

A hundred year war

Ngô Văn

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Greetings, dear friends, and many thanks to Jean-Jacques Marie¹ for having invited me to address this meeting. I will speak of the complicated and little-known period of Vietnamese history that preceded the so-called Indochina and Vietnam Wars.²

The two works on Vietnam that I have published were basically intended to recall the forgotten struggle of a generation of revolutionaries who fought against colonial imperialism, not only for national independence, but also for a radical transformation of all of society.

The first book, *Việt Nam 1920–1945, révolution et contre-révolution sous la domination coloniale* [Vietnam 1920–1945: Revolution and Counterrevolution under Colonial Rule (1997)], constitutes an attempt to chronicle the workers' and peasants' struggles against the regime, as well as to present the critical history of the Indochinese Communist Party and its metamorphosis into the Party-State that was responsible for the features of contemporary Vietnam, and finally, and most importantly, to recount the history of the Indochinese Communist Left Opposition, from its birth in 1930 to its reorganization as a section of the Fourth International in 1938, and the subsequent near-total extermination of its combatants between 1945 and 1950. The second book addresses, from the angle of a more direct eyewitness testimony, particular aspects of the struggle of this opposition. Before proceeding to the main theme, I would like to mention several facts. During the French colonial period, Indochina was composed of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The colonialists divided Vietnam into three regions: Tonkin in the north, Annam in the center, and Cochin China in the south. Tonkin and Annam were protectorates and Cochin China was a colony. While the people of Tonkin and Annam—said to be under “French protection” administered by the Mandarins of the Court at Hue,³—were the subjects of a barbarous feudal regime (legal punishments included whipping, garroting, slow death....), the Cochin Chinese, who were called “French subjects,” were under the direct administration of the French, subject to a modified form of the French Penal Code, which was no less arbitrary.

¹ The Director of CERMTRI (The Leon Trotsky Center for Studies, Research and Publications).

² The resistance movement against French colonialism that began in 1946 and ended in 1954 with the defeat of the French forces at Dien Bien Phu is known as the Indochina War. The resistance movement against American intervention that began in the 1960s and ended in 1975 is known as the Vietnam War.

³ Hue was the capital of the former Vietnamese State in the 19th century.

The French became aware of the problem of Indochina with the reconquest in 1945 and the first Indochina War, which ended at Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Conference in 1954, after 95 years of French colonial rule. Later, there was another wake-up call with the intervention of the United States in Vietnam. The broad outlines of this history are known, but what took place before 1945 is ordinarily not so well known.

Jules Ferry, the spokesman for the French bourgeoisie of the Third Republic, declared before the National Assembly in 1884: "It is the duty of the superior races to civilize the inferior races...."

Later, in elaborating on his declarations at the Assembly session of July 29, 1885, Jules Ferry wrote:

"Colonization is the offspring of industrial policy.... Exports comprise an essential factor of public prosperity, and the extent of the employment of capital, as well as the demand for labor, is measured in relation to the expansion of the foreign market."

The conquest of Indochina and its political subjugation therefore led to its conversion into a land for extracting profits, and to the country's transformation into a closed market for the products of French industry, to serve as a source of raw materials (coal, minerals, rubber, rice, cotton....), and for the exploitation of cheap labor power (semi-slavery in the mines, rubber plantations, factories....).

It can be said without any exaggeration that the colonial war actually began at the moment when the first French troops set foot in Indochina in 1859 (the conquest of Saigon). Once the colonial power was established in the country it conducted a permanent war against the peasant and working class population that was in a state of latent or open revolt; it was either dormant or insurrectionary. This rebel movement was at first organized under the leadership of lawyers, religious leaders, and secret societies. In the 1920s modern nationalist groups arose that subsequently assumed leadership over these movements.

In 1923, in Cochin China, Nguyen An Ninh⁴ published *La Cloche Fêlée*,⁵ a newspaper that denounced the irreverence of the colonial power. He encouraged young people to go to France in order to expand their horizons because, in his opinion, the oppression of Vietnam came from France, but so, too, did the spirit of liberation. In 1926, Saigon experienced its first spring of revolt. At a rally held by Nguyen An Ninh, the humble folk of Saigon attended a massive demonstration against the colonial power and demanded democratic freedoms. At the funeral procession of the old revolutionary Phan Chau Trinh, the population of the entire country assembled in a gigantic demonstration against its French masters. Heeding the call of Nguyen An Ninh, many young people emigrated to France. After their arrival in France, the French Communist Party sent a

⁴ An independent nationalist leader and a representative of the extreme left of the independence movement. Nguyen An Ninh studied law in Paris, where he first joined the nationalist movement. He returned to Vietnam in 1923 and founded the nationalist newspaper, *La Cloche Fêlée*, which, among other things, published *The Communist Manifesto* in Vietnam for the first time; in the 1930s he played a leading role in the Indochinese Congress movement and in *La Lutte*.

⁵ "The Cracked Bell," a title that Nguyen An Ninh took from Baudelaire's poem of the same name (from *The Flowers of Evil*).

large number of them to Moscow for training as professional revolutionaries. Some of the other emigrants to France would not go to Moscow because they did not trust the USSR, which was already under the boot of Stalin in 1926, and they joined the Trotskyist Left Opposition in France. In 1923 the émigré Nguyen Ai Quoc⁶ (who would later assume the name Ho Chi Minh) was sent to Moscow by the French Communist Party, which he joined after the Tours Congress of 1920. In 1925, implementing directives from Moscow and the Third International, he founded the “Thanh Nien Cach Mang Dong Chi Hoi” (The Association of Young Revolutionary Comrades or Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League) in Canton, based on groups of rebels from Annam who had emigrated to China. After several months of training, these professional revolutionaries returned to Vietnam. Beginning in 1925–1926, the Thanh Nien rapidly spread from northern to southern Vietnam, mainly among the peasantry. In 1927, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party was secretly founded in Hanoi (VNQDD, “Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang”), whose declared goal was to expel the French from Indochina and to establish a bourgeois-democratic republic. Its members preached the tactics of conspiracy, military coup and terrorism. In February 1930 the Vietnamese Nationalist Party supported the insurrection of the native troops at the Yen Bay garrison⁷ (in northern Vietnam). The insurrection was drowned in blood and the Vietnamese Nationalist Party was destroyed.

The proto-Bolshevik nationalist group, Thanh Nien, founded by Nguyen Ai Quoc (the future Ho Chi Minh) in Canton, was reorganized as the Indochinese Communist Party in February 1930.

Beginning on May 1, 1930, its militants organized marches of poor peasants to the colonial administrative offices to demand a reduction in taxes and a postponement of the date for paying them, since May 1st was the date tax payments were due. The movement was most active in Cochinchina and Annam. The colonial authorities responded by opening fire on these peaceful demonstrations. The Party rapidly reoriented the movement based on economic demands towards an insurrection to overthrow colonial imperialism, seize power and establish a soviet regime. This corresponded with the policy known as the “third period” that was advocated by Moscow at that time. In northern Annam, peasant soviets were formed in Nghệ Tĩnh between September 1930 and January 1931. In central Annam, guerrilla units attacked military bases. In the south, the nascent peasant revolt executed high level police officials. This peasant movement was defeated in a bloody wave of repression. Thousands of peasants were massacred, imprisoned, or sent to forced labor camps. The Communist Party was almost annihilated. After the defeat of the peasant movement, two communist left opposition groups were formed within the party, one in northern Annam and the other in Cochinchina. They criticized the party’s policy that was determined for the most part by professional revolutionaries “sent by Moscow,” who never consulted the rank and file, which was only supposed to execute their orders. The opposition

⁶ “Nguyen the Patriot,” the name adopted by Ho before he finally became known as Ho Chi Minh (“the bringer of light”).

⁷ The insurrection of Yen Bay began as a mutiny of the Annamese troops posted on the Chinese border, who massacred their officers and took control of the garrison for one night, but the other garrisons either failed to join the revolt or were rapidly defeated. The village of Co Am revolted a few days later, and was crushed by a merciless campaign of aerial bombardment. The harsh repression inflicted by the French authorities in the wake of the uprising put an end to the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (Nationalist Party) as a political force. The massacre of Yen Bay was a milestone in the formation of the political thought of the Vietnamese Trotskyists.

group in Cochinchina thought that the Indochinese Communist Party, by dedicating most of its efforts to rural areas, had disregarded the urban proletariat of the industrial centers that was theoretically the only force capable of becoming the vanguard of the revolution, because, as young and as weak as it may have been, it had within its hands the nerve centers of the system of economic exploitation and colonial rule.⁸ This group was active among the coolies⁹ and the workers of Saigon and formed the underground organization, “Thang Muoi” (October), led by Ho Huu Tuong and Dao Hung Long. They published a theoretical journal of the same name (eight issues between August 1931 and March 1932). Ta Thu Thau, who had been expelled from France for having participated in a demonstration on the Champs-Élysées against the judicial executions of the insurrectionaries of Yen Bay, joined with other militants who were disoriented by the fiasco of the Communist Party of Indochina. This group published the insurrectionary bulletin, *Cong San* (Communism). In November 1931, these two groups combined to form the “Ta doi lap” (Left Opposition). They continued to publish *Thang Muoi* (October) as their theoretical organ and, under the imprint of “Ta doi lap tung thu” (Left Opposition Publishers), they distributed Vietnamese translations of the classics of Marxism (*The Communist Manifesto*, Bukharin’s *The ABC of Communism*, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* by Frederick Engels ... about fifty titles in all). This was truly a colossal amount of work for such a small group that operated in strict secrecy. This movement was soon destroyed by colonial repression: the political police tracked down the “printers.” In August 1932, 65 of the group’s militants and sympathizers were put behind bars, about thirty of them in Saigon.

Now that I have sketched the historical background, you will forgive me if, for the purpose of providing exact testimony, I use the first person in my narrative, as I did in my memoir, *Au pays de la Cloche Fêlée*.¹⁰

I was fourteen years old when I left home to go to work in the city of Saigon at a French metal-working firm, and I began to pay closer attention to the activities of the revolutionary movements. In 1930, I began to go to the municipal library of Saigon after work to read Marx, signing the books out under a false name, of course. I tried to translate *The Communist Manifesto* into Vietnamese. A friend of mine from work was acquainted with a newspaper editor, who turned out to be Ho Huu Tuong, whom I have already mentioned, and I talked to him about my attempt to translate the *Manifesto*. He could see how eager I was for action and, initiating me into the ways of the underground organization, he introduced me to Dao Hung Long, whom I have also mentioned. I thus made contact with the Trotskyist Opposition group of Cochinchina led by Ho Huu Tuong. At the metal-working firm where I worked I tried to discreetly organize

⁸ “The group rallied around the theses of the Left Opposition: the Moscow leadership has led everyone to disaster; it led to the crushing of the workers of Shanghai ... [and then] to the putsch and massacre of the workers of Canton in December, and the putsch of Nghê Tinh was nothing but the continuation of those disasters.” From the article by Ngo Van, “The Movement of the Fourth International in Indochina, 1930–1939.”

⁹ The semi-proletarians of the rubber plantations.

¹⁰ “In the Country of the Cracked Bell.” An English translation of this book—as well as other texts by Ngo Van—is available online (as of June 2015) at the Bureau of Public Secrets website, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/vietnam/index.htm>, under the title, *In the Crossfire: Adventures of a Vietnamese Revolutionary*. *In the Crossfire* contains passages that are identical to some passages in the above text, indicating that Ngo Van may have included excerpts from his books in his presentation [translator’s note].

most of the coolies and the two truck drivers in an association (since the words “cong hoi”—trade union—were impossible to use in the atmosphere of unbridled repression), whose aim was to not only provide mutual aid in case of unforeseen misfortunes, death and sickness, but also to sustain a climate of fraternity among slaves. There were about thirty of us who came to meetings, after taking certain precautions, once at a house of one of the members in the suburbs, another time in the house of another member in the city, under the pretext of celebrating a wedding anniversary, or simply going to a party, since meetings of more than 19 persons were forbidden without prior authorization. One morning when the factory opened, the coolies refused to enter their workshops, and remained on the street. It was the first spontaneous strike by the lowest-paid workers of the firm. They demanded a wage increase and denounced the beatings and abuse they suffered in the factory. The slave drivers did not give in right away, but in the next paycheck the lowest wages were slightly increased.

The Trotskyist oppositionist movement was broken up by the French political police in August 1932.

The conviction of 21 militants of the Trotskyist Left Opposition on May 1, 1933, followed by the conviction of 121 militants of the Communist Party on May 3, practically signaled the end of the underground movement. Most of the militants were imprisoned or deported to the forced labor camps.

1933: the most incredible moment in history, when a united front between Stalinists and Trotskyists was formed, at a time when, all over the world, Stalinists were calling for the political and physical elimination of Trotskyists, such as took place first in the Soviet Union, and then in Spain. This front was formed to run an electoral slate in the municipal elections in Saigon, in April 1933, and was inspired by Nguyen An Ninh.

It was his charisma and his influence that allowed the two communist tendencies (Stalinists and Trotskyists, who viewed him as their progenitor) to consent to the formation of a united front around the newspaper *La Lutte* (The Struggle) in 1933. Thus, the two tendencies agreed to disseminate Marxist ideas and to abstain from mutual criticism, for the purpose of waging a joint struggle against the colonial power within a legal framework. And so it was that from 1933 to 1937 they participated in a common cause, an event that stands out as a unique phenomenon in the history of the communist movement, but which can be easily understood, from a certain point of view, since, under the colonial regime, Indochina was a veritable prison and it was only natural that the prisoners should unite against their guards. On May 2, 1935, a mortal blow was delivered to the world of those who refused to submit to the imperialist order: Stalin signed the “Franco-Soviet Mutual Assistance Treaty” with Laval and officially sanctioned the growth of French military power. The French Communist Party submissively endeavored to extinguish all anti-militarist sentiment and to bolster the moral force of the imperial tricolor. The Indochinese Communist Party gradually came to support this policy, despite the inevitable internal resistance. *La Lutte*—the newspaper based on the collaboration of Stalinists and Trotskyists—remained silent concerning this turn of events. The new line imposed on the Indochinese Communist Party made

radical critique an urgent necessity. The Trotskyists working under legal conditions were handcuffed by their agreement to abide by the united front with the Stalinists in the *La Lutte* group. This is why, in opposition to this surrender to Stalinist nationalism, along with Lu Sanh Hanh, a dissident who was formerly a member of the Communist Party, Ho Huu Tuong introduced me to another comrade who had just been released from prison, Trinh Van Lau, and we decided to form the League of Internationalist Communists for the Construction of the Fourth International. We feared that the victory of nationalism over colonial imperialism in Vietnam would only mean the rise to power of a native bourgeoisie and that the desperate condition of the exploited would remain unchanged.

At night, with a young typographer, I worked on our modest little improvised printing press. I learned the printing trade and we successfully published a theoretical pamphlet, *Cach mang thuong truc* (Permanent Revolution), which was disseminated in secret. Towards the end of 1935 our group published the polemical bulletin, *Tien Dao* (The Vanguard). This bulletin recapitulated the previous opposition critiques, while also adding that the communist parties must not allow themselves to be reduced to playing the role of auxiliaries of Russian diplomacy, and that if an imperialist war were to break out, it would be our duty to transform it into a civil war, and that the only way to defend the USSR is the revolutionary action of the proletariat. The first practical action of our group was to engage in support for striking horse-drawn carriage drivers. These cabdrivers had become very agitated over new proposed regulations whose purpose was to eliminate them for the benefit of the French Streetcar Company. On December 25, 1935, they staged a strike that was observed by almost all the cabdrivers. On the following day they attended a demonstration in the central market square of Saigon and they called upon the recently-elected Stalinist and Trotskyist municipal councilors to help them. The repression that was then unleashed was extremely violent. The political police raided the offices of the newspaper, *La Lutte*, and arrested all of its editors, as well as Ta Thu Thau, who was recently elected to the Municipal Council, for obstructing the freedom to work. On several occasions our press was shut down.

Then came June 1936. With the inauguration of the Popular Front government led by Leon Blum and supported by the Communist Party, the workers began to go on strike and to occupy the factories all over France. Had the long-awaited moment finally arrived—for us, too, for the colonial slaves? Our Internationalist League resolved to call upon our brothers and sisters to take that first step to escape from their hell.

At the very moment we went into action our core group fell into the hands of the political police, on Wednesday, June 10, 1936. Our arrests, however, could not prevent the distribution in Saigon, on the night of June 11, of our flyer calling for the formation of action committees and for the general strike. Encouraged by the French strike movement and factory occupations, the workers of Indochina rose up in revolt to demand from the employers the right to have Sundays off, the eight-hour day, and the right to form trade unions. Strikes broke out all over the country, the most important of which paralyzed the arsenal and the railroads. A derisory Labor Code was enacted, but neither the right to form trade unions nor the right to strike was recognized. The program of the French Popular Front included a provision for appointing a parliamentary commission of inquiry concerning the aspirations of the colonized peoples. Ta Thu Thau and *La Lutte* called for the formation of action committees and the selection of delegates to an Indochinese

Congress conceived as the basic framework of an Indochinese popular front. The campaign for this Congress was launched and thousands upon thousands of flyers were distributed. Action committees spread like wildfire. In the region of Saigon-Cholon, committees were formed in the French Streetcar Company, the cigarette factory, the distilleries of Binh Tay, the oil storage depots at Nha Be, the railroads, the print shops, and among the cabdrivers. Popular enthusiasm surged like an indomitable tidal wave. The colonial administrators were terrified and notified Paris; on September 8, the Minister for Colonial Affairs, Moutet, prohibited "the meeting scheduled to be held in Saigon by a Congress of several thousand individuals, in order to prevent possible disturbances." A wave of arrests followed. Thus, Nguyen An Ninh, Ta Thu Thau and Nguyen Van Tao joined us at the Central Police Department. They were put behind bars, and the Indochinese Congress movement was decapitated. The Governor of Cochin China issued a decree ordering the dissolution of the action committees. At this time, we were joined in prison by the 17 peasants who comprised the action committee of Ben Luc. It was during this enforced get-together of Stalinists and Trotskyists in jail that we became aware of the Moscow Trials. More than ever before, the Trotskyist-Stalinist united front in *La Lutte* struck us as a real paradox. The Russian Trotskyists were being treated like venomous serpents in Moscow, they were being imprisoned, deported, massacred: how much longer would the Trotskyists of Indochina be able to avoid condemning Stalin and his local supporters?

While Ta Thu Thau and his circle continued to maintain a united core group within *La Lutte*, which barely held together in view of the circumstances, we were informed in March 1937 that, breaking with his enforced silence, our comrade who was still at large, Ho Huu Tuong, had once again begun to publish *Le Militant*, "organ of proletarian defense and Marxist combat," in the pages of which he had printed the text of *Lenin's Testament*, with its warnings against Stalin's brutality and deceitfulness.

One Sunday morning, while I was still in jail, I was very moved to meet Dao Hung Long, my old friend, who had dropped out of sight in 1932. He had been sentenced to one year of forced labor and sent to work on the road projects in Chau Doc. There, he persuaded the common criminals to refuse to do any heavy work, and then to go on a hunger strike. He told me that he was arrested at an important secret meeting organized by the Trotskyists on the night of May 29, 1937. For the first time, workers delegates from approximately forty factories and workshops in the Saigon-Cholon area (from the arsenal, the artillery works, the railroads, the streetcar company, forges, the Workshops and Construction Company of Indochina—FACI—the East Asian Post Office, the rubber industry, the water and electric power company, the Portail, Ardin and Union printing plants, the three big horse-drawn carriage depots of the city, the Indochina Distilleries, and the porters who carried the bags of rice at the Chinese mills, the Far East Mills, in Cholon....) met to form the Workers Trade Union Federation. Along with about sixty workers who were present, Dao Hung Long was arrested right in the middle of the meeting, in a violent raid by the political police. More than ever before, the Trotskyists had asserted their presence in the workers movement. The political police were therefore quite concerned. One of its reports mentioned that:

"The influence of the revolutionary agitators who are advocates of the Fourth International continues to gain ground in Cochin China, principally among the working class milieus of the Saigon-Cholon region. The working class element is more attracted to the Trotskyist party than it is to the Indochinese Communist Party."

In May 1937, at the orders of Moscow, Gitton, from the Colonial Bureau of the French Communist Party, ordered the Vietnamese Stalinists to break with the Trotskyists. The Stalinists resigned from the *La Lutte* group, and founded a new newspaper, *L'Avant-garde*, in which they characterized the Trotskyists, their erstwhile allies, as “the twin brothers of fascism.” After I was released from my first stay in prison, in June 1937, along with Dao Hung Long, I published a pamphlet in Vietnamese denouncing the Moscow Trials, which was confiscated almost as soon as it came off the press. In 1938–1939, the Indochinese Communist Party rallied around the tricolor. It supported the policy of the colonial government for the defense of Indochina against the Japanese threat, going so far as to advocate the approval of special state credits and even the supplemental recruitment of regiments of native troops. The Communist Party entered into alliance with the constitutionalist bourgeoisie in the colonial elections of April 1939 and was defeated. The Trotskyist Fourth International candidates led by Ta Thu Thau, on the other hand, who opposed the new credits and of the recruitment of regiments of native troops, won three seats. (This victory must be understood in the context of the fact that the election was based on a system of suffrage constrained by educational and economic qualifications, thus favoring the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, who were nonetheless opposed to the policy of national defense, which would imply an increase in taxes and tariffs.)

On May 20, 1939, in a telegram to the Minister of Colonial Affairs, Governor General Brévié praised the position of the Indochinese Stalinists:

“While the Stalinist communists understand, like Nguyen Van Tao, that the interests of the Annamese masses bring them closer to France, the Trotskyists, under the leadership of Ta Thu Thau, are not afraid to encourage the natives to revolt, so that they can take advantage of the opportunity to carry out a war for total liberation.”

After the defeat of the Communist Party in the elections and the success of the Trotskyists, Ho Chi Minh, who was still in China, in Guilin, sent his comrades in Hanoi the order to “politically” eliminate the Trotskyists. (This order would eventually be carried out. His supporters massacred the Trotskyists as soon as Ho Chi Minh took power in 1945.)

In September 1939, the second world butchery commenced. In Indochina, a generalized persecution ensued, and all political suspects, practically without exception, were sent to forced labor camps or to jail.

1939–1940: with the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the Indochinese Communist Party made a sudden change of course, once again declaring that French imperialism was the enemy: it no longer supported the colonial government against Japan (which occupied Indochina in 1940, allowing the French administration to continue to exist under its control until March 9, 1945). This is why, after the declaration of war between France and Germany, the Communist Party in Cochinchina, which, although it was severely weakened, nonetheless retained a significant rural base, unleashed a peasant insurrection for the seizure of power in November 1940. This zigzag strategy of sudden policy reversals led to tragic consequences. The insurrection was drowned in blood. Thousands were murdered and imprisoned, and hundreds sentenced to death. The period between 1940 and 1945 was characterized by a complete absence of opposition to the French administration, under the boot of the Japanese occupation. All the subversives were in prisons or forced labor camps.

1941: In order to reconstitute the forces of the Indochinese Communist Party, which had been decimated by the French repression of 1939–1940, Nguyen Ai Quoc, now known as Ho Chi Minh,

abandoned the communist label and created the Viet Minh (an abbreviation of “Viet Nam doc lap dong minh hoi”—Vietnam Independence League), whose immediate objective was, and I quote:

“To expel the French and Japanese fascists and to establish the complete independence of Vietnam, in alliance with the democracies fighting against fascism and aggression.”

The class struggle and the agrarian revolution were excluded from the program of the Viet Minh, since it must not alienate the bourgeoisie and the rural landowners with whom it wanted to make an alliance.

The Viet Minh set about organizing an underground network in northern Tonkin, and in November 1941 it organized its first guerrilla group, the forerunner of the future “Liberation Army.” The Viet Minh was actually a disguised version of the Indochinese Communist Party. In 1944 Ho Chi Minh requested aid from the famous American secret service, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), which sent him weapons and advisors. On August 15, 1945, Japan surrendered. The Allies decided that Vietnam north of the 16th Parallel would be occupied by Chinese troops under Chiang Kai-Shek,¹¹ and Vietnam south of the 16th Parallel would be occupied by British troops. Before the arrival of the occupation troops, taking advantage of the political vacuum, and in the face of the indifference of the defeated Japanese, Ho Chi Minh seized power in Hanoi, while his supporters seized power in the south. In September 1945, in Saigon, on the day after a major Stalinist show of force, we distributed a flyer at the central market square, signed by the League of Internationalist Communists, which called upon the people to take up arms, organize people’s committees, form people’s militias.... The people tried to obtain weapons. In Saigon, a large number of people’s committees (reminiscent of the 1936 action committees) arose spontaneously as institutions of local government. The workers of the various districts of Saigon had already elected their committees in August. Embryonic forms of people’s councils emerged everywhere; the formation of councils seemed to possess an irresistible dynamic. The League of Internationalist Communists did everything it could to coordinate this movement. In a working class neighborhood in Saigon it set up an office where the elected delegates of these councils could meet under the protection of armed workers. These delegates disseminated a declaration in which they proclaimed their independence from the Stalinist de facto government as well as their resolute condemnation of any infringement of the autonomy of the decisions of the workers and the peasants.¹² The Stalinist government sent in the police and imprisoned all the delegates, after trying them in a so-called people’s court. The British occupation forces re-armed the French, who promptly set about reconquering southern Vietnam. It was at this time that the Saigon insurrection broke out, on September 23, 1945. That night, the workers in the maintenance and repair workshops of the streetcar company decided, completely autonomously, to participate in the insurrection against the return of the French. In conformance with the internationalist spirit of the League, they unequivocally supported the League’s appeals for the arming of the people, broke off relations with the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor—rechristened as the “Workers of the National Army”—and constituted a “workers militia” (a name that was inspired by the Spanish Civil War). We numbered sixty combatants, organized in groups of eleven, each of which was under the responsibility of a comrade we elected ourselves. The workers militia served in

¹¹ Chiang Kai-Shek (1887–1975): military leader of the Kuomintang during the Chinese Revolution of 1925–1927, and a member of its right wing. Until April 1927, when he carried out a bloody massacre of the communists and trade unionists of Shanghai, the Stalinists considered him to be a great revolutionary. He ruled China until he was defeated by the Chinese Communist Party in 1949.

¹² This declaration is reproduced in full in *Some Stages of the Revolution in Southern Vietnam*, p. 85.

the center of the front line during the siege of Saigon, which had been occupied by British and French troops. It therefore participated in the combat against the colonial forces while trying at the same time to create a revolutionary organization that was not beholden to strategies imposed from above. All the armed forces that were opposed to the return of the French in the south—the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects, the various armed groups, including the Trotskyist groups that had fought the Anglo-French colonial troops—all of them were later destroyed, physically eliminated by the Viet Minh. The Viet Minh started with the assassination of Trotskyists and then proceeded to deal likewise with the leaders of the other organizations, in order to establish its unrivaled power in the leadership of the resistance. In northern Vietnam Ho Chi Minh had concluded several agreements with the Chinese occupation troops so that he could retain power until the arrival of the French expeditionary force which, once the Chinese had withdrawn, then set out to reconquer the country in December 1946. As was the case in the south, Ho Chi Minh was intent upon exterminating the Trotskyists from the very moment he took power and, after the withdrawal of the Chinese troops, he destroyed all the other national liberation movements.

At this point, I would like to recall a few of the little-known high points of this real class struggle within the struggle for independence.

When Ho Chi Minh seized power in northern Vietnam, in August 1945, the 30,000 coal miners of the Hon Gai-Cam Pha district, riding the wave of enthusiasm unleashed by the liberation, thought that they were free to take their fate into their own hands. They elected councils to administer the mines, and to manage the district's public services, its railroads, and its telegraph service, and applied the principle of equal wages for all in every category of manual and intellectual labor. They even waged a campaign against illiteracy by organizing courses among the miners. This is how life was organized in this workers Commune, without leaders, without police. But the movement remained isolated, and therefore terribly vulnerable; the troops of Ho Chi Minh's government were dispatched to besiege the mining district; its commander addressed the miners, invoking the need for national unity and, to induce them to surrender, he promised to allow them to preserve some aspects of their Commune. This promise quickly proved to be hollow: not only did he arrest all the elected workers delegates, but he immediately replaced the councils with a new hierarchy of Viet Minh cadres. And, soon enough, after three months of revolutionary autonomy, the military-police order of the Stalinist "Democratic Republic" reigned over the district.

I would also like to mention the autonomous movements of the peasants in the north. In Tonkin and northern Annam, the peasants, under the pressure of hunger, and remembering the Indochinese Communist Party's slogan of 1930, "The land to those who cultivate it," rejected the party's call for national unity in alliance with the rural landowners and acted through the popular committees to confiscate the property of the rich and to expropriate the land: they knew they could make it more productive and that the harvest would not be diverted into speculative ventures. Ho Chi Minh wasted no time in suppressing their initiatives. A circular issued in November 1945 to the provincial committees stipulated that "the rice paddies and the cultivated land will not be

redistributed,” and a decree on the “organization of the institutions of peoples power” proclaims the reestablishment of a pyramidal hierarchy like that of the Viet Minh. The Stalinist hierarchy brought its police power to bear on the situation and forced, *manu militari*, the return of expropriated land and property to the rural landowners.

In the south, in the Mekong region, the peasants also spontaneously seized the lands owned by their exploiters. Stalinist militants who attempted to stop them were almost lynched on the spot by the expropriators. A communiqué from the Commissariat of the Interior of the de facto Stalinist government was published in the newspapers: “Those who have encouraged the peasants to seize land will be mercilessly punished. The communist revolution that will resolve the agrarian problem has not yet taken place. Our government is a democratic and bourgeois government, although the communists hold power.”

In this way the Viet Minh furnished itself with all the means to maintain absolute hegemony over power and over the conduct of the war. It was the eve of the thirty year war. Ho Chi Minh’s party won that war, of course. But did the Vietnamese people gain anything but a new servitude?

As George Orwell wrote: “Those who control the present, control the past and those who control the past control the future.”

When history is harnessed to the discourse of the victor, concealing and distorting all past struggles in a Manichaeian schematic that dissolves all real choices, the present is imposed as ineluctable fate. This is why I want to evoke all these events with a view towards present and future struggles.

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Ngô Văn
A hundred year war
2001

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In this two-part talk given in 2001 in Paris, Ngo Van Xuyet introduces his two books about Vietnam (*Viêt-nam 1920–1945: révolution et contre-révolution sous la domination coloniale* [1997] and *Au pays de la Cloche fêlée: Tribulations d'un Cochinchinois à l'époque coloniale* [2000]), starting with a critical chronology of the 1920s, and concluding with a first-person account of the period between 1930 and 1945, when Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh seized power after the Japanese surrender and immediately proceeded to exterminate the Vietnamese Trotskyists, while workers and peasants formed councils that were suppressed by the Stalinist government's military forces.

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