

The Vietnamese revolution was the first communist revolution to succeed after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.¹ Ostensibly the initial triumph in Vietnam in August 1945 only two years after the official demise of the Comintern, could be described as the one great achievement of international communism albeit a posthumous one for the Comintern. The Comintern was instrumental in the creation of communism in Vietnam through its agent, one of the most well known revolutionaries of the twentieth century, Ho Chi Minh.² However, recent debate suggests that Vietnamese Communists won their victory despite the Comintern whose attempts at control may have been more of a handicap than a benign influence. Vietnamese Communists driven by *real politik* painstakingly succeeded by fusing revolutionary patriotism with Leninism.

One of the most significant successes of the Comintern was its appeal to colonial liberation movements and at its heart were the principles laid out by Lenin in his 'Theses on the National and Colonial Questions,' presented to the Second Comintern Congress in the summer of 1920. For many Euro-centric communists, capitalism in Leninist terms, imperialism, meant that strikes and economic disruption organised in the colonies would impact on the domestic political situation. After all, for Marxists the continuation of feudalism and a minuscule proletariat in the colonial situation meant that conditions were not yet advanced for the commencement of the class struggle. Pressure for an alternative perspective came from Asian delegates to the Second Congress like M.N.Roy,

according to H el ene Carr ere d'Encausse and Stuart R.Schram, who forced the issue onto the agenda.³ In a substantial clash of opinions with Lenin, Roy argued that the success of the revolution depended upon the revolution in Asia as a first step to the overthrow of capitalism.⁴ How far the encounter influenced Lenin is uncertain but the conclusion, the Lenin theses, proved decisive for it not only mediated the quarrel but also 'opened wide the door to the implantation of Marxism in Asia'.⁵

The colonial thesis of Lenin was crucial to the anti colonial struggle for it profoundly influenced the young Ho Chi Minh then resident in Paris, 'this is the path to our liberation' was his reaction.⁶ According to William J.Duiker, Ho Chi Minh was transformed from espousing a left nationalist position to become an active Marxist and founder member of the French Communist Party (PCF).⁷ He soon found himself in Moscow, at the invitation of Dmitri Manuilsky to help prepare for the Fifth Comintern Congress held in 1924 where he also made a significant contribution to the anti-colonial struggle debate.⁸ The route to Marxism through the anti colonial struggle reveals a degree of independent thought and while in Moscow Ho Chi Minh became influenced by Roy and was one of the few to share his thesis.⁹

The Second Congress of the International opened the door for the Leninist hypothesis that both workers and peasants together could also achieve a revolution.¹⁰ Conceivably, the admission by Lenin that there

could be 'peasant soviets' signalled the first steps leading to Maoism.¹¹ Although there is no evidence that Ho Chi Minh and Mao Tse-tung ever met during the Comintern period, both recognised the necessity of a revised form of Marxism that incorporated a revolutionary role for the peasants.¹² It has even been suggested that Ho was far in advance of Mao in suggesting the peasants should carry out the revolution.¹³ Further evidence from one of the few theoretical works of Ho Chi Minh, *The Road to Revolution*, reveals that he places the peasantry within the vanguard of the revolution, the proletariat led by the Communist Party.¹⁴ Ho Chi Minh was a party tactician and strategist not a theoretician and Mao Tse-tung is credited with developing the revolutionary peasant theories into Maoism.¹⁵ When Ho Chi Minh was in Moscow for his first tour of duty from 1923, there is evidence of his interest in the peasantry, he became actively involved in the establishment of a Peasant International, the Krestintern, with the Polish Communist leader Thomas Dombal.¹⁶ The purpose of the Krestintern was in itself significant, to realise 'a workers' and peasants' government.'¹⁷ On his return to Asia in late 1924, Ho Chi Minh, at his own request, was denied any post with the Comintern based in Canton and served as the representative of the Peasant International.¹⁸

The widespread rural unrest and uprising that began in 1929 was significant in that the fledgling Vietnamese Communist party played a major role.¹⁹ The rural revolt that lasted until 1932 resulted in the creation of many peasant 'Nghe Tinh Soviets.' Although the Comintern was

predicting a revolutionary situation Huynh Kim Khanh believes that the revolt was a local initiative inspired by mass unrest.²⁰ There is no evidence that Ho Chi Minh was instrumental in the Nghe Tinh Soviet movement, its origins remain a 'mystery'.²¹ Speculation exists that young revolutionaries trained in Moscow and obedient to the new ultra leftist line of the Comintern were responsible for the rising. If this were the case, it would perhaps be expected that the rising would have been initiated amongst workers and not peasants. Although the consensus suggests that the revolt was spontaneous, Duiker argues that Ho Chi Minh had serious misgivings, however, he does not deny that Ho did not disassociate himself from the revolt on theoretical grounds.²² After the Guomindang suppression of communists in China, Ho Chi Minh had criticised the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for the Canton uprising, suggesting that its defeat was the consequence of it not sufficiently involving the peasantry.²³ The establishment of peasant soviets as part of a revolutionary push would therefore appear to be fully compatible with the position taken by Ho and the Vietnamese Communist Party (ICP) at the time.

The rising failed and had devastating repercussions for the Communist Party in Vietnam resulting in near annihilation. In the post Nghe Tinh analysis, Ho Chi Minh and cadres within Indochina were severely criticised by the pro Moscow, ICP Overseas Executive Committee for 'placing too much attention on mobilising peasants.'²⁴ Its failure coincidentally came when the Comintern was trying to vigorously enforce the

new ultra leftist line during the 'third period'. It not only displaced the attention of party work in the countryside but also impacted on the only Vietnamese leader with any authority, Ho Chi Minh, who was rewarded with an extended stay in Moscow until 1938. The issue would also appear to have been heavily entwined with the machinations surrounding the formation of the ICP as will be discussed.

It is 'impossible to separate the early fortunes of Vietnamese Communism and nationalism... from the career of Ho Chi Minh.'²⁵ From the beginning, Ho Chi Minh was committed to two goals, national liberation from colonial oppression and a socialist revolution. The tension between liberation and socialism surfaced within the Comintern from an early stage as has been referred to in the Lenin/Roy debate. Should communists be seeking nationalist gains or organising workers in the struggle to overthrow capitalism? The question was again a significant factor in relations between the Comintern and the Chinese Communist Party following the Shanghai uprising and the break with the Guomindang.²⁶ The issue was also very pertinent to the creation of the Vietnamese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930 and inseparable from the figure of Ho Chi Minh.²⁷

Ho Chi Minh was 'more than a pawn of historical forces... he impressed his personality on the course of Vietnamese history.'²⁸ The foundation of the ICP owes much to his initial work in at first fusing the anti-imperialist movement with its Vietnamese patriotic tradition with an

international communist movement into the patriotic revolutionary organisation Thanh Nien in 1925.²⁹ With its headquarters in Canton, Thanh Nien fell victim to the events in China, following the violent collapse of the united front between the CCP and the Guomindang and Ho Chi Minh returned to Europe.³⁰ In the ensuing chaos the organisation already suffering from factionalism over its commitment to social revolution or colonial independence split.³¹ One section, based on Tokin, heavily influenced by the class against class line of the 1928 Sixth Congress of the Communist International declared themselves a Communist Party while the other two followed a more nationalist position but also adopted similar title and the 'dispute degenerated from crisis into absurdity.'³²

The squabble became farce as the Comintern became involved when invited to adjudicate between all three factions who had applied to join the Comintern. The question became embroiled in the bureaucratic monolith of the Comintern with the CCP claiming jurisdiction against that of the Far Eastern Bureau and the Singapore based South Seas Communist Party which claimed to represent fledgling organisations not yet granted full party status.³³ The question also arises of the strong possibility that the Chinese were attempting to take on the leadership of the whole Asian Communist movement.³⁴ During this period Ho Chi Minh had returned to Southeast Asia and with painstaking negotiation, as an emissary of the Comintern, brought together the three disparate groups to form the Vietnamese Communist Party at a meeting in Hong Kong in February 1930.³⁵

How much authority Ho Chi Minh had from the Comintern to resolve the issue is controversial. The new party including its programme was very much fashioned by Ho Chi Minh, 'there is little question that *his* sympathies lay with the nationalist faction.'³⁶ There were also further entanglements, as the nationalist faction appeared to carry the support of the CCP against the pro Moscow Tonkin group.³⁷ Once reports reached Moscow, the Comintern held back recognition of the new party on a number of grounds until April 1931.³⁸ Humiliation for Ho Chi Minh and his supporters followed as the Comintern criticised its policy for 'violating the class principles of communism' denounced its slogan 'an independent Vietnam' as 'chauvinist' and ordered that its name be changed to the Indochinese Communist Party.³⁹ The ICP was now established clearly in a model laid down by the Comintern following the Sixth Congress and the position adopted by Ho Chi Minh and to a certain extent Lenin was clearly repudiated.⁴⁰

Communism was the most successful of the anti-colonial groups at work against the occupation of the French in Indo China. Melanie Beresford has suggested that the other nationalist groups failed because they took an 'essentially traditional and hierarchical view of society' and were unable to 'place the mass of Vietnamese peasants and workers at the centre of their political strategy'.⁴¹ Further evidence of communist success has come from Duiker who rejects any suggestion that the French Colonial regime was so harsh and successful at containing non-communist

nationalism that it created a power vacuum that the ICP was able to exploit.⁴²

Vietnamese Communism had a pragmatic and independent streak as has been noted in respect of work with the peasantry but also exceptionally, it widely extended the interpretation of the Popular Front line from 1935. The ICP was the only Communist Party to work in collaboration with Trotskyites, the group associated with the Saigon based newspaper *La Lutte*.⁴³ Such was the anxiety at Comintern headquarters and the minor electoral success that occurred, that the relationship could not be quelled until 1937 following the direct intervention of a senior figure from the PCF and a somewhat reluctant one from Ho Chi Minh then resident again in Moscow.⁴⁴

It has been argued that the significance of Vietnamese Communism was not to be realised until after the demise of the Comintern. In the 1920s and 1930s Southeast Asia was 'a mere appendage' of China, the spotlight of international communist attention and Indochina was a mere side show.⁴⁵ Marxist roots had firmer foundations in other countries, the Communist Party of Indonesia the oldest in Asia was founded in May 1920, before the Chinese and ten years before that of Vietnam.⁴⁶ However, under the influence of Ho Chi Minh and a form of revolutionary patriotism combined with pre-Maoist thought the Vietnamese Communists established themselves as a viable anti-colonial movement.

The 'political success of communism in Vietnam has been largely due to its ability to identify with Vietnamese patriotism' but it would not have succeeded without the outside assistance provided by the Comintern in terms of a refuge in China and Moscow for when the going got tough.⁴⁷ The legacy of the Comintern and its agent Ho Chi Minh continues to this day, Vietnam is in one of the few communist states still remaining, having achieved its own unique road to power. The Vietnamese party, certainly its leader was exceptional, influenced by Lenin rather than Marx, Ho Chi Minh wrote 'at first, it was patriotism, not yet communism which led me to have confidence in Lenin, in the Third International.'⁴⁸

NOTES

- ¹ Melanie Beresford, Vietnam: Politics, Economics and Society, (London, 1988), p.1
- ² *Ho Chi Minh was born Nguyen Sinh Cung according to William J. Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, (New York, 2000), p.17. and used between thirty two and seventy six aliases during his life, see Huynh Kim Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945 (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), pp.57-58. The most commonly used in the 1920s and 1930s are Nguyen Ai Quoc, however, I shall use the name he is commonly known as Ho Chi Minh.*
- ³ Hélène Carrère d'Encausse and Stuart R.Schram, Marxism and Asia, (London, 1969), pp.26-27.
- ⁴ Ibid.p.27.
- ⁵ Ibid.p.4.
- ⁶ Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, p.56. and Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, p.64.
- ⁷ Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, pp.71-73.
- ⁸ Ibid. pp. 85-86 and 98-101.
- ⁹ Ibid. p.95.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. p.90.
- ¹¹ Carrère d'Encausse Marxism and Asia, p.30.
- ¹² W.E.Willmott, 'Thoughts on Ho Chi Minh,' Pacific Affairs, Vol.44, 4, (Winter, 1971-72), p.585.
- ¹³ Beresford, Vietnam: Politics, p.91.
- ¹⁴ William J. Duiker, The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam, 2nd Edition, (Boulder, Colorado, 1996), p.20.
- ¹⁵ Beresford, Vietnam: Politics, pp.91-92. *see also Willmott, 'Thoughts on Ho Chi Minh,' pp.586-587.*
- ¹⁶ Duiker, The Communist Road to Power, pp.16 and 20.
- ¹⁷ Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, pp.90-92.
- ¹⁸ Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, pp.113-114.
- ¹⁹ R.B. Smith, 'The Foundation of the Indochinese Communist Party, 1929-1930', Modern Asian Studies, 32, (1998), p.783. *see also Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, p.177. First as the ICP the northern wing of the disintegrating Thanh Nien and then from 1930 as the unified VCP.*
- ²⁰ Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, p.164.
- ²¹ Ibid. p.171.
- ²² Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, p.181 and 183.
- ²³ Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, p.169. *see also Note 14, Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, p.181.*
- ²⁴ Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, pp.216-218.
- ²⁵ Kevin Ruane, War and revolution in Vietnam, 1930-75, (London, 1998), p.1.
- ²⁶ Smith, 'Indochinese Communist Party', p.771.
- ²⁷ Smith, 'Indochinese Communist Party', p.771.

- ²⁸ Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, p.8.
- ²⁹ Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, pp.20-21, 26-28, 63-64. *see also* Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, pp.129-133.
- ³⁰ Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, pp.67, 76 and 88.
- ³¹ Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, pp.144-145.
- ³² Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, pp.158-159. *See also* Smith, 'Indochinese Communist Party', pp.781-789. *and* Ruane, War and revolution, p.4. *see also* Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, pp.86 and 123.
- ³³ Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, pp.161-162. *and* Smith, 'Indochinese Communist Party', p.793.
- ³⁴ Smith, 'Indochinese Communist Party', p.801.
- ³⁵ Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, pp.163-164.
- ³⁶ Ruane, War and revolution, p.4. *see also* Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, pp.126-127.
- ³⁷ Smith, 'Indochinese Communist Party', p.797.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.* p.799.
- ³⁹ Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, pp.126-130. *See also* Smith, 'Indochinese Communist Party', p.799.
- ⁴⁰ Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, p.189.
- ⁴¹ Beresford, Vietnam: Politics, p.12.
- ⁴² Duiker, The Communist Road to Power, pp.353-354.
- ⁴³ Huynh Kim Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945 (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), pp.198-199, Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, p.215, Duiker, The Communist Road to Power, p.56. *For the Trotskyite history of the La Lutte movement see* Daniel Hemery, Revolutionnaires Vietnamiens et pouvoir colonial en Indochine, (Paris, 1975), translated by Ted Crawford, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/backiss/Vol3/No2/Hemery.html> [Accessed 25 November 2001].
- ⁴⁴ Duiker, The Communist Road to Power, p.56. *and* Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, pp.2226-227.
- ⁴⁵ Justus M. van der Kroef, Communism in South-east Asia, (London, 1981), pp.6-7. *see also* Michael Weiner, 'Comintern in East Asia, 1919-39' in Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin, (Basingstoke, 1996), p.159.
- ⁴⁶ van der Kroef, Communism in South-east Asia, p.4.
- ⁴⁷ Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, pp.26 and 100.
- ⁴⁸ Ho Chi Minh, 'The path which led me to Leninism' *quoted in* Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, p.35.

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