Chapter 5: Vietnam's long revolution: a history of war, compromise and betrayal

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For over thirty years the Vietnamese masses struggled against imperialist control of their country - by the Japanese, the British, the French and the Americans. This protracted anti-imperialist struggle ended with the creation of a degenerate workers' state in Vietnam. The heroic struggle of the Vietnamese masses influenced a section of the Trotskyist movement to ignore the counter-revolutionary nature of the Stalinist leadership of this struggle.

During the 1970s the majority of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI) denied that the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) was Stalinist and opposed the programme of political revolution for North Vietnam.1 Ernest Mandel argued:

"Because for us the Yugoslav, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean revolutionaries are distorted socialist revolutions led by bureaucratically distorted working class parties we prefer not to call the parties which led these revolutions ?Stalinist Parties?? 2

The USFI's Vietnam 'expert' Pierre Rousset takes this point further:

"Of all these parties? [i.e. Yugoslavian, Greek and Chinese ? eds] the Vietnamese has travelled furthest in the direction of a rediscovery of the principles of Marxism? 3

However, the history of the VCP in the course of this struggle, and the nature of the social revolutions that have occurred in Vietnam, stand in sharp contradiction to this opportunist assessment by the USFI. The Vietnamese revolutions were carried through and betrayed by a thoroughly Stalinist leadership.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War as the Japanese armies retreated from Vietnam the Stalinist-led resistance movement - the Vietminh - took power.

The Vietminh, whose full title, ?The Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh?, means the League for the Independence of Vietnam, was founded by the VCP, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh in May 1941. It was a classic popular front embracing bourgeois and petit bourgeois nationalists, and announced a programme strictly limited to national independence. The VCP even dropped its slogan of ?Land to the Tillers? in order to woo the bourgeois nationalists, it supported the Allied war effort ? supplying the Americans and British with information about Japanese movements - and received aid and weapons from Chiang Kai Shek and the American Office of Strategic Services.

In the North it was in control by 20 August 1945 and then after out manoeuvring the Southern United National Front (which consisted of various nationalist groupings and a section of the Vietnamese Trotskyist movement) it established a ?Provisional Executive Committee of South Vietnam? in Saigon. The independent and united Democratic Republic of Vietnam was declared by Ho Chi Minh on 2 September, at
this time, apart from the armies of the Stalinist-led Vietminh, no coercive state apparatus existed. The French had been disarmed by the Japanese in 1945. The Japanese forces were in complete disarray. The British expeditionary force that was to re-establish order on behalf of the French had not yet arrived. Thus the Vietminh, as a result of the August Revolution were in total control. Yet in these extremely advantageous circumstances the VCP proceeded to attack the Vietnamese working class, their revolutionary leaders (the Trotskyists) and lay the basis for a pact with imperialism that reopened Indo-China to imperialist armies of occupation for another 30 years. Such a historic betrayal underlines the Stalinist nature of the VCP. It reveals it as a counter-revolutionary party.

The August Revolution, at least in the South, and particularly in Saigon posed the objective possibility of the creation of a healthy workers state in Vietnam. Following the defeat of the Japanese, the workers in the South, often acting under Trotskyist leadership established some 150 Peoples Committees, these committees organised many thousands of workers, they were embryonic Soviets. They stood as a potential governmental alternative, and thus a second power, to the Vietminh coalition (with the ex-Emperor Bao Dai included in it by Ho!) The spectre of independent working class power terrified the Stalinists. Their project was for a negotiated settlement with imperialism, aimed merely at the guarantee of independence. Bourgeois property and the bourgeois state in Vietnam were to remain intact. As the Stalinist leader in the South, Nguyen Van Tao declared:

Our government I repeat is a democratic and middle class government, even though the Communists are now in power. 6

Thus, instead of basing themselves on the Peoples Committees, they proceeded to smash them. Ho Chi Minh based the constitution of his Democratic Republic on the bourgeois American Declaration of Independence (it opened with a sentence from that Declaration foreshadowing similar utterances from Fidel Castro). Five days after this declaration by Ho, the Stalinists issued a decree on 7 September, outlawing all armed bodies except their own. This was a direct attack on the armed workers.

Ten days after the declaration of independence on 12 September 1945, the Stalinists welcomed General Gracey, chief of the British expeditionary force, into Vietnam. In order to forestall organised working class resistance to this treachery, the Stalinists arrested and murdered the leaders of both the Trotskyist organisations. The Peoples Committees, robbed of their leaders, were effectively crushed by the British and the newly-returned French in heavy fighting in Saigon.

The Stalinists? bloody services earned them little thanks from the imperialists. Preparing for the return of French troops to Vietnam was always the aim of the British. General Gracey had brought some French troops with him. He armed French troops who had been interned by the Japanese declared martial law in Saigon, forbade publication of Vietnamese language papers and allowed French troops and officials to take over all Vietminh-held public buildings in Saigon on 23 September. Having crushed the Saigon resistance to this restoration the British then stood aside leaving a clear field for the French General Leclerc to launch a campaign for the reconquest of the whole of Indochina.

Thus the Stalinist collaboration with the British resulted, in effect, in handing the South over to the French. The attempt to prevent this in October 1945 was doomed. The Saigon rising called by the Vietminh was abortive and the French, British and -Japanese troops, rearmed by the British, quickly massacred many of the insurgents. Ho, still in control in the North, then compounded his earlier treachery by seeking a negotiated pact with the French. The fruit of this was the 6 March 1946 agreement with the French which allowed them (with 25,000 troops) to enter Hanoi and the North. Having gained this enormous advantage the French repaid Ho by shelling the northern port of Haiphong in November 1946, deliberately provoking
the Vietminh into war. Only when given no other option by imperialism did Ho sanction a war against the French by the Vietminh—a costly war made necessary by the actions of the Stalinists in August September of 1945.

Ho Chi Minh negotiates defeat

From the March settlement through to the shelling of Haiphong, Ho had been busy negotiating. In May 1946 he went to Paris in a bid to secure a referendum on independence in the South. The status of the South had been the outstanding problem in negotiations with France since March. In September Ho and the Socialist Minister of Overseas France, Marius Moulet, signed a ?modus vivendi? in a bid to keep the negotiations open. Despite this, the French imperialists had no intention of giving up their ?right? to Vietnam. In November, following the formation of an army, under Va Nguyen Giap by Ho, the French General in Saigon ? Vallay ? telephoned the French commander in Haiphong and gave him the following message:

?Attempts at conciliation ... are out of season. The moment has come to give a severe lesson to those who have treacherously attacked you. Use all the means at your disposal to make yourself complete master of Haiphong and so bring the Vietnamese army around to a better understanding of the situation.? 7

On 23 November 1946, the town was shelled and some 20,000 Vietnamese were killed. Despite this, on 20 December Ho made yet another appeal (to Leon Blum) for negotiations. However, it is unlikely that the appeal reached him ? the French generals held it up in Saigon. Ho was thus forced into a war of liberation by the imperialists.

These events demonstrate clearly that it is not the case that the Stalinists will inevitably carry through a social overturn whenever their repressive apparatus holds sway, and that of the capitalists has disintegrated.

There are two major reasons for this Vietnamese variant on the pattern elsewhere after the establishment of the armed hegemony of the Stalinists. Firstly, the Soviet bureaucracy had agreed to French imperialism?s claims for the re-establishment of its colonial power in Indochina. Vietnam, like Greece, had been definitively signed over to imperialism by the Kremlin. The imperialists could act with confidence to re-establish their state apparatus, knowing that the Soviet bureaucracy would not resist.

The second reason was that the Vietnamese Stalinists could not break with Stalin?s plans ? as had the YCP and the CCP (however partially). This was due in the last analysis to the strength of the Vietnamese working class. Far more immediately than in China and Yugoslavia, the Stalinists were faced with the real threat of the establishment of genuine workers? power. Their influence was rivalled by that of the Trotskyists, at least in the South. To have resisted the re-introduction of imperialist troops would have unleashed forces that the Stalinists would not have been able to contain. The Stalinist programme for the political expropriation of the working class had to be carried through in bloody alliance with imperialism.

The Vietnamese experience in 1945-46 shows how utterly false it is to believe that the Stalinists are compelled by some sort of objective process to economically and politically expropriate the bourgeoisie. It is completely false to characterise any regime within which the Stalinists have achieved armed hegemony as a workers? state, or even a workers? state in the process of formation. This position presumes that Stalinism is inevitably compelled to establish workers? states and is therefore both expansionist and progressive.

In the war that raged from the end of 1946 through to July 1954, the Vietminh pursued a strategy identical
to that of Mao?s CCP/PLA. The Vietminh withdrew its forces from the cities and began a strictly rural guerrilla war, leaving the small but, as 1945 had shown, strategically important working class of Vietnam in centres like Saigon, at the mercy of the French. It is true that the northern cities, especially Hanoi, were returned to the French only after very fierce fighting. However, once defeated in the cities, the Vietminh made no further attempt to base their war effort in any way on the urban population, until they had actually achieved victory.

Again, as in the war against the Japanese, the Stalinists fought on a purely nationalist programme. The struggle was called a ?national democratic? struggle and Ho repeated many times that his aim was unity and independence on a capitalist basis and under the auspices of a coalition regime. Indeed, in the areas liberated by the Vietminh land reform ? the crying need of the peasants who supported Ho?s army ? was not granted until 1953.

The appeal of nationalism was very real in a country which had been directly controlled by the French since 1888. This domination squeezed every section of Vietnamese society including the national bourgeoisie which controlled only 5 per cent of private capital in Vietnam, and that mainly in the low profit agricultural sector.

In the course of the war the Stalinist leadership of the Vietminh, the VCP maintained themselves and their army by means of a tax on agricultural produce in the liberated areas. The Vietminh levied such a tax twice a year. It had 41 scales, ranging from 5 per cent to 45 per cent, depending on income. A trade tax (maximum of 28 per cent on net profits) was also levied. The Party branch in each village was responsible for the collection of taxes. They were also able to retain a portion of the taxes collected to use for local purposes.

During the 1956 Rectification of Errors campaign, many party cadres admitted to having ?persuaded? peasants to pay more tax than they should have done. This taxation system was crucial in explaining the crystallisation of a Stalinist bureaucracy in advance of the creation of a degenerate workers? state in Vietnam.

This bureaucratic caste had at its head Ho Chi Minh, Va Nguyen Giap, Pham Van Dong, Hoang Quoc Vet and Truong Chinh the established leadership of the VCP since the 1930s. Their brief enjoyment of government in 1945 had whetted the appetite of these bureaucrats for power, their dependence on a tax on the peasants who supported them and their Vietminh army provided a material base for the restoration of that power. Their programme was aimed at achieving governmental power, but not at smashing capitalism and the capitalist state in Vietnam. They were genuinely willing to co-exist with capitalism. Upon achieving power, however, the brutal realities of imperialism exposed this project as not only a reactionary one, but also an absolute utopia.

French imperialism emerged from the Second World War a considerably weakened world power. Their re-entry into Vietnam was only as a result of British intervention and a guarantee of non-intervention by the Soviet Union. Their early victories were a consequence of the Vietminh?s self-defeating treachery to the working class and the Vietnamese People in 1945. However, by the late 1940s the French were beginning to lose the war. A series of defeats enabled the Vietminh to launch an offensive in 1950.

The ability to launch this offensive was greatly facilitated by the victory of Mao in China, who officially recognised Ho?s Democratic Republic of Vietnam on 16 January 1950 and supplied the Vietminh with arms. Moscow only recognised the DRV after Mao had ? on 31 January. No significant aid to the Vietminh was forthcoming from Moscow. The offensive was however defeated because in May the US decided to give military aid to the French. Anxious after Mao?s victory they were very concerned to keep Asia under
imperialist control? via the French in Indochina and themselves directly in Korea. In July 1950, the first American military mission arrived in Vietnam. Despite American aid, which was not extensive enough, French imperialism was not able to sustain a successful war effort. In 1952 a second offensive by the Vietminh began. This culminated in the decisive defeat of the French in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu.

This defeat gave Ho Chi Minh absolute control of the North and considerable prestige and support in the South. Once again imperialism was at a tremendous disadvantage. Once again the VCP prevented the Vietnamese masses from consolidating a final victory.

U.S. imperialism fills the breach

Prior to the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the USA, Britain, France and the Kremlin had convened a peace conference in Geneva.

This opened on 26 April 1954. The US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles made clear that the US was not interested in a negotiated peace with Ho Chi Minh. Immediately after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the then vice-president Nixon announced that if the French left, the US would move in. When the Geneva accords were signed, dividing Vietnam at the 17th parallel, recognising the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North and providing for elections throughout a unified Vietnam in 1956, the US simply refused to sign.

They had strengthened their economic hold on the South, had installed a pro-American premier in June 1954? Ngo Dinh Diem? and had increased their military aid to the French and the Saigon government?s forces. Their intentions were clear and yet Ho Chi Minh, with massive support throughout the country, with an army whose victories meant its morale was high, refused to move against the puppet Diem and instead signed the Geneva Accords on 21 July 1954. This was the Stalinists? second historic betrayal in Vietnam, and one which, like the first, was to lead to many more years of war and suffering for the Vietnamese masses.

As his part of the bargain, Ho agreed not to move against capitalism in the North. He maintained the goal of achieving a capitalist democracy, despite the hegemony of Stalinist armed forces in the North. However, if, in 1945 it was the spectre of working class power that led the Stalinists to compromise with imperialism, between 1954-56 the intransigence of US imperialism?s puppet Diem forced them in the direction of overthrowing capitalism by means of a bureaucratic social revolution. Within months of the Geneva Accords, it became clear that Diem with the backing of the world?s most powerful imperialist nation ? the USA ? had no intention of allowing elections to take place.

Diem set about hunting out and killing all Southern Vietminh activists. He began military manoeuvres at the 17th parallel to provoke the North. At the same time the US blocked French aid to the DRV, and began an economic blockade of the North. In July 1955 Diem declared that South Vietnam had not signed the Geneva accords and did not therefore recognise them. In the following October he declared South Vietnam a Republic. This happened under the careful eye of the US. In November 1954, General Collins, Eisenhower?s special Ambassador to South Vietnam arrived in Saigon to give Diem backing against the French who remained sceptical of Diem. In January 1955 the (US started to give military aid directly to the South Vietnamese army instead of via the French, and a press campaign in the US, began in praise of Diem. The following month the US military mission took over training of the Southern Army from the French.

In these circumstances Ho was forced to change course. There was now no threat of independent working class power in the North. The wave of mass support that had followed Dien Bien Phu had largely receded. It was safe for Ho and the Stalinist caste that he represented to move against capitalism using bureaucratic means in the North. At the end of 1955 French businesses in the North were nationalised and a land
reform programme was launched. A national planning board was set up and at the beginning of 1957 it implemented a one year plan. This was quickly followed by a three year plan:

?To liquidate capitalist ownership of the means of production in industry and trade?9

By 1960, no purely private enterprises remained in North Vietnam. Despite the miniscule size of the industrial base in the North (in 1954 there were only seven large-scale ? French-owned ? plants in the North), the drive to liquidate capitalism and plan the economy was facilitated by aid from Peking and Moscow. On 7 July 1955, Moscow concluded an aid deal with Hanoi with the establishment of a planned economy at the beginning of 1957, North Vietnam can be said the have become a degenerate workers? state. On the basis of its planned property relations, North Vietnam was able to expand industrial output significantly. In 1955 state industries accounted for 40 per cent of total non-agricultural production (not including handicraft industries). By 1960 this had risen to 90 per cent of total non-agricultural production.10

Between 1954 and mid-1955 the government in Vietnam was a Stalinist-controlled bourgeois workers? government. It acted, consciously in the interests of capitalism even though there were no bourgeois parties in the government. Bao Dai, who fled to the South in 1949 had been Ho?s main hope for a coalition. Between the second half of 1955 and 1957 however the blockade and sabotage of US imperialism and the actions of their puppet, Diem in South Vietnam, forced this government onto the road of systematic anti-capitalist measures, carried through bureaucratically.

Vietminh cadres, not independent workers and peasants? organisations strictly controlled the nationalisations and land reform. The regime at this stage was a bureaucratic workers? government. In the period up to the second half of 1955, this government presided over a situation of dual power. Its eventual resolution was in the interests of the Stalinists, as had happened in Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia and China. In this period, revolutionaries would have sought to break the bureaucratic stranglehold on the liquidation of capitalism and landlordism, by transforming it into a struggle for genuine workers? power based on soviets, a workers? militia. The bloody liquidation of Vietnamese Trotskyism had ensured that no such leadership existed.

The establishment of post-capitalist property forms in North Vietnam was achieved with counter-revolutionary consequences in both the North and the South. In the North, the working class was robbed of political power in the state by the Stalinist bureaucracy. In the South the struggle against imperialism suffered an enormous setback. Another 18 years of open war were inflicted on the Vietnamese masses, North and South, by the combined effects of Stalinist treachery and the US imperialist stranglehold.

By 1957 the US had replaced the French as imperialist masters of South Vietnam. By 1957-58 US aid funded all of the South?s armed forces; the US funded 80 per cent of all other government expenditure and 90 per cent of all imports into the South were from the US. In addition, more than1,000 officers and men from the US were in the South training Diem?s army.

Diem?s state was vital to them as a bastion of anti-communism, a prop to the whole string of US semi-colonies in South-East Asia. It was a check to the ?falling domino? effect that the Americans feared would result from a communist takeover in Indochina. With this backing, Diem was in a strong position to step up his repression against the Vietminh elements in the South. In 1957 captured Vietminh cadres were thrown into a network of concentration camps. Diem further antagonised the masses by carrying through a ?land reform? programme that was explicitly designed to benefit the small number of catholic landlords who supported the catholic clique around Diem.

Prior to the land reform there were 600,000 landless peasants in the South. Over 50 per cent of the land
was owned by 22 per cent of the total number of landowners, while 70 per cent owned a meagre 12 per cent of the land. The land reform launched by Diem did not give land to the landless. It merely introduced a maximum rent of 25 per cent of the crop harvested. Given that a majority of peasants had been paying no rent during the war, this was in fact a guaranteed income from rents to the big (catholic) landlords.

The repression and the mass opposition to Diem forced the Southern Vietminh (led by the VCP) into war. In 1957 the second Indochina war began. The southern National Liberation Front was officially formed in 1960, but the army that comprised it had already been fighting for three years. That army had fought during that period without any material support from the Hanoi government. Despite Diem?s obvious contempt for the Geneva Accords, Ho Chi Minh was determined to remain loyal to them. It was only in 1960 after three years of seeing his supporters fighting a difficult and bloody war against an imperialist backed dictatorship that Ho called for the commencement of a struggle in the South. Even then, however, the aid that Hanoi gave to the NLF, imperialist propaganda notwithstanding, was minimal. Pentagon figures revealed that of the NLF weapons captured between 1962-64, only 179 (less than 1 per cent) were neither home made nor from the US ? i.e. could have come from the North.

The Americans had no such qualms as far as their puppet was concerned. They poured aid into South Vietnam. When Diem became an international embarrassment, after the brutal suppression of a Buddhist rising in 1963, the US backed a military coup that replaced Diem with an equally barbarous dictatorship, but one that included Buddhists to offset the charges of religious repression that had been aimed at Diem and his US-backers. However, instability reigned in the South. A general strike in Saigon brought down Diem?s successor. In the 20 months succeeding the coup (1 November 1963), nine governments came and went. By 1965, the US decided that drastic measures were needed. More troops were poured in and on 7 February the US began bombing North Vietnam.

American involvement had escalated sharply towards the end of the 1950s. Before Diem?s fall, Washington was giving him $1.5m dollars a day to smash the NLF. After Diem?s fall, troops were poured into the South. By August 1965 there were 125,000 US troops involved in the war. By 1966 this had risen to 400,000, and at the height of the war in the late 1960s, half a million US troops were involved.

The Popular Front is launched again

By 1960, the VCP was able to launch the NLF having already moulded the liberation movement in the popular frontist image of the Vietminh. As with its forerunner the NLF was dominated by the Stalinists. They controlled its strategy (capturing the cities by a rural takeover) which was always purely military and never sought to link the war with the struggles of the urban proletariat in Saigon and elsewhere.

The famous Tet Offensive of 1968, while serving as an example of the courage and determination of the NLF, also underlined the centrality of this non proletarian perspective. It left the urban masses as passive spectators of a rural military conflict.

The NLF?s programme repeated all the formulations of that of the Vietminh. It promised to guarantee capitalism and limit the revolution to a national democratic stage.11 The appeal of this programme to the mass of the peasantry was strong. In the same way as the Vietminh had based itself on the peasantry, so the NLF followed suit. On this basis they were able to sustain the war despite meagre aid from their ?allies? in Moscow, Peking and Hanoi. By the early 1970s, it became clear that America could not win this protracted war. The anti-war movement in America and elsewhere was massive. Morale amongst American troops was low, whilst the prestige and morale of the NLF was high. For a third time the possibility of completely ousting imperialism and its puppets from Vietnam was on the agenda.
Yet for the third time, the Stalinists chose to sit at the negotiating table. In January 1973 the Paris Accords were signed, calling a ceasefire and recognising the legitimacy of the Southern state now ruled by General Thieu. The Stalinists hailed these accords which allowed Nixon and Kissinger, the bombers of Indochina, to present themselves as peacemakers a victory for the masses.

The need for an agreement was also due to the terrible devastation the North was suffering as a result of American bombings. A tactical agreement (recognised as such) with imperialism, to gain a breathing space would be entirely legitimate for a workers' state to undertake. However, this should not then be announced to the workers as a revolutionary victory. The Bolsheviks for example, did not regard Brest-Litovsk as a victory.

There was no way the Paris Accords could be regarded as a victory they were viewed as a strategic pact with imperialism of coarse this is precisely what the Stalinists were aiming for a goal that could only have profoundly reactionary consequences for the Vietnamese masses.

General Thieu had no such intentions. Having gained a respite he regrouped his forces and, again with American aid, launched an attack on the NLF and the DRV. In July 1974, the Third Indochina War began. However, it was to be even more short lived and self-destructive for Thieu, than was Chiang Kai Shek's 1945 offensive.

As victory for the combined NLF/DRV forces approached, the Stalinists again sought a compromise that would have left Thieu's successor, General Minh, in power in Saigon, in coalition with the NLF. Their strategy remained the implementation of the Geneva Accords. However, Minh was intransigent and in April 1975, as the last panicky US officials scrambled, aboard their helicopters, the NLF/DRV forces entered Saigon.

The pattern established by the Stalinist takeovers in Eastern Europe, China and North Vietnam was closely followed in the South. Despite the collapse of the capitalists armed forces and the hegemony of those of the Stalinists, the VCP refused to move against capitalism. Instead, one of the first radio announcements made after Saigon fell was a plea to the Saigon workers, who had struck to greet the NLF/DRV forces, to return to work at once. The immediate pretext for keeping capitalism intact was the need to secure $3.25bn in aid from France and America. When the imperialist powers found pretexts to withhold the aid they had promised, the Stalinists had no alternative to carrying though a bureaucratic social revolution.

The Provisional Revolutionary Government, established in June 1975, was a Stalinist controlled bourgeois workers government which was quickly driven under the pressure of an imperialist blockade and a devastated economy onto the road of an anti capitalist bureaucratic workers government.

In August of 1975, this government nationalised the Southern banks, and took control of all southern industry. In September it raided the houses of the wealthiest inhabitants of the Cholon areas of Saigon. The period of dual power between the VCP and the mainly comprador bourgeoisie ended very quickly, because that bourgeoisie, detached from its lifeline to imperialism had little cause to collaborate with the Stalinists.

For their part the enormous devastation that the Stalinists inherited forced them to act against the extensive black market profiteering, which the comprador elements had engaged in. This way the VCP hoped to offset a developing state of chaos that could easily have produced their own downfall. The move to liquidate capitalism was imposed on the Stalinists by the need to preserve their newly-won governmental power.
During the course of 1976, the overturn of capitalism was consolidated by, first, the geographical assimilation of the South into the North, announced on 25 April 1976; secondly, the inauguration of the five-year plan in the summer of 1976 for both North and South; and thirdly, the consolidation of an aid deal from China in 1976 followed by a series of aid deals with the USSR.

In no sense was the overturn the action of the masses themselves. The key moves against capitalism occurred after the decisive mobilisations of the Southern working class in April 1975 had abated. The mass demonstrations that did occur in the period from late 1975 to summer 1976 (the period of the bureaucratic workers? government) did reflect the desire of the masses, after thirty years of civil war, to effect a fundamental change.

Nevertheless they were not mobilisations based on independent organs of workers? power. They were organised and tightly controlled by the armed forces of the NLF/DRV.

Although the capitalist Cholon merchants existed as a very important force in South Vietnam up to 1978 (when they were expropriated by government edict), the launching of the plan in 1976 and the unification with the degenerate workers? state in the North, can be said to be the point at which all of Vietnam became a degenerate workers? state.

This bureaucratic social revolution, carried through in a counter revolutionary manner, involved the political expropriation of the Vietnamese working class. The political revolution against the Stalinist rulers of Vietnam, with the defence of the country against imperialism and its restorationist agents, is the central tasks facing the Vietnamese working class.

The case of ?Democratic? Kampuchea

While the creation of a degenerate workers? state in Vietnam presents no theoretical problems for Trotskyists the same is not true of the genesis of Democratic Kampuchea. If this was a degenerate workers? state, then careful consideration is needed of its dynamics and the means by which it came into existence in order to explain the horrendous crisis that gripped the country in the late 1970s. Here was a degenerate workers? state which exhibited, apparently as its defining features, an absolute economic autarchy, genocide against its own population and perpetual famine. How is this to be explained?

In 1970 a military coup in Phnom Penh brought to power a US puppet regime, headed by Lon Nol, in Kampuchea. In the same year the South Vietnamese regime, with full backing from the US, entered Kampuchea to help Lon Nol crush the Khmer Rouge (the military wing of the Kampuchean Communist Party, CPK). The CPK, underground since 1963, had established a base of support amongst the peasantry in the late 1960s. With this support behind it, the CPK moved into war against Lon Nol and allied itself with his predecessor, Prince Sihanouk. The Kampuchean National United Front (FUNK) was formed to prosecute the war. It was described by one leading CPK member as, ?the largest united front in the world ? all the way up from the peasants to the former king of the country.?12 Indeed, the purpose of this ?united front? was to bring to power the Royal Government of National Union of Kampuchea (RGNUK) .

From the earliest phase of the 1970-75 war against Lon Nol and his South Vietnamese and US allies, the anti imperialist fighters were grouped together in a popular front.

The Stalinist CPK (whose leading cadre had been educated in Paris and by the French GP) quickly moved into an alliance with Sihanouk after his fall, despite the fact that it had been Sihanouk?s repression which had originally driven them into the countryside. In Kampuchea itself, the Stalinists were the overwhelmingly dominant force in the popular front, Prince Sihanouk being unable to field many troops and relying on
Chinese support for influence within the alliance. The real weakness of his position was sharply revealed after the fall of Lon Nol in April 1975?he was at first kept out of the country altogether and then eventually forced to resign as head of state by the CPK in March 1976.

The war conducted by the People’s National Liberation Armed Forces of Kampuchea (KPNALF - Khmer Rouge?is actually an anti-communist term of abuse for this army) followed closely the patterns of peasant war applied by Mao in China. The KPNALF established a series of liberated zones in which land reform was carried out (e.g. freeing the peasants from the vice-like grip of the city merchants), hospitals were built (under the direction of Dr. Thiounn Thioeun, the former head of the Medical Faculty of the University of Phnom Penh) and a literacy campaign was undertaken. In return the peasants supplied manpower, food and shelter for the guerrillas. The CPK bureaucracy was in this way able to consolidate a material base for itself prior to the final seizure of power.

By this strategy the KPNALF was able to exercise control over virtually the whole countryside, to isolate the cities and to move slowly against them. In this project there was no shortage of peasant support. The peasantry of Kampuchea was exploited not primarily by landlords (agriculture consisted mainly of small holdings) but by a comprador mercantile bourgeoisie. This class, based in the cities, bought rice from the peasantry at deflated prices, sold goods and equipment to them at inflated prices and lent the peasants the money, at high rates of interest, to pay the difference! Indeed, the ferocity of the peasants towards city life (even as represented by inanimate objects such as typewriters which were smashed wholesale after the victory) can be accounted for by their relations to the merchants who exploited them.

By April 1975 Phnom Penh was completely surrounded. The torrent of US bombs, South Vietnamese troops and Lon Nol’s terror machine had failed to check the anti-imperialist advance. On 17 April, after most of Lon Nol’s regime had fled, the KPNALF entered Phnom Penh.

In the successful anti-imperialist struggle the potential for the future defeats of the Kampuchean masses was already lodged. First, the popular frontism of the CPK was to ensure that the masses themselves were prevented from taking the reins of political power into their own hands. Second, the peasant war strategy had weakened the anti-imperialists in the cities. Spontaneous urban uprisings against Lon Nol had been deliberately left isolated. They were cruelly repressed by Lon Nol. When the peasants met the urban population, the latter, or more particularly its proletarian and progressive elements, were too weak and disorganised to resist the CPK’s economic and political plans. Writing about China in 1932, Trotsky had warned of the dangers arising out of a Stalinist led victorious peasant army:

?The party actually tore itself away from its class. Thereby, in the last analysis, it can cause injury to the peasantry as well. For, should the proletariat continue to remain on the sidelines, without organisation, without leadership, then the peasant war even if fully victorious, will inevitably arrive in a blind alley.?13

The blind alley predicted by Trotsky was the restoration of a new bourgeois power. The experience of bureaucratic revolutions allows us to modify this prediction. The blind alley can be a degenerate workers’ state in which the economy, because it is being planned blind and according to the needs of the bureaucracy, can bring terrible ruin to the mass of the people. Following 17 April and the seizure of power by the Stalinist led peasant army, this was the path that was followed in Kampuchea. A degenerate workers’ state was established, but it proved to be a tragic blind alley for the masses of Kampuchea.

A land devastated by imperialism

The RG NUK, as the government was called until January 1976, inherited a land verging on total ruin. Under Lon Nol’s rule the area under his control had become a virtual desert.
According to UN figures, the area under rice production fell from 2,399,000 hectares in 1970 to 737,000 in 1973. It fell to 500,000 by 1975. In 1974, the Phnom Penh regime was importing 282,000 tons of rice. In 1968 Kampuchea had exported 230,000 tons of rice. Industrial production fell to 42 per cent below its pre-war level. Of the total resources of Lol Nol's Kampuchea, only 2.2 per cent came from domestic production.

The rest came from the US (95.1 per cent) and a number of other countries (2.7 per cent). Phnom Penh and the other cities were gripped by economic chaos and increasing famine in 1975. This terrible situation was compounded by the 400,000 tons of US bombs dropped on Kampuchea's countryside. The population of Phnom Penh swelled from 600,000 to 3 million, to create in the city a Saigon syndrome of corruption, starvation, depravity and cruelty before the entry of the KPNALF. Further, the war is estimated to have resulted, in the deaths of some 600,000 and at least as many wounded, out of a population of only 7 million.

This was the situation which faced the new government. It responded in a brutal, bureaucratic fashion. Its policies led to countless deaths (many people being murdered). The exact figure is difficult to determine amidst the imperialist lies and Stalinist counter-claims. However, given that sympathetic sources estimate at least 500,000 dead, it is probable that between that number and a million suffered death during the CPK's regime. The policies of the CPK exposed thousands to exhaustion, malaria (on a massive scale) and semi-starvation.

The cardinal question is whether or not this terror is of a qualitatively different nature from that of Stalin or Mao which also led to countless deaths? It was not.

Despite its disgusting nature this was the terror of a bureaucracy based on post-capitalist property forms.

In the period April 1975 to January 1976 the RG NUK appeared to have the form of a popular front. Its initial gathering from 25-27 April was attended by 20 Buddhist clergy and 13 Sihanoukists. These delegates were outnumbered, however, by 125 ?people's delegates?, 112 army representatives and 14 FUNK delegates, all of whom were loyal to the CPK. Furthermore the RG NUK simply ceded real power to the Angkar (which means revolutionary organisation? a shadowy body which was in fact always the leading cadre of the CPK - Leng Sary, Saloth Sar, also known as Pol Pot, Son Sen, Khieu Samphan, Leng Thirith etc.), no evidence exists that any non-CPK figures held any ministerial power. The ?popular front? was not a governmental alliance so much as a diplomatic charade that was designed to win and to further international credibility.

Sihanouk, the nominal head of state, was actually kept out of the country by the CPK until it had got a complete grip on the country. This government must, therefore, be defined by its policies.

The attempt to fulfill a reactionary dream

The economic policies of the Angkar were based on the doctoral thesis of Khieu Samphan. In essence the policy consisted of: mobilising the energy of the peasants to reconstruct the country, in the first place via hydraulic management and increased rice production; secondly, imposing autarchy to reduce foreign competition and the penetration of the economy by foreign capital. Success with these two policies was supposed to create a sound basis for industrial development. Leng Sary summed it up thus:

?After our total victory we extended to all Kampuchea the economic policy which had already been applied in the liberated zones. This policy consists of considering agriculture as the base and industry as the dominant factor. Our objective is to manoeuvre our country a modern agricultural and industrial country.?
This schema was a reactionary utopian one. It was the Stalinist conception of Socialism in One Country, mixed with various petty bourgeois nationalist notions, taken to extreme xenophobic lengths. As in Russia, abandonment of internationalism could only lead to coercion of the masses on a huge scale, thereby creating new contradictions that would in fact undermine the planned economy.

The first steps taken by the Angkar involved depopulation of the cities and a population transfer (mainly to the countryside) of massive proportions, a drive to manage the water supply, vital for increased rice production, via the building of dams, reservoirs, canals and irrigation channels and, lastly, the collectivisation of agriculture and its organisation into cooperatives often up to 10,000 strong (on the model of the Chinese Communes). This policy was carried through rapidly in early 1976, and involved total collectivisation, including the collectivisation of cooking utensils! It was carried through against the wishes of the mass of peasants, going far beyond the simple communal organisation necessary for rice cultivation.

At the same time, however, by breaking the smallholding system it did create the conditions for improved harvests which, according to Western and Yugoslav diplomats did come about in 1976-77. However, achieved by coercion, it also led to new contradictions and sparked uprisings in 1977 in the West of Kampuchea together with a steady flow of refugees to Thailand and Vietnam.

In addition to the measures outlined above, all industry and foreign holdings (such as rubber plantations) were nationalised.

Kampuchean industry had always been a minor component of the country’s economy, as it was in the other countries of Indo-China. Between April 1975 and late 1976, the regime kept it that way. Industrial production was used only to serve the agricultural ?revolution? that was taking place. However, it was never destroyed. In the early days Pol Pot talked of maintaining industry, not of destroying it or expanding it. On 26 September 1975, the Far Eastern Economic Review reported that some 70 factories (mainly small workshops) in Phnom Penh were once again working although key installations, such as the oil refinery at Kompong Sam, were not.

By mid-1976, with the full collectivisation of agriculture more or less complete; the Far Eastern Economic Review Asian Yearbook for 1977 reported over 100 factories back in operation. At the same time a construction drive resulted in the restoration of the Kompong Som to Phnom Penh railway, the country’s seven airports and a traffic-worthy road system.

In 1977-78, a shift in industrial policy appears to have taken place and figures indicate that, compared with its pre1975 levels, industry underwent a limited expansion. The New China News Agency reported in August 1977 that for the first time new factories were being built in Kampuchea.

These included a shipbuilding yard, an acid works, a motor vehicle plant and a number of machine tool shops. That this is not fiction is borne out by trading figures for 1977. These show a dramatic increase as compared to previous years in the import of raw materials and steel products for construction purposes. In the first six months of 1977, Hong Kong and Japan supplied $13m worth of steel products, spare parts, car generators, rubber processing plant, rice husking machinery and medicine trade with Hong Kong Japan and Singapore rose to $19m in 1978. These two figures compare with a mere $2.5m of total trade with the same countries in 1976.

All of these indicators show a hesitant growth of the Kampuchean economy between 1976 and 1978. Trade with workers’ states was carried out from 1975 onwards. All trade with the capitalist world was monopolised by the state via the Ren Fung trading company, based in Hong Kong. Trade with other degenerate workers’ states was absolutely decisive in allowing the Kampuchean economy to grow at all.
China, in particular, supplied 4,000 technical advisors and in 1975 alone gave $1bn worth of aid. Trading deals favourable to Kampuchea were also carried out with Yugoslavia, Rumania, North Korea and Albania.

These measures comprised the programme of the government of Kampuchea. They were carried out by the Angkar, acting as the central authority, with instruments of its rule acting at local and regional level in the numerous committees of the cooperatives. From mid-1976 the Angkar had definitely centralised planning in industry, agriculture and trade, all of which were under its control.

It did this via a National Development Plan which, like the plans in other degenerate workers’ states, set itself wild targets for agricultural production and for industrial development (e.g. 3 tons of rice per hectare for each crop, a quota that would have severely exhausted an already overworked peasantry). In no sense was the plan (referred to by CPK leaders with regard to water conservancy, rice production, control of malaria and industrial expansion) a democratic one. It was a bureaucratic plan that, in fact, conflicted with needs of the masses.

However, it was a plan for an economy that exhibited none of the features of capitalism. The law of value had been suppressed through the state direction of investment and the abolition of an internal currency (which resulted in some barter but not in a barter economy). All industry and agriculture was in state hands, there was no private property at all and no bourgeoisie left in either the economy or the state. All foreign trade was controlled by the state. In other words the plan operated within a post-capitalist economy.

The means by which this post capitalist economy, a degenerate workers’ state, came about roughly follows the pattern exhibited in China and Vietnam. In April 1975 a Stalinist dominated popular front came to power. Although the form of the popular front was maintained until January 1976 (when Democratic Kampuchea was declared) the establishment of direct rule by the Angkar, that is the CPK, indicates that from May 1975 to mid-1976 a bureaucratic anti-capitalist workers’ government was in power. It destroyed capitalism and it destroyed all the aspects and the personnel of the previous state machine. In doing this it also acted against the masses, riding roughshod over their needs and either killing or causing the deaths of many, many thousands. Like all such governments, its action against capitalism were far outweighed by the counter-revolutionary manner in which they were carried out.

There was no dual power situation in Kampuchea after May of 1975, prior to that dual power on a territorial basis had existed between the KPNALF and the Lol Nol regime. The bureaucratic workers’ government very quickly ended this.

With aid from China and the organisation of a transferred population into cooperative units, the Angkar, by mid 1976, was able to implement its National Plan. With the commencement of this plan we can say that a degenerate workers’ state was created by the bureaucratic anti-capitalist workers’ government. This degenerate workers’ state made possible the economic growth that we have detailed. But it achieved this by coercing the masses and depriving them of many basic needs. As such it built up new contradictions. The masses began to resist. Revolts took place and there was passive resistance as well.

The regime tried to play the card of anti-Vietnamese chauvinism and moved into a border war with the Hanoi regime which was anxious for its Western borders. Indeed, the long term goal of the Hanoi Stalinists was the creation of an Indo-Chinese federation under their control. The crisis, into which the Pol Pot regime ran because of its policies, provided an opportunity for them to take a step in this direction. They related to a wing of the fracturing Kampuchean bureaucracy around Heng Samrin, a wing historically sympathetic to them, and used it as a cover to legitimise their invasion. In late 1978, the Vietnamese Army sent its best regiments into Kampuchea.
The most battle-hardened army in Asia encountered little difficulty in establishing its control. However, the fact that the war between the Khmer Rouge guerrillas and Vietnam is still raging four years later indicates that Heng Samrin’s pro-Vietnamese regime is far from stable.

Since Heng Samrin came to power the collectivisation scheme has been relaxed and a free market partially restored, but the economic system has not changed in any fundamental sense since the invasion. The measures taken by Heng Samrin’s regime did end the internal coercion of the Pol Pot government and, in that sense, did temporarily offset the explosive crisis into which bureaucratic planning was leading Kampuchea.

The nature of the Kampuchean bureaucratic anti-capitalist revolution had a number of specific features that shaped the fortunes of the workers' state but, in essence, this revolution was no different from the ones carried out in China or Vietnam. The CPK leadership decided to emulate the CCP. They adopted wholesale the voluntarism and xenophobia that Maoism exhibited during particular periods of its history (Great Leap Forward, Cultural Revolution).

In China the disastrous consequences of these policies became apparent to the CCP leadership before the Chinese economy was plunged into utter chaos. In Kampuchea these policies were carried out in a country proportionately more devastated by war than China, with a far smaller population, with far fewer natural resources and a less well developed industrial and agricultural infrastructure than China. In addition they were not checked by the CPK leadership and in a matter of months the hesitant revival of the economy seen by 1976 was facing constant crisis in 1977.

The immediate cause of the crisis was that the state was forced to expropriate all the peasants' rice in order to finance trade and industrialisation plans. This, in turn, meant starvation and, therefore, the resistance of the peasantry. This crisis led to a fracturing of the bureaucracy in 1977 ? along pro- and anti-Vietnam lines. The way was paved for a second destructive war - with Vietnam and entirely suited to Hanoi’s purposes. / We can say that the degenerate workers' state of Kampuchea began its spiral towards total disintegration far more quickly than had been the case, so far, with any of the other degenerate workers' states. The peculiarity of Kampuchea was the speed of this development. The tendency to disintegration, however, is a feature of all economies where the plan operates blindly and bureaucratically and where the proletariat is politically expropriated.

The invasion of Kampuchea by Vietnam temporarily checked the process of internal disintegration but, because this was done by a counter-revolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy (in Hanoi) and because it was carried out by purely military means and did not involve the masses of Kampuchea at all, it has only offset the process of degeneration. It has not and cannot definitively check it. The political revolution in Kampuchea is desperately needed. Only by placing the post capitalist economy under the political control of the workers and peasants can the masses put an end to famine and war.

The case of Kampuchea shows, in an almost chemically pure form, what is meant by the counter revolutionary nature of Stalinist-led bureaucratic anti-capitalist revolutions. This dialectical formula was concretised in Kampuchea when the destruction of capitalism led, within a mere three years, to a process of degeneration the logical end point of which would have been, thanks to the Stalinists, the reintroduction of capitalism, probably courtesy of an ASEAN intervention - a course of action still being considered in Manila and Bangkok.

Footnotes

1. The Vietnamese Communist Party has existed under various names throughout this period -
Indochinese Communist Party, People’s Revolutionary Party, Association for the Study of Marxism etc. For convenience we will refer to it throughout as the VCP.

4. The Trotskyists: Though weakened as a result of Stalinist and imperialist repression, the Vietnamese Trotskyists had long enjoyed considerable support among the masses, particularly in the South. They were divided into two groups. The Struggle Group was led by Tha Thu Thau, after a period of collaboration with the Stalinists in the early Thirties it was attacked by them for criticising the Popular Front Government in France. The other Trotskyist group was the International Communist League which produced a daily paper, The Spark, and played a major role in the People’s Committees. Both groups suffered massive repression and had their leaderships physically wiped out by the Stalinists in 1945.

5. cf. Stalinism and Trotskyism in Vietnam, Spartacist League Pamphlet p.21
8. To illustrate the degree of support for Ho as compared with Diem it is worth comparing two bourgeois assessments. Eisenhower said of Ho, “I have never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indo-Chinese affairs who did not agree that if elections had been held as of the time of the fighting, possibly 80% of the population would have voted for Ho Chi Minh”. Quoted in I.Birchall, Workers against the Monolith, (London 1974) p.15
9 The Economist magazine said of Diem, “Diem's problem is that he is not a leader who has been merely helped by the West; he has been created by the West ... The objectionable word, ?puppet? so often used by "both sides in a propaganda wars was in this case literally true.? Quoted in D.Horowitz, From Yalta to Vietnam, (Harmo~worth 1971) p.14 9. Quoted in Hoang Van Chi, From Colonialism to Communism, (London 1964) p.259
11. Key clauses in the NLF programme were, “It [the NLF - Eds] has successfully consolidated its base among the broad masses of the people; at the same time it has engaged in joint action with many political and religious forces, and won over large numbers of manufacturers and traders, official functionaries of the puppet administration, and officers and soldiers of the puppet army.” Programme of the NLF (Giai Publishing House). And, the NLF’s aim was to establish... a broad democratic national union administration, build an independent, democratic, peaceful, neutral and progressive South Vietnam.” ibid) For workers it promised, “To settle disputes between employers and employees through negotiation between the two sides and mediation by the national democratic administration.” ibid) In short this programme contained not a whiff of independent working class power or of socialism or anything approaching it. It was designed to forestall such things in order to appease the capitalists who were being robbed of their imperialist paymasters.

16. The following figures also suggest a significant degree of economic growth within the country: 200 factories reported in operation in 1977. a rubber factory producing 15,000 bicycle tyres a day; a Phnom Penh textile mill producing 14,000 metres of cloth a day; Battambang Bag Factory ? 10,000 bags a day; rubber processing plants -? 40-50 tons of cured rubber a day. Imports of medicinal compounds indicate a re-opening of laboratories in Phnom Penh.
Each region possessing at least one reservoir with a capacity of 100-22 million cubic metres of water. One-third of the countryside made cultivable. A steel mill under construction in 1978. The Bor 3 Plastic factory at Chak Angee ? 9,000 metres of plastic sheet, 1,500 metres of rubber hose and 100 fifteen litre containers per day. The year 1977-79 saw a population increase (the first significant one since the war) of 392,000, taking the population to a post war record of 7.8 million. Exports to Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore rose from US dollars 357,000 in 1976 to US dollars 680,000 in 1977, including 130,000 tons of rice. Figures from Far Eastern Economic Review Year Book 1975

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