all other forms of exploitation, stem the trend of small production towards spontaneous capitalist development, smash all attempts by hostile elements to raise their heads, ensure order and security and strengthen the national defense potential... However, class struggle is not

confined to these tasks. To gain a radical victory over the bourgeoisie and other reactionary forces, to build socialism and communism successfully ... the expropriation of the exploiting classes cannot by itself create a material and technical basis for socialism, nor can the suppression of counter-revolutionary forces in itself ensure success for socialism. The basic problem here is to convert small individual production into large-scale socialist production and build almost from scratch the whole material and technical basis, the economic foundation and the superstructure of a socialist country by simultaneously carrying out a triple revolution...”⁹⁰

And of course the most important revolution is in science and technology. What other point is Le Duan making here except that, while in developed capitalist countries it might be necessary to wage protracted class struggle, particularly in the superstructure, in countries like Vietnam the content of the class struggle and the task of the dictatorship of the proletariat is to do away with private ownership of the means of production and move from small scale to large-scale, industrialized production?

As for the enemy in the class struggle, and the target of the revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat, this is described almost exclusively in terms of external elements, “imperialism and the reactionary and bellicose forces.” In the south, for example, the exploiting classes who still remained intact, the poison of the enslaving culture and the social evils caused by the U.S. neo-colonialists, along with the influence of openly bourgeois ideology still rampant after the U.S. withdrawal are targeted. But in terms of bourgeois ideology and bourgeois elements constantly regenerated in the course of and within the revolution and socialist construction, that is dismissed by saying that since the material basis for it is small-scale production, it is something that will be eliminated in the transformation into large-scale industrialized production. At most one should be on guard against the petty-producer mentality.

Once again their view of the role of the party is illustrative of their bourgeois outlook. The party, says Le Duan, has at its disposal the state of the dictatorship of the proletariat, an extremely powerful instrument for suppressing all opposition from hostile forces, but “*and this is the most important aspect—* for mobilizing and organizing the people for socialist construction and participation in the management of all spheres of social life.”⁹¹ Once more the party’s role is described principally as organizational. And wherein lies the strength of the party? In its political and ideological line? No.

“Indeed the strength and fighting capacity of a party in power lies in the efficiency and vigour of the State apparatus under its leadership. Being the brains of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the party cannot slacken its leadership over government organs... To increase the Party’s organizational ability, one must first of all raise its capacity to lead and utilize the machinery of the State, with all its specialized, professional and technical agencies for directing economic and cultural construction and meeting the people’s needs in conformity with the Party’s line and policies.”⁹²

And what qualities are most essential for a party member?

“... the best organizer, one with a mastery of the science and art of organization, is one who goes about his organizational work in a flexible way and responds to new happenings with timely changes in his own system of organization and mode of action.”⁹³

And what is it that the party lacks most? “Knowledge in economics, science and technique, and organizational and managerial abilities.”⁹⁴ It is no wonder they could not see that the main danger can come from within the party itself!

In all their talk of organization, technique, rapid industrialization, etc., the Vietnamese party does manage to come up with a few key formulations about the masses as the masters and rulers of society.

“To hold firmly to proletarian dictatorship means to firmly grasp the Party line, strengthen the leadership of the working class, exercise and enhance the right to collective mastery of the working people...”⁹⁵

But what exactly is the content and what are the forms of this collective mastery? According to Le Duan’s Political Report to the Fourth Congress it means several things. Politically it means “firm defense of socialism and the firm defense of the socialist motherland along with socialist construction ... [It] involves both duties and rights ... [such as] the citizen’s rights and individual freedom ... [and] duty to work, the duty to defend the motherland, the duty to respect and defend socialist property, respect the rules of collective life, etc.” Economically collective mastery “... includes collective mastery of the main means of production of society, [i.e., public ownership], collective mastery over the organization and management of production and in the domain of distribution.”⁹⁶ This rather vague formulation is given a bit more concreteness when the Political Report later goes on to emphasize that:

“We must select and promote outstanding working people to managerial positions, give attention to their training and fostering in economics, science, techniques and managerial work.”⁹⁷

This Report greatly downplays the whole concept of *revolutionizing* the relations of production, and instead sees the promotion of individuals from the working people into managerial and professional positions as somehow ensuring the “collective mastery” of the working people. Actually, it’s much more a formula for a new elite. With this kind of line it is not surprising at all the hostility exhibited by the Vietnamese leadership toward the Cultural Revolution in China in 1966.

During the long course of the Vietnamese revolution the revolutionary line represented and developed by Mao Tsetung certainly had some impact in the Vietnam Workers’ Party, but it never held dominant sway. But while opportunism and the necessities of the war against the French and the U.S. imperialists forced them to tip their hats to Mao, it was with the revisionist elements in the Chinese party that the Vietnamese leadership had the closest unity.

In an interview in the *Manchester Guardian* two years ago, Hoang Tung, a Central Committee member of the Communist Party of Vietnam and editor of the Party daily newspaper *Nham Dan*, provided a glaring self-exposure of the line held among VWP leaders toward the Cultural Revolution:

“After 1967-68 and the Cultural Revolution, we no longer looked on the Chinese leaders who succeeded one another in the long power struggle as socialists. The period of 1949-1966 saw the victory of communism. Since then it’s been something else entirely. The Chinese Communist

Party was destroyed along with the dictatorship of the proletariat. And 1966 marked the beginning of the decay of socialism ... Non-socialists have eliminated the outstanding militants. Those who fought against Mao after 1966 were in general the best of the lot.”⁹⁸

And the line of the Vietnamese party leaves no doubt why they looked at the Cultural Revolution with such hostility. Here was the revolutionary proletariat in China engaged in a life or death struggle, deepening and broadening its dictatorship over the bourgeoisie and making an earth-shaking and historic breakthrough for the international working class. Here were revolutionaries under Mao’s leadership developing, as Mao said, the form and method to wage mass revolutionary struggle against the return to the enslavement of the masses by the chains of capital, and leading the masses to push society forward, closer to the goal of the complete destruction of the system of exploitation of man by man.

But for the Vietnamese leaders this sight was terrifying. It was a complete repudiation, not only of their revisionist line on building “socialism,” but their whole outlook of wanting to use the revolutionary struggle of the masses to come to power, and then demand that the revolution cease and the people get back to work. The Cultural Revolution stood as a direct threat to their own position of developing as a new class of exploiters in Vietnam. If today the Vietnamese rulers are locked in battle with some of the same revisionists they earlier supported (such as Teng), it is only over conflicting bourgeois interests. The “best of the lot” that fought against Mao were truly their class brothers.

The similarities between the formulations and goals of the revolution put forward by the Vietnamese leadership and the Chinese revisionists are remarkable, if not surprising. In both cases the role of the party is seen as principally organization, in both cases the emphasis is on managerial efficiency and technique, in both cases the concept of “grasp revolution, promote production” is reduced to “promote production” and the role of the masses to promoters of production. The forms of working class rule are bastardized to mean putting selected workers in positions of management and the operation of the capitalist law of value is given full play as the regulator and stimulator of production. Not surprisingly, both set similar timetables for their bourgeois dreams of turning their countries into modern, industrialized nations. According to the Vietnamese “It is our aim that the process of taking the economy of our country from small production to large-scale socialist production shall be largely completed within about twenty years.”⁹⁹

But not only is the formulation that “it is of decisive importance to carry out socialist industrialization, the central task of the whole period of transition to socialism” thoroughly revisionist, it will only lead to binding the Vietnamese people in new chains of neocolonialism. It will lead to distortion and dislocation of the economy and further dependence on imperialism. This can be seen from just looking at the initial implementation of the Five-Year Plan announced at the Fourth Party Congress.

The realization of the plan is admittedly largely dependent on grants and loans from other countries, principally the Soviet bloc. It would be logical to assume, given Le Duan’s definition of the relation between industry and agriculture, and the dire conditions of agricultural production after the war, that a great deal of emphasis would be placed on the development of agriculture, particularly food crops. But heavy industry was not only seen as the key link in the development of the economy overall and in the long run, it was to receive the main emphasis right away. This would mean rapid expansion of imports of

heavy machinery and technology from the Soviets and Eastern Europe—and anywhere else they could get it—and Soviet bloc aid under the Five-Year Plan, slated to be more than three billion dollars, mostly in long-term loans, is earmarked for industry.”¹⁰⁰ In order to pay for these imports, the Vietnamese began to orient production toward export goods to the Soviet bloc, mainly coal, fruit and vegetables, and cash crops like cotton, coffee and rubber. An editorial in the August 1978 issue of the party newspaper, *Nham Dan* attempted to put the best face on this by expressing the hope that the relationship with COMECON “will help in better exploitation of natural resources” and “speed up socialist industrialization.”¹⁰¹

But at the same time, bending to the Soviets’ “international division of labor” line for the exploitation of its satellites, the editorial spoke of Vietnam’s “obligations for international cooperation and distribution of work.”¹⁰² The quotas for the COMECON countries are set, of course, by the Soviet Union. This was not the first time the Vietnamese leadership had bowed to the Soviet conception of “international division of labor.” In 1973 Le Duan asserted that “At present, when productive forces have grown beyond national boundaries, social labour should be distributed not only within the framework of individual nations but also to a certain extent on an international scale.”¹⁰³ But as events have shown, the Vietnamese also intend to be on the receiving side of the benefits of this theory. Like the Soviets, they are not adverse to applying pressure, military when necessary, to enforce this division of labor on weaker countries. A rice surplus sent back from occupied Kampuchea will certainly help alleviate the food crunch at home.

Undoubtedly, however, Vietnam’s mobilization for war on Kampuchea and the cost of trying to fight its way out of the quagmire it has become enmeshed in there, along with the mobilization against China’s continued threat of future invasion, has wreaked havoc with all their grand schemes and dubious proposals for economic development, driving Vietnam further into hock to the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

The Vietnam war was a focal point of struggle at a time when the world was undergoing a profound and sharp change. The struggle of the Vietnamese people was thrust on the world stage at a strategic point in history. And this lent tremendous weight not only to the importance of their heroic battle for liberation but also to the revisionist line within the leadership of that revolution. The war in Vietnam had tremendous influence on people all over the world struggling against oppression and exploitation. It spurred people everywhere to take up revolutionary struggle against U.S. imperialism, but exactly because the war had such an impact on the peoples of the world, it also gave credence to the revisionism and centrism that dominated the Vietnamese Party.

Today, the rotten fruit of that revisionism is manifested at the very time the U.S. imperialists are intensifying their campaign to reverse the correct verdict on the Vietnam war. The invasion of Cambodia, the Vietnamese leaders’ great power ambitions in Southeast Asia, their role as pawn of the Soviets, are paraded before the American people. And former so-called anti-war activists are marshaled to denounce Vietnam—all for the purpose of supporting the U.S. imperialists’ argument that they were right all along in doing what they tried to do in Vietnam. At the same time there is a cacophony of strident voices, both pro-Soviet and pro-U.S. imperialist, competing to give bourgeois explanations of what is going on with Vietnam.

For these reasons it is vitally important to be clear on what was right and what went wrong with Vietnam.

Vietnam was a just war against imperialist aggression that deserved and received the support and the sympathy of many millions of people around the world. The question of just and unjust struggle is not an abstract moral question of good and bad or right and wrong. It is a question of what in the development of history is objectively progressive, pushes history forward, and what is reactionary, holds things back.

In the post-World War 2 period the U.S. rose to the top of the imperialist dung heap. It was the most powerful and dominant country in the world. The U.S. imperialists strutted across the globe, confident of the strength and invulnerability of their far-flung empire. But as early as 1949 the Chinese revolution demonstrated the rotten timbers upon which this empire was based as it swept Chiang Kai-shek and his U.S. patrons and financiers into the sea. The Vietnam war occurred at a turning point for U.S. imperialism, and while it was not the fundamental reason for its decline, it dealt it the sharpest blow. The U.S. poured billions of dollars and millions of men into Vietnam in a futile attempt to subjugate the Vietnamese people and hold onto a key link in its empire. But all these efforts accomplished was to inspire revolutionary struggle in other countries and exacerbate the fundamental weakness of U.S. monopoly capitalism.

At the same time the Vietnam war overlapped and, in a sense, contributed to the development of Soviet social-imperialism as a major challenge to U.S. world hegemony. In the early days of the Vietnam war the revisionist leaders of the Soviet Union did not feel themselves strong enough to challenge the U.S. and internationally their line was characterized by conciliation and collaboration with American imperialism. But by 1968 the worm had begun to turn. The Soviets were rapidly building up their military might and casting an envious eye on the U.S. empire. They marched boldly into Czechoslovakia to snuff out a challenge to their satellites in Eastern Europe. Their overall approach began to become one of more open contention with the U.S. And they started to look at the war in Vietnam not solely as a “danger that could spark a world conflagration,” and bring them into direct conflict with the U.S. before they felt themselves ready, but began also to focus on the great potential a U.S. defeat in Indochina held for their own aggressive designs. At the same time of course, they continued their attempts to manage and control the Vietnamese struggle. Thus the triumph of the Vietnamese people not only weakened U.S. imperialism on a world scale, but the betrayal of the revolution gave the Soviets an important outpost in a strategic area.

But the same was true of the Cuban revolution against U.S. colonialism and its subsequent betrayal into the clutches of the imperialists of the USSR. The difference, of course, was that Vietnam played a much more important role on a world scale than Cuba. Similarly, the line of the Vietnamese Communist Party, its bourgeois nationalism parading as Marxism-Leninism, was able to play a more significant and influential negative role worldwide.

Ho Chi Minh had long been an important personage in the international communist movement. The Vietnamese Communist Party, through its various name changes, was a long-established “Marxist party” with a fair amount of prestige. And it was operating at its highest level of prestige, and dipping into its

“brocade bag” of eclecticism and pragmatism for all sorts of opportunist theories and formulas at a time when there was a great deal of confusion and lack of clarity among revolutionaries about just what Marxism-Leninism was. Mao Tsetung and the Chinese revolutionaries had delivered a stinging attack on Soviet revisionism and the Cultural Revolution was mounting a fierce assault on revisionism inside China itself, a revolution which, it becomes clearer almost by the day, was the most important advance in the world proletarian revolution in recent times. But the Soviet revisionists were not thoroughly exposed and isolated, and by no means completely defeated. In this context, the centrism and the ultimate open revisionism of the Vietnamese leaders, fresh from a struggle objectively and unquestionably revolutionary, could only strengthen revisionism internationally.

Yet genuine Marxist-Leninists throughout the world firmly supported the Vietnamese in their struggle against the U.S. imperialists. This was particularly true of revolutionary China, which not only politically upheld the justness of the Vietnamese people’s revolutionary war but also was in a very real and material sense the “great rear area” for the struggle in Vietnam. Was this just opportunism? Certainly the Chinese Marxist-Leninists knew what was going on inside the Vietnamese Party and were keenly aware of the entrenched revisionist tendencies, if not absolutely consolidated revisionist line, of the Vietnamese leadership. But while China expressed certain concern, and even at a few points open disagreements with the policies or strategy of the Vietnamese Party, they never made this principal to their wholehearted support for the war. The Chinese revolutionaries recognized the contradiction between the progressive, anti-imperialist character of the Vietnam war and the increasingly revisionist line of the leaders. And they understood quite clearly that the principal aspect of that contradiction, as long as that war was going on, was the former. China had its own experience with bourgeois democrats masquerading as communists, but Mao and those who stood with him recognized that under the conditions of a war of resistance against imperialist aggression such people can, up to a point, play a progressive role. And it is still true today that genuine national liberation struggles, even if led by *openly* petty bourgeois or bourgeois forces, can play the objectively progressive role of delivering blows against imperialism.

Even, as was the case with Vietnam, where the defeat of U.S. imperialism opens the door for Soviet penetration, these struggles, if they are genuinely revolutionary and not just proxy wars for one or the other superpower (as is the case in Ethiopia and the phony anti-imperialism of the Derg, or during the civil war in Angola) these wars strike blows at the whole imperialist system. And in the long run, once the masses of people have been aroused and mobilized in anti-imperialist revolutionary struggle, even if not fully, those who try to arrest and suppress this awakening of the masses of people can well find themselves in unexpected trouble.

It is no surprise that the revisionists who now rule China, along with their bootlickers around the world, find it so impossible to criticize and attack the Vietnamese today on the basis they deserved to be attacked on: their revisionism. Locked in a bitter struggle with Vietnam brought about by competing bourgeois national interests in the region and imperialist alliances, the Chinese revisionists are no more able to mount a Marxist-Leninist analysis of Vietnam today than they are of the Soviet Union. To do so would only be holding up a mirror to their own revisionism. They are reduced to hurling thinly veiled racial slurs against the Vietnamese and accusing them of trampling on China’s turf, while their sycophants like the CPML in the U.S. dredge up the likes of Joan Baez to repeat the U.S. imperialists’ slogans of “human rights” violations.

But there were some, specifically the Progressive Labor Party and other, undisguised, Trotskyites, who denounced revisionism in Vietnam years ago. Was PL right all along? Absolutely not. PL completely confuses and rejects the two stages of the revolutionary struggle in the colonial and semi-colonial countries. Hence for them, anything that isn't directly a "fight for socialism" is reactionary. During the Vietnam war they consistently saw the struggle in Vietnam from their own economist viewpoint and denied any validity in or role to the national and democratic goals of the struggle, just as today they denounce the Iranian revolution and deny the material blows it has objectively delivered against U.S. imperialism because Khomeini and other bourgeois elements hold a dominant position in the Iranian revolution up to now. Despite all its "revolutionary" posturing, PL ended up in unity with the U.S. imperialists. At a time when the bourgeoisie was sparing no effort to vilify and denounce the leaders of the DRV and the NLF in order to undercut the growing anti-war movement in the U.S., PL also took this on as their main task in relation to the anti-war movement.

PL claimed to support China as late as 1969 and they were obviously picking up on some of the internal criticism that the Chinese Party had of the leadership in Vietnam. But even if there were some aspects of their criticism that were correct when they were raised by the Chinese, by the time they came through PL's garble they were completely distorted and turned into their opposite. So while the Chinese, for example, strongly upheld the fact that there was a legitimate nationalist aspect to the struggle in Vietnam, while pointing to the fact that bourgeois nationalism was incapable of carrying the struggle through to complete victory, PL got up on its soap box to denounce nationalism in all forms and under all conditions and denounced the Vietnamese struggle because of its nationalist forms. Similarly, instead of making a correct, dialectical analysis of the question of the negotiations, PL got on a high horse and denounced negotiations pure and simple, claiming that because the Vietnamese leadership was willing to consider negotiations as a tactic in the struggle, they were *ipso facto* planning to sell out the struggle. According to PL there could be no question of negotiations. The only strategy and tactic was to fight until the U.S. was driven out militarily, period. There were only superficial and shoddy attempts on their part to analyze the line of the Vietnamese leaders going into the negotiations, to explain what the revisionist outlook was that influenced them and the objective conditions that made it necessary to continue the struggle whether or not negotiations were correct as a tactic.

And even to the extent that PL did point to correct criticisms of the Vietnamese leaders and their line on the war, it was absolutely incorrect to launch the kind of attack they did when they did. In contrast to the towering international significance and objectively progressive role of the Vietnamese struggle, PL's puny gesticulation would be laughable if it hadn't been so counter-revolutionary.

What was really behind PL's constant attack on the Vietnamese struggle and the anti-war movement in the U.S. was their own economism and rightism reacting against the revolutionary forces and sentiments aroused in the U.S. around the Vietnam War. Their criticisms allowed them the opportunity to retreat into economism and "workerism," even to babble about how the situation in Vietnam could be described as a fight between "workers and bosses"—in the most narrow trade-unionist terms.

On the other hand, it was a mark of the immaturity and lack of development of the new Marxist-Leninist movement in the U.S. that it did not analyze more sharply the negative, though at that point

decidedly secondary, aspects of the struggle in Vietnam. Although there definitely was some awareness that there were some things that were not correct about the line and leadership of the DRV, a deeper and more correct understanding of the revisionism of the Vietnamese leaders would have had implications for the work of Marxist- Leninists in that period, especially in combating the influence of that line within the U.S. and in training the advanced of that movement to understand the question involved. This notwithstanding, full support for the enemy of U.S. imperialism, and the slogan of “Victory to the NLF” were, correctly, a touchstone and a dividing line in the anti-war movement.

It is no less odious to try to reverse the verdicts on the Vietnamese struggle against U.S. imperialism today than it was during the war. And every effort by the U.S. bourgeoisie to do so must be exposed to the people. But at the same time the masses of people can sense that there is something rotten in Vietnam now, and the only way to make this clear without falling into the ruling class’s traps is to explain the nature and the roots of revisionism in Vietnam and the causes for the miscarriage of that revolution.

The national liberation struggle in Vietnam, as in Laos and Cambodia, demonstrated the power of the masses rising up in armed revolution. But Vietnam shows clearly and tragically that this is not enough. Unless that struggle is led by a political party armed and guided by a proletarian line, the revolution has no chance of carrying through to complete victory. And the party itself, no matter how monolithic its unity, or to what extent it may have been able to play a progressive role at a certain point, will stand not as the leader but rather the executioner of the revolution. It is a matter of life and death. It is a question of whether the heroic sacrifice and bloodshed by the people in their millions will bring emancipation or whether it will have to serve as the seeds of yet another major revolutionary struggle certain to come.

— Footnotes —

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² John McBeth, “A Battle for Loyalty in the Jungles,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 8, 1977, p. 19ff.

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⁴ Mao Tsetung, “The Tasks of the Chinese Communist Party in the Period of Resistance to Japan,” *Selected Works*, Vol. I, p. 273.

⁵ Yao Wen-yuan, “On the Social Basis of the Lin Piao Anti-Party Clique,” reprinted in *And Mao Makes 5*, R. Lotta, ed., Banner Press, 1978, p. 196ff.

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- ⁹ Ho Chi Minh, *loc. cit.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 251-2.
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- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 317.
- ¹³ Ho Chi Minh, *loc. cit.*, p. 252.
- ¹⁴ V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, p. 24.
- ¹⁵ Truong Chinh, *Forward Along the Path Charted by Karl Marx*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Hanoi, 1973, p. 93.
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- ¹⁸ *An Outline History of the Viet Nam Workers' Party*, FLP, Hanoi, 1971, p. 13.
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- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.
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- ²³ Frederick Engels, *Anti-Duhring*, FLP, Peking, 1976, p. 20.
- ²⁴ Lacouture, *op. cit.*, p. 134.
- ²⁵ *An Outline History of the Vietnam Workers' Party*, pp. 30-31.
- ²⁶ Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Articles and Speeches*, Jock Woodis, ed., International Publishers, p. 50.
- ²⁷ Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Writings*, p. 111.
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- ²⁹ Le Duan, *The Vietnamese Revolution: Fundamental Problems, Essential Tasks*, FLP, Hanoi, 1973, pp. 34-35.
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- ³¹ David Floyd, *Mao Against Khrushchev: A Short History of the Sino-Soviet Conflict*, Praeger, 1963, p. 284.
- ³² *The Origins and Development of the Differences Between the Leadership of the CPSU and Ourselves* (September 6, 1963), reprinted in *The Polemic on the General Line of the International Communist Movement*, (n.p., n.d.), pp. 105-6.

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- ⁴⁴ Zagoria, *op. cit.*, p. 107.
- ⁴⁵ Le Duan, "Hold High the Revolutionary Banner of Creative Marxism," *Selected Writings*, FLPH, Hanoi, 1977, p. 97.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-160. [Sic.]
- ⁴⁷ Nguyen Chi Thanh, "Who Will Win in Vietnam," quoted in Zagoria, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
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- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.
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- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.
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- ⁶³ *Ibid.*
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- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, March 19, 1968, p. 21.
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- ⁷⁸ Le Duan, "Speech at the Second National Congress of the Vietnam Federation of Trade Unions," February, 1961. Reprinted in *This Nation and Socialism Are One*, pp. 37-38. Our emphasis.
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- ⁸⁴ Le Duan, *The Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 139.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- ⁸⁶ Le Duan, "Political Report," p. 58. Our emphasis.
- ⁸⁷ Le Duan, *The Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 152. Emphasis in original.
- ⁸⁸ The Vietnamese consistently speak of "the period of transition to socialism" instead of socialism as a period of transition from capitalism to communism.
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