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Revolutionary witness
Ngô Van, Vietnam’s history of struggle against imperialism
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Retrieved on October 14 2021 from
http://chatquipeche.free.fr/Revolutionary_witness.html
Vietnam’s history of struggle against imperialism, ”The International”, n° 17, January 1996. Ngô Văn Xuyết was a Vietnamese libertarian communist.

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> could he tell me about his life… We have other great national heroes… but President Hô alone was able to complete the job… The people call him 'Father of the Nation-because he is the most loyal son of the Vietnamese fatherland.

In his testament the 'Father of the Nation', who died on 2 September 1969, expressed his wish that there should be no grand funeral rites:

> I ask that my body should be burned… My ashes divided into three parts, one sent to the north, one to the centre and one to the south. My compatriots in these areas should choose a hill to bury the urn. I wish for no tombstone nor bronze statue, but instead a simple shelter, large and shady, so that visitors can rest there. A plan should be made to plant trees around the hillside. Each of my visitors could plant a tree of remembrance… The care of the place could be entrusted to elderly people.

What a way for the elderly to end their days, caring for a hillside shrine!

In fact, after his death the Hanoi bureaucrats had Hô embalmed. The personality cult during his life was followed by the worship of his mummy on show in a mausoleum; Stalin did the same with Lenin's remains (one can imagine how sarcastically Lenin would have greeted such a proposal). In Moscow, now, people are saying it is time to end this form of fetishism. Will the same happen in Hanoi tomorrow? What is not in doubt is that one day, the oppressed and exploited masses will rise up and put an end to their suffering. That is our profound hope and conviction.

paternalist, authoritarian: it is conservative and degenerate, a complete stranger to any democratic instinct.

Russian aid has dried up; Chinese aid comes with punitive conditions; the bureaucracy is now appealing to foreign capitalist powers and an economic commission is discussing the 'free market economy'.

Whatever the problems which confront us, we know that what was called 'communism' in Vietnam, as in the USSR and China, was in fact a criminal and barren travesty, a kind of state capitalism, a politico economic monstrosity run for the benefit of a greedy, unscrupulous bureaucracy. This 'communism', in fact non-existent, used lying terms to disguise the bonds of its new form of slavery.

How could some historians apply the formulation 'national communism' to the unjust, unhappy regime of Hô chi Minh?

The Marxist utopia of a free, open, rational world order without classes and without capitalism, and therefore without exploitation and national antagonisms, has not been achieved anywhere in the twentieth century. Totalitarian, nationalist Stalinism, with its oppression, its lies and its assassinations, has presented a distorted picture of such a society.

Ho chi Minh, who always claimed allegiance to Marx and Lenin, did nothing but follow exactly the line of the Moscow bureaucracy as laid down by Stalin, its master‹down to the last wretched detail. So, in the 1940s, he called himself, and even signed documents as, 'Uncle Ho'‹a name with all the associations of a revered tutor in traditional Confucian society. When he gained power in Hanoi

At the age of 55, he proclaimed himself 'Father Ho'. In the hagiographical biography written by him but signed Tran dan Tien, An account of the active life of President Ho, we read:

> President Hô chi Minh does not want to say anything about his own life... A man like our president, so virtuous and modest, and so busy, how

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More recently, in October 1991, the novel The Sorrow of War by Bao Ninh was published; it evoked the terrible drama lived out by the 27th brigade from 1959 to 1975, until the capture of Saigon, which was witnessed by only ten out of the original 500 members of the brigade.

> Those who survived went on living, but their most ardent hope… was not realised… Look around you: isn't this post-war life mundane, coarse and violent? It seems to me that the masks of the past years have fallen, and everyone now reveals their true horrific faces. So much blood and bone lost, and for what?

The author does not condemn the war, without which 'there would have been no peace', but neither does he condemn the desertion of his anti-hero:

> I am not afraid of dying, but to be always killing, it's destroying what is human in us… How many bastards are sitting back making a mint out of this war, while the peasant sons have to harden their hearts and go, leaving behind old mothers with the sky as their curtain and the earth as their mat… Victory or defeat… that means nothing to me any more… I've already killed too much.

In November 1991 Bui Tin, editor of Nhan dan, organ of the party central committee, left the government while on official business in ~aris‹a sure sign of the political and economic crisis ravaging the country. He said:

Our present situation concerns every Vietnamese person… bureaucracy, irresponsibility, egoism, corruption, fraud, are allowed free rein under this arrogant regime of privilege. The Communist Party of Vietnam is still firmly rooted in Stalinism and Maoism, in a tendency which is feudal, peasant, idealist,

On 21 December 1986, the Nhan dan (The People), the Communist Party's daily paper, published a statement by Duong quang Dong, party member in the south since 1930:

> For eleven years now, the party has shown itself to be incapable of providing a single grain of rice, portion of meat or drop of brine; it has even been incapable of stabilising prices. The people are suffering too much… The best solution would be for the party to give them the freedom to produce, to live, to study.

On 27 October, 1988, Tran van Giau in Saigon wrote in the paper Tuoi tre (Young Age):

> How did we revolutionaries manage to create such an unprecedentedly bureaucratic state? The province of Thanh hoa itself contains more functionaries than the whole Indochinese colonial apparatus. How can the country countenance such a state? I am over 70, and I have never seen the peasants as poor as they are now: once the harvest is over, they've nothing left to eat. Why? Because they are forced to sustain a bureaucracy as disproportionate as it is inefficient.

In 1989, Le quang Dao, a member of the PCI central committee and president of the National Assembly, declared :

> Party dictatorship has taken the place of the dictatorship of the working class… the result is a totalitarial regime based on privilege… a regime based on social injustice which provokes revolt.

Ngo Van was born in 1913 into a peasant family living in a village near Saigon. He started work at the age of 14 and from 1932 was active in the revolutionary anti-colonial struggle in Vietnam. During the 1930s and 1940s he participated as a Trotskyist militant in workers' and peasants' demonstrations, strikes and protests, undergoing, as did thousands, torture and imprisonment at the hands of the French rulers.

The working class in Vietnam was small, but Trotskyist activists were influential in the important industries, and encountered the ruthless hostility not only of the colonial regime but of the Communist Party of Indochina (PCI) under the leadership of Hô chi Minh.

Forced into exile in Paris in 1948, Ngo Van spent many years researching the history of these years of struggle, told in full in his two books published in 1995: Revolutionaries They Could Not Break: the fight for the Fourth International in Vietnam (Index Books, London) and Vietnam 1920-45: révolution et contre-révolution sous la domination coloniale (L'Insomniaque Éditeur, Paris).

Ngo Van, now in his 80s, was able to attend the launch of the English book in London. He prepared a talk giving a background to the events he describes, which had unfortunately to be curtailed due to the limited time available. We are pleased to be able to print it now, in full.

Comrades and friends: I thank you with all my heart for coming to hear me today, and a particular thank you to the comrades from Workers Press and Revolutionary History, who have organised this meeting.

I presume that you already know something of the struggle of the Indochinese comrades from 1930 to 1945 from my book Revolutionaries They Could Not Break. For those who have not read the book yet, I would like to speak about the essential

elements of the history of this struggle, which took place over half a century ago in the Far East almost the other side of the world in a backward country very little known to the French, let alone other Europeans, a country which suffered almost a century of colonial imperialism.

Indochina in history

But first it is necessary to dwell briefly on the nature of Indochinese society and the history of colonial conquest. Before the conquest, the Indochinese kingdoms of Annam, Laos and Cambodia were agrarian societies of which the basic unit was the peasant family. It was essentially a subsistence economy, dominated by rice growing. Fishing, hunting and artisanry were all on a very small scale.

In this rural setting, the intelligentsia was considered superior to the other three classes the farmers, the artisans and the merchants. The labouring people stood outside any official classification. The intelligentsia was composed of those who could read and write Chinese characters, who knew the religious rituals, who had studied the Confucian classics canons of morality, political philosophy and ancient history.

From this class came the mandarins or administrators of the kingdom‹the bureaucracy of the feudal regime. Those who failed in a career as a mandarin became doctors and schoolteachers in the villages.

From this class came poets and writers who ensured the survival of traditional culture. But members of the intelligentsia were also in the leadership of peasant revolts against the throne, and at the heart of popular insurrections against colonial domination.

Until 1954 Vietnam was divided into three different countries: Tonkin in the north, Annam in the centre and Cochinchina in the south. In the sixteenth century the Viet

The working class today is even smaller, the new mandarins rule over producers who still do not enjoy collective ownership of the means of production, nor time for reflection, nor the possibility of making their own decisions, nor means of expression, nor the right to strike. A bureaucratic order reigns over social misery and inequality, with its military-police regime, its nomenklatura essentially motivated by careerism.

Ever since 1956, after Khrushchev's 'secret speech' on the crimes of Stalin, some poets and writers have dared to break the apparent consensus. In December of that year, Hô chi Minh issued a decree banning all opposition publications‹the penalty was indefinite imprisonment.

In November 1956, a serious peasant revolt ousted the bureaucrats in Nghe an, after agricultural reforms were arbitrarily decided. Fifteen thousand innocent people were executed, according to a report by the Ministry of Security in 1956, unearthed in 1961 in the Hanoi archives. In other words, an average of five executions in each of the 3,014 communes involved in the uprising. Estimates of the number shot put this at around 50,000. Many more peasants were thrown into prison or deported.

In 1975, after the unification of the country, agrarian reform in Cochinchina was no less disappointing. Demonstrations such as those by the peasants of the Mekong Delta and the Plaine des Joncs indicate the extent of injustice and oppression at this time.

A brutal collectivisation decimated livestock and in many places peasants themselves pulled their ploughs instead of buffalo. The hasty and equally brutal expropriation of commercial and industrial

The International No. 17 January 1996 enterprises, together with new laws on fishing, brought economic chaos and provoked the emigration of more than a million people. Social malaise grew to such an extent that internal party criticism burst out into the open.

USA. Without Russian and Chinese arms and advisers, Dien bien phu would have been inconceivable, as would the 'defeat' of the United States in the second stage.

Certainly, Hô chi Minh's party won the war, but did the Vietnamese people win anything more than slavery? In Indochina, the militants of the Fourth International fought to involve coolies, workers and poor peasants in political struggle, with the perspective that only a proletarian revolution can bring a true and lasting solution to the national and agrarian questions. They disappeared during the battle against colonial reconquest, but due chiefly to the methodical assassinations ordered by Hô chi Minh. He, as a good pupil of his Kremlin masters, could not tolerate their intransigent adherence to the class struggle, their refusal to unite with the bourgeoisie and the landlords, their internationalism as opposed to the nationalism of the Stalinists.

The small proletariat, with as yet scarcely any revolutionary consciousness, was not able to take the lead in the liberation movement. The Stalinist party came to power through the terrible suffering and sacrifice of millions of peasants, who were rewarded by their renewed enslavement to the nationalist bureaucracy, as a workforce necessary for the primitive accumulation of capital… for the sole profit of a new variety of money-grabbers.

'National independence' become dependence: the country, a satellite of the so-called Soviet empire, found itself caught up in the confrontation between the two great 'Party States', battling for power in southeast Asia. Its 'communist' army, revitalised by the Russians, drove out the 'communist' Pol Pot, protégé of the Chinese, and occupied Cambodia for a decade (1979-89).

The Vietnamese bureaucracy, this new ruling caste of the 'Socialist Republic of Vietnam', with its 'cultivated middle-class' background, master of a hierarchical one-party state, has done nothing but replace the bourgeoisie and the landowners in exploitation of the proletariat and the peasantry.

territory consisted of Tonkin (the present-day North Vietnam) and the northern part of Annam, down to Hue.

In the seventeenth century, the Viets began their advance on the south, destroying the kingdom of the Chams, between Hue and south Annam: then they occupied Cochinchina (the modern South Vietnam), where the Khmers lived. From this sprang the traditional enmity between the Khmers (Cambodians) and the Viets, encouraged by the colonial government, which pitted one against another. In the twentieth century it has been exacerbated by the extreme nationalism of Pol Pot and Hô chi Minh, and remains a potentially explosive source of conflict in the region. Nationalism is indeed the scourge of our times.

Each communal village was administered by a council of notables, and enjoyed considerable autonomy and independence from the central regime. The council was composed of a dozen members nominated by the intelligentsia, the rich and/or the "virtuous", and was led by the oldest and wealthiest in the village. The mayor was in charge of collecting taxes; other notables were responsible for the police, education, religion.

Traditionally, there existed a form of collective ownership. Paddy fields and other land was communally owned: the land was reassigned among villagers periodically and "fairly". A decree of 1897 alleviated the situation of the poor by forcing rich peasants to give three-tenths of their land to the commune.

The colonial administration failed to take account of the social character of this "collective" tradition which prevented any individual from falling into desperate economic straits. After the French took power, communal land was too often seized by the notables and the rich landowners. After the colonial takeover, only 2.5 per cent of the land in Cochinchina was still collectively owned, whereas before the French came "the land was owned entirely by the villages" (Jobbe Duval, La Commune Annamite, p. 42). During the colonial era the land was leased by process of law, and consequently inaccessible to the poor.

The French, however, did retain the commune as the basic administrative unit, together with the councils of notables.

Merchants and missionaries first from Portugal and Spain then from the Low Countries and from England had been arriving in Indochina since the sixteenth century. French missionaries installed themselves from the seventeenth century onwards. Evangelicism and mercantilism the cross and the counting house were the forerunners of colonial conquest.

Christianity threatened not only traditional religion, but also the Confucian social order on which rested the authority of the aristocracy and the monarchy. But the aristocracy tolerated the missionaries because they needed them as intermediaries in obtaining arms from the western powers.

During the seventeenth century, the Viet people suffered under the rival powers of north (the Trinh) and south (the Nguyen): the civil war lasted from 1627 to 1787. The wars of the rival lords hastened the country's ruin and brought untold misery to the population.

In 1772, the peasants of Tay son, a village in south Annam, overthrew their local lords: two of their leaders installed themselves as kings and founded the Tay son dynasty (1776-1801).

Vietnam under the French

At the end of the eighteenth century, the epoch of the French Revolution, one of the Nguyen aristocrats of the south succeeded in taking over the whole country, from the Chinese border to the tip of Camau. This was done with the help of French missionaries, merchants, and deserters from the French king's ships moored at Pondicherry in India.

In 1801 he made Hue his capital and proclaimed himself emperor Gia long, founding the Nguyen dynasty which lasted until the 1940s. Nationalists and historians of all kinds have glorified Gia long as the unifier of the "Annamite fatherland". In

Tao was conveniently forgetting that the division of land among the peasants was, according to PCI theory in 1930, a task which the bourgeois-democratic government had to accomplish before passing over to the socialist revolution. Instead, the Vietminh had returned to the days of the Thanh nien, of 'national revolution' (national unity for independence) before any agrarian reform.

Let us return to the Trotskyists, chief target of the Stalinists. In Saigon, on the evening of "3 September, Le van Vung, secretary of the Saigon-Cholon comittee of La Lutte, was murdered outside his house. Some days later, the teacher Nguyen thi Loi who, like van Vung, had been instrumental in reviving La Lutte after the Japanese surrender, was killed in Cholon.

The month of October saw the worst of Stalinist crimes, with the assassination of Trotskyists and sympathisers throughout Cochinchina. The lawyer Hinh thai Thong was surprised by the Vietminh as he chaired a meeting of delegates from neighbouring village action committees: they were all arrested and he was murdered. His body was to be discovered only in 1951, along with a hundred other corpses who had been tortured, at Quon long.

The Co giai phong, organ of the PCI central committee, urged the slaughter of Trotskyists in its edition of 23 October 1945, justifying it in these terms:

> At Nam bo, they [the Trotskyists] demand the arming of the people… and the completion of the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, with the aim of splitting the national front and provoking opposition from the landlords to the revolution.

And today?

The so-called 'victory of the heroic little people' in Vietnam was due to the Cold War between the Sino-Russian bloc and the

people's councils with a new hierarchy‹the military-police regime of the 'democratic republic'.

The Trotskyists called for the land to be given to the peasants and the factories to the workers‹in other words, the implementation of the 1930 programme of the PCI. In one province of Cochinchina, the peasants began taking over the land: the de facto Vietminh government in Saigon immediately forbade this and instituted severe penalties for any act of expropriation.

At Tra vinh, the peasants began to share out the land, the livestock and agricultural implements. To conciliate the landlords, the Vietminh stopped these actions and forced the peasants to hand back what they had taken. This made the Vietminh very unpopular among the poor peasants. In numerous provincial centres and villages, notably in north Annam and in Tonkin, people's committees ordered the distribution of the land and the confiscation of goods of the rich. In November 1946 a Vietminh government circular to the provincial committees decreed that 'no paddy fields or cultivated land must be shared out'. It re-established a pyramid hierarchy of government, whereby the executive committee of each region was to be responsible for the implementation of government orders and every component of the pyramid was to control the one immediately below it. This is what the Stalinists called 'democratic government'.

The Commissioner for the Interior, Nguyen van Tao, issued threats against Trotskyists who sided with the peasants and agricultural workers. He wrote:

> Those who urged the peasants to expropriate the landlords will be ruthlessly punished. The communist revolution, which will solve the agrarian problem, has not yet taken place. Ours is a democratic and bourgeois government, even though it is communists who are in

reality, his l9-year reign saw the imposition of forced labour and taxes on the population: many villagers had to give up their land.

From 1802 to 1883, Gia long and his successors put down more than 400 uprisings by peasants and ethnic minorities, of which the best known were those of Phan ba Van (1826-27) and Ta van Phung (1862-65).

In gratitude to the missionaries, Gia long gave them the freedom 'o propagate the Catholic religion. But his successors revoked this, promulgating anti-Christian laws which called it a perverse religion which: allowed for no rites for dead relatives, plucked the eyes from corpses to make a magic potion for hypnotising the people… The European priests, who are the most guilty, will be thrown into the sea with a stone around their necks… The Annamite priests will be tried to see if they will renounce their heresy. If they refuse, they will be marked on the face and exiled to the unhealthiest places in the empire.

Many French and Spanish missionaries were beheaded.

Napoleon III launched a 'Catholic crusade', under the pretext of defending the missionaries and protecting those who had converted to Christianity, to win the support of Catholics at home in France. In two decades, through gunboat diplomacy and a series of punitive treaties imposed on the Annamite monarchy, the French bourgeoisie consolidated its hold on Vietnam.

Marx, writing in the New York Daily Tribune of 8 August 1853 about British colonialism in India, said 'the profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarity of bourgeois civilisation is revealed when it ventures out of its native surroundings, where it takes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it shows itself in its true colours."

The capture of Saigon in 1859 was followed by the almexation of the whole of Cochinchina, which was completed in 1867.

The intelligentsia and the mandarins, threatened with the extinction of the regime of which they were the mainstay, joined with the peasants in a desperate struggle against the invader.

Bien hoa insurgents declared in December 1862:

> Your country belongs to the west, ours to the east. We are as different as the horse and the buffalo, in our language, our writing and our customs… You have ships and guns, no one can stop you… But we are bound in gratitude to our king… If you continue to bnng us death and destruction, the price will be chaos without end. But we are following Heaven's laws: Heaven will help us and our cause will triumph in the end… Therefore we pledge ourselves to unending and inexorable struggle.

The French Third Republic, proclaimed on 4 September 1870, pressed on with the conquest of Vietnam. Jules Ferry, president of the council, characterised its colonial policy in this way:

> Colonisation is the child of industrialisation. For the rich countries, where capital abounds and rapidly accumulates, where manufacturing enterprises are constantly growing… export is essential for general prosperity and potential of capital, and consequently the demand for labour is directly related to the extent of the foreign market.

After the occupation of Tonkin by the French, the royal court at Hue signed a treaty on 6 June 1884, accepting the French protectorate. In 1874, after the loss of the Cochinchinese provinces, the Annamite intelligentsia called on the people to 'chase out the Westerners and exterminate the practitioners of a perverse religion.' Thousands attacked Catholic villages. The movement was put down by the pro-French

and on the 25th they proclaimed in Saigon the establishment of the Vietminh government in the south, pre-empting the coming of the Indo-British troops.

'All the nationalist parties at this time were pro-Chinese or pro-japanese, and together with the politico-religious sects were preparing the armed struggle against colonial reconquest and for independence. The two Trotskyist groups were also preparing. The La Lutte group proposed to work with the Stalinists to form an armed united front, but the Ligue des Communistes Internationaliste (International League of Communists), the other group, organised a workers' militia with the perspective of fighting independently of the Vietminh, for national liberation and the emancipation of the proletariat and the poor peasants, under the red flag and with the anthem of the 'Internationale'.

For a year, from 1945 to December 1946, that is, up to the beginning of the Indochinese war, Hô chi Minh consolidated his hold on power. He did this through manoeuvring and negotiating with the Chinese, the French and the Americans, and through the physical elimination of all other nationalist tendencies.

Workers and peasants were also reacting to the vacuum of power in the country. Still outside the totalitarian control of the Vietminh, 30,000 miners in Hon Gay elected their own councils to control mineral production. They took control of all the public services in the area, the railways, the telegraph system, and applied the principal of equal wages for all workers, manual or professional. Illiteracy was tackled and attempts were made to begin a welfare system. This new order reigned from August to November, 1945, to the apparent indifference of the Japanese.

But this movement was isolated and soon government troops encircled the area. When the miners refused to submit to the requirements of 'national unity', three elected workers' leaders were arrested by the Vietminh, who then replaced the

After the Hitler-Stalin pact in August 1939, the PCI stopped collaborating with the French 'for the defence of Indochina' against Japan. In an abrupt about-turn, it launched a peasant insurrection in Cochinchina in November 1940‹ despite the repression, the party could still call on considerable forces in the countryside.

The uprising was quickly crushed, shelled and machine-gunned by Cambodian artillery. Thousands of villagers were massacred, 5,846 arrested (the official figure), 221 condemned to death (of whom 181 were actually executed), 216 sent to hard labour camps and a thousand to prison.

In July of this year Nguyen ai Quoc, the future Hô chi Minh, wrote in a report to the Comintern:

> As far as the Trotskyists are concerned, concessions are out of the question. We should do everything to unmask them as fascist agents. They must be politically exterminated.

This call for 'extermination' was to be answered, and between 1945 and 1951 PCI activists were to systematically assassinate any Trotskyists who fell into their hands.

In 1945, events proceeded rapidly. On 9 March, French rule, which had survived for 80 years against generations of conspiracies and peasant uprisings, was ended in one night by the Japanese army, who installed themselves as sole masters of Indochina under martial rule.

In July, as the defeat of Japan drew closer, Truman, Churchill and Stalin decided at Potsdam how the country would be occupied: by the Chinese army from the extreme north down to the 17th parallel, and by Indo-British troops in the south.

On 18 August, after the Japanese surrender, Hô chi Minh took advantage of the political vacuum. Under his leadership, the Vietminh‹a nationalist organisation led by the PCI‹and its guerrilla fighters took power in Hanoi. On the 23rd they captured Hue, before the arrival of the occupying Chinese army,

monarchy, and Christians avenged themselves by setting fire to the houses where non-Christians lived. In 1885, in response to a provocation, the Hue court launched a surprise attack against the French.

The king fled, and the mandarins and notables organised a rebellion which spread to the whole of Annam. To enforce 'pacification', the French brought up battalions of artillery, and the insurgents were faced with columns of soldiers under the command of the French. The rebellion was finally quashed in 1896, and the king deported to Algeria.

Thereafter the Hue court was to became the instrument of French domination‹but not always a docile one, as is shown by the deportation of two more kings to Île de la Réunion in 1909 and 1916.

French Indochina

From 1887 Indochina fell under the authority of a governor general based in Hanoi, who controlled administrative and military power in all five countries‹the kingdoms of Annam, Tonkin, Cambodia and Laos, which were protectorates, and the colony of Cochinchina. In the protectorates, the monarchy was under the control of the French presidents.

Cochinchina was directly administered by France through the governor of Cochinchina. A French administrator controlled every province, whereas in Annam and Tonkin, the mandarin in charge of a province was under the orders of a French resident. A poll tax was instituted, and salt, alcohol and opium monopolies were set up. The poll tax and salt tax, combined with the setting up of forced labour gangs to build the roads and canals, were the main sparks for the peasant revolts in 1908 and 1930.

Colonisation was to drag a country with a so-called 'Asiatic' mode of production out of its isolation, and impose a capital-

ist mode of production on it, transform it into a source of raw materials like coal, minerals, rubber, rice, cotton, to feed the industries in the metropolitan countries and to provide a market for exports manufactured in France. The colonisers found in Cochinchina a huge reservoir of cheap labour.

Exploitation of Indochina on this scale began around 1900. The first mineral industry started in 1889. Mines, the big conglomerates (dredging, public utilities, electricity, cement, distilleries), transport, all the new industries, gave rise to a pronounced social differentiation in a matter of a few decades.

The proletariat, born in conditions approaching slavery, was concentrated mainly in the coal mines of Tonkin, in the rubber plantations of Cochinchina and Cambodia, which belonged to the French conglomerates. In the towns, coolies‹ those who did hard, unskilled work‹and workers in native bourgeois enterprises were no less exploited than their counterparts in French and Chinese factories.

Traditionally, the homes of these coolies and workers were in the countryside. The peasantry constituted the majority of the population. The rich peasants were small proprietors who employed agricultural workers; the middle peasants cultivated their own paddy fields; the poor peasants possessed so little land they could not even feed their families, and had to sell their labour power, as did millions of landless peasants, the agricultural proletariat.

The poor peasants became farmers by renting land from landowners, who lent money at very high rates of interest. As well as paying rent for his paddy, the peasant had to work free for the proprietor for a certain number of days and take him presents on feast days. Always in debt, they were often reduced to the status of serfs, tied for life to the landowner. Those with no land, such as day workers and domestic servants, made up a dispersed agricultural proletariat, superexploited by the landowners and the rich peasants.

who had returned from France contacted the latter group and the Indochinese Left Opposition or Ta Doi Lap was launched in November 1931 in absolutely clandestine conditions.

The organisation was broken up in August 1932, with 65 arrests. The trial of 21 militants of the Left Opposition took place in Saigon on 1 May 1933, followed by that of 122 PCI militants from 3-7 May. Eight were condemned to death.

The United Front between the Stalinists and Trotskyists of 1933-37‹known as 'La Lutte' ('Struggle') was a last resort. Out of this came the splits in the Trotskyist organisation, at the time of the Laval-Stalin pact (1935), the Moscow trials (1936) and the Popular Front (1936).

The programme of the PCI from 1930 to 1935 was based on internationalism and the class struggle: it called for the overthrow of the imperialist colonial power. In 1935, the Laval-Stalin pact sealed the alliance between France and the USSR. The PCI followed the line of the French Communist Party (PCF), accepting the integrity of the French empire and choosing to 'defend France, which is threatened in Indochina' and calling for 'the defence of our country and our race'.

In 1936, the Stalinists defended the Popular Front, which upheld French imperialist rule in Indochina. The Trotskyists criticised this policy, and as a consequence won the confidence of the majority of workers in Saigon-Cholon. Their influence extended into the provincial centres.

The break-up of the united front, La Lutte, in 1937, was carried out by the PCF on orders from Moscow. The Trotskyists called for the building of a party of the Fourth International, which had been proclaimed by Trotsky in 1938.

War broke out on 3 September 1939, and wholesale arrests followed of all oppositionists‹Stalinists, Trotskyists, nationalists, members of politico-religious sects. They were sent in their thousands to the island prison of Poulo Condore or to the concentration camps.

The explosions of 1930

The National Party was annihilated after the failure of the Yen Bay insurrection on the night of 9-10 February, 1930, in Tonkin. Those who escaped took refuge in China. The party was not to reappear in Vietnam until 1945. The Trotskyist militant Ta thu Thau wrote of this attempted putsch:

> It was the work of the left nationalist faction, which attracted students influenced by the Chinese revolution, and supporters of Sunyatsenism (a synthesis of democracy, nationalism and socialism), a faction which opted for the violent overthrow of imperialism.

Yen Bay, he added, was 'a barely organised revolt, localised, lacking contact with the civilian population and ideologically unprepared.'

The Indochinese Communist Party entered on the scene on 1 May 1930. The Thanh nien had a training school for militants at Canton, in China, and since 1925 had put down roots in Vietnam, with a proto-Bolshevik nationalist ideology. Reorganised in February 1930 as the Indochinese Communist Party (PCI), it was able, only three months later, to launch the peasant movement of 1 May.

The Vietnamese Trotskyist Left Opposition was formed in France in 1930. After the February demonstration in Paris against the death sentences on the Yen Bay insurgents, many comrades were deported from France to Saigon. The stalinists met them with thousands of leaflets denouncing them as counter-revolutionaries.

After the failure of the 1930-31 peasant movement and the crushing of the peasant soviets of Nghe Tinh in northern Annam, an opposition faction was formed inside the PCI, in north Annam, and the Baclieu-Camau region of Cochinchina. Those

The landowning class was formed through the conquest - of Cochinchina by the French, and the confiscation of land abandoned by the old landowners who had been driven out by war. They increased their land through confiscations and seizures, by order or with the complicity of the French, as payment for their collaboration in the war of conquest and in the repression of rebels.

In Cochinchina in 1950, 2.5 per cent of the landholders controlled 45 per cent of the cultivated land. They increased their holdings through usury and plunder, with the tacit connivance of the colonial administration, to the detriment of the small peasants.

Landlords grew rich from the rent of land and from the rice paddies. They borrowed money from the Bank of Indochina and practised usury on a huge scale in the countryside. Through an intermediary, the landlord exploited the peasant through land rent‹ the basis of the feudal economy. But capitalist characteristics predominated over the remnants of feudalism, and finance capital held sway. It was not, as the Stalinists characterised it, a 'semi-feudal economy'.

The native bourgeoisie came out of the landed class. Most of them were also landlords. This section arose suddenly, artificially, and never succeeded in finding a place in the capitalist colonial system. Industrial development was barred to them to prevent competition with metropolitan industries, so they had to remain content with involvement in industries connected with agriculture (cloth, soap making, dehusking rice, and so on). They hardly formed part of the colonial regime, since the French capitalists had found in the Chinese more effective allies.

In 1925, they formed the Constitutionalist Party, demanding a constitution which would give them access to power. The colonial leaders agreed that they should be elected to consultative assemblies, such as colonial, municipal and provincial councils.

Both the indigenous bourgeoisie and the landlords owed their entire existence to imperialism. They always took the side of the colonial power against any revolutionary movement, always favouring a Franco-Vietnamese collaboration.

Intermediate layers grew up among the big social classes: artisans, small traders, teachers, intellectuals, all constituted the petty bourgeoisie.

The intelligentsia, if one could give that title to the group of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois intellectuals, were faced with an unstable social situation that offered them no prospects. Colonial society consigned them to subordinate roles in every sphere. From the 1920s, this layer was the revolutionary contingent which took action against the colonial regime, a military and police dictatorship ever since its establishment.

Struggle against imperialism

We have already mentioned the two bloody rebellions by monarchists against the French occupation, that of the intellectuals from 1860-74 and of the mandarins from 1885-1896. Both were decisively crushed and, from 1897 onwards, the French enjoyed supreme power.

From 1900, intellectuals formed two different tendencies reflecting the aspirations of an indigenous bourgeoisie striving for modernisation. The first, in Annam, was led by the intellectual Phan chau Trinh. It was republican and democratic, demanding administrative reforms and modern training for industry from the protectorate‹to no avail. The second, epitomised by the intellectual Phan boi Chau, was monarchist, looking simultaneously towards education and a war of liberation, and seeking the support of Japan.

These reformers were decimated in 1908 during serious peasant disturbances in Annam against the poll tax and forced labour. Many were beheaded or deported to Poulo Condore.

The partisans were utterly crushed in their terrorist attempts in 1913, as well as in their military campaigns of 1914-16, during the first world war.

In the 1920s we see the birth of a new nationalism, drawing in the young, French-educated intelligentsia. Four nationalist revolutionary groups sprang up between 1925 and 1929: the Tan Viet (New Vietnamese Revolutionary Party, 1925-29); the Hoi kin Nguyen an Ninh (Nguyen an Ninh Secret Society, 1928-29); the Viet nam quoc dan dang (VNQDD, National Party of Vietnam, 1927-30); and the Thanh nien (Association of Young Revolutionary Comrades, 19251930, which was to become the Indochinese Communist Party).

Faced with a colonial regime which would concede not even the most elementary democratic rights (freedom of the press, of communication, of association, of meeting, of travel…), a regime which felt itself to be permanently under threat, these groups imposed on themselves an iron discipline. On pain of death, members were obliged to keep totally secret the affairs of their party and not speak of them even to relatives, friends and acquaintances. It was a dark, silent world. Their common aim was to 'make revolution' through an armed insurrection, 'to free our country from the yoke of imperialism'.

For the Tan Viet, the final objective was the establishment of a socialist republic. The Nguyen an Ninh Secret Society would achieve, they said, some kind of agrarian socialism. The National Party of Vietnam (homologous with the Kuomintang) wanted a democratic republic. None of these three sought foreign help. The Thanh nien, created on the initiative of the Third International in 1925, had the perspective of founding a socialist republic in the image of the USSR. All drew members from the cultured middle classes. Both the Tan Viet and the Secret Society were destroyed by the repression of 1929.