

Vietnam, February 1968: The Tet Offensive, international solidarity and radicalism

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In February 1968, the liberation forces in South Vietnam began the “Tet offensive”. It was conducted on a very large scale throughout South Vietnam, including Saigon. Its international reach was considerable, it galvanized anti-imperialist and national liberation movements and accelerated the youth radicalization in Japan, the USA and Europe. It represented a turning point in the war and in the take-off of resistance at the very heart of the US military.

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Since 1965, Vietnam had become the epicentre of the world situation. The United States took over from the French and continued a multi-faceted military escalation that became, over the years, increasingly deadly, including the massive bombardment of liberated areas in the south, North Vietnam, Laos and finally Cambodia. Washington sent up to 500,000 troops to the campaign (during the 2003 Iraq intervention, there were never more than 180,000). Giant B52 bombers came into action. The Phoenix plan of targeted killings accounted for more victims than drones today. The economic and scientific resources of the world's largest power were mobilized. The conflict took place on all fronts – including social: a capitalist reform of agriculture was opposed to the revolutionary agrarian reform of the liberation forces. In many respects, the extreme brutality of the escalation was unprecedented – and remains so far unique. It embodies imperialist barbarism.

If Washington committed such means, it was because the outcome of this total war was not to be of local significance alone. It was a question of putting a stop to the revolutionary dynamic initiated in the third world by the victory of the Chinese revolution (1949), then of “containment and rollback” – the objective was to restore the imperialist order in the world, under US hegemony.

The roots of the radicalization of youth in the 1960s are diverse. In France, the Gaullist regime, resulting from a coup d'état, became unbearable (“10 years is enough”), as well as the stifling Catholic-influenced moral atmosphere. New social tensions were emerging as students of working class origin began to gain access to the universities. The year 1968 has different facets in different countries. However, the mobilization against the imperialist escalation in Vietnam constituted a unifying element, a shared identity trait, an essential marker across many countries. Of course, this is less true, at least on a large scale, under dictatorial regimes or the countries of Eastern Europe.

The necessary moment

In Vietnam, the decision to launch an offensive of the magnitude of Tet was not self-evident and provoked intense debate within the leadership of the Communist Party. The option finally chosen was an all-out, sustained offensive that could (maximum objective) pave the way for insurrectional uprisings or (minimum objective) change the course of the war thanks to its global impact. The city of Hue (capital of Central Vietnam) resisted 26 days before being reconquered by US forces – at the cost of its destruction. The siege of the giant Khe Sanh military base by divisions of the People's Army lasted 77 days (starting on January 21, it was a diversion to hide the preparation of the Tet offensive proper). The fighting hit the heart of Saigon (including the US embassy) and continued for a long time in the popular suburbs.

All the modalities of a people's war were combined during the Tet offensive: guerrilla operations, uprisings, intervention of the regular army (initially based in the North) and so on. Many problems appeared and were not necessarily resolved: how to organize the unstructured refugee populations in the suburbs of Saigon in such a clash? How to protect them durably against a deadly counter-offensive indifferent to civilian casualties?

Although initially taken by surprise, Washington quickly mobilized its huge military resources, as well as the networks and forces of the Saigon regime, to counter the Tet offensive. The cost paid by the revolutionary movement in Vietnam was very heavy. In particular, the political and activist infrastructure of the National Liberation Front (FNL) was severely undermined as it emerged into the open – the extent of losses of cadres in the South had long-term consequences.

In 1968, the Vietnamese leadership faced a real dilemma. It was necessary to change the course of the war, otherwise the US military escalation could have continued without limits: up to the massive bombardment of the dikes in the delta of the Red River in the North, for example, which would have caused the flooding of a large, densely populated area.

To act without delay and in a decisive way was all the more imperative as the Sino-Soviet conflict was in full swing and China was plunged into the tumult of the so-called Cultural Revolution. Material and military aid to Vietnam provided by Moscow and Beijing was still coming, but for how long?

More than a “favourable moment”, February 1968 was a “necessary moment”. To carry out a spectacular but punctual offensive (the revolutionary units retreating rapidly after simultaneous attacks on the whole territory) would have been much cheaper but might not have changed the course of the war. It was a very risky gamble to engage so many forces for so long – and the cost was considerable – but the course of the war was indeed changed.

Electric shock

The Tet offensive provoked an electric shock in the United States and in the world. It exposed many of Washington's lies. It showed that this war was neither “democratic” nor being won, but was terrible, barbaric, bogged down. It divided the US bourgeoisie, because its economic cost became prohibitive in the eyes of financial circles. Campuses were igniting. The protest of the US soldiers took a collective form. The slogan of “out now!” became popular among the troops. More than ever, African-Americans recognized themselves in the Vietnamese liberation struggle.

In Japan, the fight against US bases and the construction of the Narita airport radicalized, with the

mobilization of the peasants, the pacifist movement, and the far left. In Europe, the international conference and demonstration in Berlin was held in February, while the offensive was in full swing, with the emblematic banner: "The duty of the revolutionary is to make the revolution." The Vietnamese struggle was indeed perceived, rightly, as the intimate combination of a social revolution and a national struggle for independence, one energizing the other.

So in the eyes of the far left, Vietnam symbolized the actuality of the world revolution. The context of the time is profoundly different from what it became 50 years later. In Europe, dictatorships existed in Greece, Spain and Portugal; trans-Pyrenean contacts had to be clandestine. Many known activists (this was less the case with female activists) were banned from staying in numerous countries – to travel and to build links between movements, borders had to be crossed "discreetly". Helping soldiers who deserted from US bases in Germany required just as much discretion. The daily lives of members of far-left organizations were very different from those of Socialist Party members; clashes were constant with fascist groups, police stations were regularly "visited", injury or imprisonment was always a possibility.

The identification with the struggle of the Vietnamese people helped the far left to build and – in much wider circles – prefigured the radicalism of May 68.

In France

In France, thanks to the links established during the Algerian war in solidarity networks with the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), the Vietnam National Committee (CVN) brought together from the outset many components: personalities who were "autonomous" of the French Communist Party (PCF and fellow travellers, intellectuals or committed scientists, doctors and medical staff, social Christians, Americans who came to Paris in protest against the war, those "without cards" and the "anonymous", as well as the far left. [1] The main Maoist currents nevertheless kept to themselves and the UJCML launched the Vietnam Base Committees (CVB). The PCF led a broad coalition including many unions. The CVN advocated unity, but the Communist Party refused to rub shoulders with "leftists"; this was the time when PCF and CGT stewards would physically attack far leftists during demonstrations or around workplaces. For their part, the Vietnamese worked with everyone.

As well as the crisis of the Gaullist regime and the sharpness of latent social tensions, the still fresh experience of the fight against France's dirty war in Algeria was one of the peculiarities of the 1960s in France with, more distantly, the experience of resistance to the colonial reconquest of Vietnam initiated in 1946-1954 to recreate France's Empire. It constituted the basis on which anti-imperialist solidarity was redeveloped in the sixties. The Interunion University Committee played a pivotal role in this transmission.

In the aftermath of the Tet offensive, Washington was forced to accept the principle of peace talks. Conducted in Paris, they were quadripartite: the North Vietnamese government and the provisional revolutionary government in the South on one side, the United States and Saigon regime on the other.

The Vietnamese CP rejected the presence of the "great powers". It had learned the lessons from the 1954 Geneva negotiations. China and the USSR then lobbied hard for it to accept a compromise (the supposedly temporary division of the country at the 17th parallel) that was well below the level that the liberation forces were entitled to hope for given the reality of the balance of power on the ground. The exorbitant price of this compromise was the Second Indochina War, under the hegemony of Washington, which had been careful not to sign the Geneva Accords.

This question had an important resonance in the solidarity movement, especially in Europe. The French Communist Party traditionally had “peace” as a central slogan; but what peace? With the experience of Geneva, the radical left, the student movement, those personalities “autonomous” of the PCF mobilized for the “victory” of the liberation forces. No more rotten compromises imposed in Vietnam! The PCF finally made honourable amends and the coalition that it led then took on the name of the “National Action Committee for the Victory of the Vietnamese People”.

Agreeing to coerced and forced talks did not indicate any desire to engage in real negotiations. In fact, Washington was still trying to win the war, or else to thoroughly destroy this country that was so resistant to it. The military escalation continued, but the international context and the internal situation in the United States made it impossible to resort to ultimate measures such as the massive bombardment of dikes in the Red River delta (some were struck and weakened, however) or indeed atomic weapons.

However, Washington could play for time. The normalization of relations between China and the United States began. The People’s Republic replaced Taiwan at the UN Security Council in 1971 and Nixon went to Beijing the following year.

The liberation forces in Vietnam finally appealed to all components of international solidarity to mobilize and force Washington to sign the Paris Accords - a compromise, but this time a winning compromise, reached in 1973. US troops were gradually withdrawing from Vietnam (but the bombings were concentrated on Cambodia). In 1975, the Saigon regime collapsed.

Internationalism

These years of fire were a real school of internationalism for our militant generation. The utility - and therefore the need - of solidarity was tested. It took a thousand forms, a thousand faces, a thousand expressions and its diversity strengthened its effectiveness.

Political positions in support of struggles around the world are obviously important, and sometimes, given the situation, they cannot be transcribed into active campaigns. Nevertheless, internationalism is not an abstract notion. It’s not just a theory, a program, an ethics, an empathy, a state of mind, the sense of a fighting community, even if it’s all of that. It only comes alive in action. When it remains unorganised while action is possible, it becomes helpless, reduced to empty proclamations of commitment. The commitment was obvious for hundreds of thousands, even millions, during this period.

The French case shows, however, how this solidarity in action can be fragile. After the general strike of May 1968, the CVN and CVB disappeared, while the far left concentrated on strengthening its implantation in the working class. However, we were still far from the Vietnamese victory we were hoping for. The French “political moment” makes it possible to understand why this was so. For a wing of Maoism, there was no longer any question of supporting the Vietnamese, deemed too close to the Soviets: this would lead it to side with the Khmer Rouge. For the majority of our militant generation, this was not the result of a cynical decision, but of a sudden shift in “priorities” and enthusiasms.

The abrupt cessation of solidarity mobilizations was nonetheless irresponsible in the strong sense of the term, an irresponsibility painfully felt by some of the components of the CVN.

The best help we could bring to the Vietnamese of course would have been to make the revolution at home, but there was still a long way to go - and even more than we envisioned at the time. The May

crisis weakened the imperialist camp, without reducing the importance of a specific movement of solidarity as evidenced by the harshness of the Indochinese years 1968-1975. We knew it, but the reconstitution of a solidarity movement was not spontaneous.

The Vietnamese representation in France did everything it could to help. To the chagrin of the PCF, by now passive, the PRG (South Vietnam), Laotians and Khmers even participated in a meeting of the Ligue communiste (ex-JCR) calling for a revival of solidarity with Indochina. The arc of forces that had animated the CVN was, to a large extent, reconstituted to found, in 1971, the Indochinese Solidarity Front (FSI) which multiplied initiatives until 1973 - but could not, after 1975, respond to the strangulation policy pursued by imperialism for years, to the consequences of the China-USSR inter-bureaucratic conflicts and the Sino-Indochinese crisis.

The very conception of the anti-imperialist movement has been the subject of divisions in France within the extreme left. Was it above all a matter of popularizing amongst ourselves the example of the revolutionary struggle in Vietnam ("Dare to struggle")? Was it really up to the Vietnamese people to help us build ourselves? The compass that guides solidarity, if this word makes sense, concerns the needs of those who struggle "over there". By responding as best we can, we build ourselves certainly, but as an *internationalist organization*.

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P.S.

* Translation IVP: <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5369>

Footnotes

[1] Including part of the Maoist movement, the Parti socialiste unifié, the Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire and the Alliance marxiste révolutionnaire, but not the "Lambertist" movement which did not participate in solidarity nor in the May uprising whose "adventurist" character it denounced.