

The Imperialist Defeat in Vietnam: Its Causes, Meaning, and Historical Consequences

Tuesday 12 February 2008, by [MANDEL Ernest](#) (Date first published: 20 July 1975).

Contents

- [Why the War of Aggression?](#)
- [The failure of the counter-rev](#)
- [Role of the U.S. antiwar \(...\)](#)
- [Role of the Solidarity Movemen](#)
- [The defeat of the Moscow \(...\)](#)
- [Historic Meaning of the \(...\)](#)
- [The world situation after \(...\)](#)
- [Interaction of the various \(...\)](#)

For more than a decade the world situation was dominated by the civil war in Vietnam and the attempt of U.S. imperialism to determine its outcome by means of a counterrevolutionary war of intervention. This was not simply a result of the fact that the international, internal, military, and even (in part) economic and monetary policy of the United States, the major capitalist power in the world, was dominated by the war. It resulted above all from the fact that the Indochina war, like an intense spotlight, illuminated the major shifts that have occurred in the worldwide social relationship of forces; moreover, it burned these changes into the consciousness of the most lucid representatives of the major antagonistic classes and sections of classes in the world today.

Why the War of Aggression?

We deliberately designate the Vietnam war primarily as a civil war in which U.S. imperialism intervened. This definition is annoying to all those who, from whatever angle, do not admit that the world in which we live is dominated by the irreconcilable conflict between capital and labor, a conflict that the historic crisis of the capitalist system, opened by the first world war, drives to its most acute expression, leaving open only two possible outcomes: the victory of the world socialist revolution or humanity's fall into barbarism.

The concrete manner in which this conflict manifests itself in each sector and country of the world can vary. In the semicolonial countries, which are dominated by the law of uneven and combined development imposed on them by imperialism, this conflict interlaces with the necessity of resolving the tasks that in other countries had been on the whole solved by the bourgeois revolution: independence and national unification, liberation of the peasantry from feudal and semifeudal exploitation. But precisely because of this combination of tasks with which the Indochinese revolution was confronted, the alternative "socialist revolution or barbarism" assumed an especially gripping expression in Indochina.

The barbarism was supplied by the riches power of the world - in the form of genocidal bombing, chemical defoliation, tiger cages for political prisoners, and drugs and prostitution on an unprecedented scale. This fury was unleashed by imperialism against the Vietnamese masses because they had committed the sins of not bowing to the superiority of Yankee weaponry and of not resigning themselves to defeat.

The class domination of the international bourgeoisie rests 90 percent on its automatic reproduction by market mechanisms and the acceptance of those mechanisms as natural or inevitable. By selling their labor power, purchasing their living necessities, and producing for the employers, the workers reproduce not only surplus value and the accumulation of capital but also the social relations that compel them to continue to sell their labor power, to remain wage-earners.

But when a large section of the exploited say, "Enough!", when they refuse to accept oppression, inequality, and injustice as inevitable, when they begin to revolt massively against a society of exploitation, then the reign of capital is shaken more deeply than by ten economic crises. For the rule of capital can then no longer base itself on automatic economic factors. It must resort to extraeconomic violence, to naked terror, in order to maintain its domination. Capital then tries to give the oppressed a lesson so bloody and so persuasive in its horror that they will hesitate for one or two generations before ever again daring to commit the crime of treason against capital.

Such was the historic meaning of the massacre of the Paris Communards in 1871. Such was the historic meaning of the Nazi terror and the Spanish civil war. And such was the historic meaning of the war of aggression unleashed by American imperialism against the Indochinese revolution.

Nowadays good liberal souls in the United States wonder if this was not some kind of grandstand stunt, a bad political joke. They try to assign responsibility for the intervention in Vietnam to the "provincial" Johnson, the "crook" Nixon, or even the "diabolical" machine of the CIA. But history will not allow them to ease their bad consciences at the expense of a few low-level scapegoats. The decision to intervene in the civil war in Vietnam was made by the "great" "liberal" president John F. Kennedy. It was proposed, decided, and approved by the cream of the U.S. monopolist bourgeoisie, including the most distinguished intellectual advisers. It was a deliberate decision, taken on the basis of an analysis of world developments that perfectly illustrates the meaning of the intervention: to show the revolutionaries and the masses of the world the price they would have to pay for any attempt to challenge the bourgeois order wherever it remains in force.

To realize this it is enough to recall the exact moment when the intervention was decided: just after the consolidation of the revolution in Cuba, where the regime of the bourgeoisie and its North America protector had been swept away almost by surprise, Washington thus lacking the time to intervene, except after the fact with the miserable failure of Playa Giron. The documents attest to this: What motivated the intervention in Vietnam was the fear that revolutionary uprisings of the type that led to Dien Bien Phu, uprisings in the image of the Algerian and Cuban revolutions, would spread throughout the world; that was the great fear, more than the fear of a successive fall of capitalist positions in Southeast Asia itself.

To this must be added a supplementary, conjunctural, and "regional" motive for the escalation, which came to the fore during the Johnson administration. In one of the greatest and potentially richest semicolonial countries of the world, Indonesia, a pre-Revolutionary crisis had been developing during the period 1964-65, a crisis that gave the "domino theory" a very precise content. A rapid victory of the Vietnamese revolution could have quickly swept Indonesia toward a victorious workers and peasants insurrection. Johnson's escalation in Indochina had the practical effect of strengthening the resolve of the Indonesian counterrevolution. It paved the way for the coup and bloody massacres of October 1965.

Finally, in response to the aid the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was extending to the revolution in South Vietnam, the Johnson administration had the supplementary aim, at least between 1965 and 1968, of destroying this workers state, that is, of "rolling back" the revolution and expanding the free-world zone of capitalist exploitation.

The failure of the counter-revolutionary war

The war of imperialist intervention in Indochina ended in a total political, military, and social defeat. The bourgeois regimes in Indochina collapsed. U.S. imperialism did not succeed in preventing the victory of the revolutionary forces. It is now only a matter of time before the workers state now being constructed in South Vietnam becomes definitively established and before the reunification of the country is carried out through the fusion of the South with North Vietnam.

Nevertheless, although the imperialist intervention failed in its immediate objective - intimidating the Vietnamese masses and halting their advance along the road of national and social liberation - it did manage to make gains on a world scale. The enormous price in blood that the Vietnamese revolutionaries were forced to pay had an effect in intimidating not so much the popular masses of the semicolonial or imperialist countries as important sectors, reformist and neoreformist, of the international workers movement. The U.S. intervention facilitated counterrevolutionary undertakings in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This resulted essentially from the tactical risk that imperialism was able to run with success: It was able to concentrate its forces on Vietnam without substantial anti-imperialist forces taking advantage of the weakening of its capacity to intervene elsewhere in the world.

Che understood the terms of the situation: Imperialism could not permit itself the luxury of concentrating its entire frightful destructive machine on the territory of one small country unless Vietnam remained isolated. "Create two, three, many Vietnams!", the slogan taken up from Che by the Fourth International, did not simply mean that aid had to be offered the Vietnamese revolution by compelling imperialism to disperse its forces. Above all it meant that bloody intimidation operations of this kind had to be made impossible. The very dispersion of the imperialist forces would have qualitatively diminished the impact of these operations.

The fact that such a dispersion did not occur is primarily the responsibility of the Soviet bureaucracy and all the leaderships of workers and anti-imperialist organizations influenced by that bureaucracy. The fact that for years this bureaucracy did not even provide the Vietnamese masses the means to defend themselves effectively against a murderous air assault will remain an additional cause of discredit of the masters of the Kremlin in the eyes of vanguard workers.

If in spite of this tactical advantage, which could have been avoided, imperialism still wound up losing the war in Vietnam, it is above all precisely because it was a civil war, because the counterrevolutionary war of intervention was a dirty and unjust war and was seen as such by the masses throughout the world, by the masses and soldiers in the United States, and above all by the Vietnamese masses themselves.

The war in Vietnam thus confirms a great historical lesson. In wars between antagonistic social classes (whether they are waged on a purely "national" terrain or actually spill over to become international civil wars) the factor of weaponry and military technology is in the final analysis less decisive than the political-moral factor.

Of course, it would be irresponsible to underestimate the importance of adequate weaponry, of military strategy and tactics correctly adapted to the specific character of the country and the

combatants. But when the field of battle is taken by the toiling masses fighting against age-old exploitation, masses like those of Vietnam who wanted to get rid of the landlords and usurers who were taking over 50, 60, or 70 percent of the harvest, when the masses take the field against soldiers who see every day that they are fighting to preserve the power of gangsters, smugglers, torturers, rotten generals, and politicians who have no other ideal but self-enrichment, the former will inevitably be infused with indomitable determination and energy, while the latter will inevitably become progressively demoralized, so long as betrayal does not take hold in the camp of the revolution and so long as the masses do not have the feeling that they will be systematically robbed of the fruits of their battle.

On all these points, the unfolding of the war in Vietnam confirmed the lessons of the Dutch war of independence from Spain, of the wars of the French revolution against the crowned heads of Europe, of the American civil war, and of the Russian civil war. Whatever the precise nature of the classes involved and whatever the exact stakes of the battle (and they were manifestly different in each of these five cases), in the final analysis in each case it is a question of wars of oppressed majorities against oppressive and corrupt minorities, wars in which the former could have been beaten only by betrayal in their own camp (as was the case in Spain between 1936 and 1939) and not by the political strength of their adversaries.

This implies that the imperialist defeat in Vietnam is also a consequence of the fact that the Vietnamese Communist party did not repeat the role played by the CP and the Popular Front during the war in Spain, that it did not stab the revolution in the back under the pretext of winning the war "first," that it allowed the country to be engulfed in the flames of the agrarian revolution, that it did not accept the possibility, offered by imperialism after the Tet offensive of 1968, of obtaining a halt to the attacks against North Vietnam in exchange for a halt to the revolution in South Vietnam, in other words, that the CP did not betray the Vietnamese revolution.

Role of the U.S. antiwar movement

The defeat suffered by imperialism in Vietnam, which turned into a military rout, was above all a political defeat. It was the political defeat that made the military defeat possible. And imperialism suffered that political defeat on both of the major fronts of the war: Indochina itself and the United States.

The war in Vietnam was revealing in this regard as well. The idea that an imperialist state could mobilize half a million men and send them thousands of miles from their homes for a period of years regardless of the political and ideological conditions is a profoundly false idea that overestimates the power of ideological manipulation commanded by the ruling classes. Every war in which large armies are committed involves some political risk for the ruling class, and this risk can be run only under precise political conditions. Every imperialist war that comes on top of a preceding war increases this risk still further. The leaders of the American bourgeoisie, who were led to send ever larger contingents of American troops to Indochina in escalation after escalation, clearly committed a catastrophic error of estimation in judging the extent to which the American people were prepared to accept any crime whatever in the name of foreign policy. To a large extent the Watergate scandal was a consequence of the largely abortive attempts to postpone the moment at which the price of this error had to be paid.

The reaction of the American masses to the war in Vietnam was not a highly politicized one in the sense that they did not take up a position of solidarity with the Vietnamese revolution. To hope for something like that would have been to completely misunderstand the state of political

consciousness of the proletariat and the great majority of youth in the United States; they have not yet achieved political independence of bourgeois ideology. But while this reaction was visceral and elementary, it was no less powerful; its breadth was unprecedented in the history of colonial wars. After some years of hesitation and even of mitigated support for the aggression, the American masses began to react when the sending of American contingents to Indochina and the growing American losses brought the reality of the war into the majority of U.S. households.

Having grasped both the limits and potential of this mass reaction, our American comrades played an important role in the building of a mass antiwar movement around the single theme of the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. That was the most effective internationalist aid they could have rendered the Vietnamese revolution. It succeeded in changing the political situation in the United States to such an extent that Johnson was forced to withdraw from the presidential elections in 1968, that Nixon was forced to promise a rapid end to the war, and that the ruling class was drawn into divisions and ever more complicated and lying maneuvers in face of its own people, which finally led to the effective withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Vietnam and the halting of the bombing after the signing of the Paris accords.

The role played by the Trotskyists in this mass mobilization also reveals the changes that had occurred in the world situation during the preceding decade. It can be said without fear of exaggeration that the antiwar movement in the United States was the most important objective ally of the Vietnamese revolution. If the American masses had not thrown their weight into the balance to force imperialism to withdraw its troops, the war could have gone on much longer and the outcome could have been different.

Role of the Solidarity Movement in Europe

In Europe the situation in which revolutions had to deal with the Vietnamese revolution was different from the situation confronting revolutionaries in the United States – in two respects.

First, the European bourgeoisie was not directly engaged in the war. It even regarded the war with some skepticism. Moreover, this skepticism was intermixed with a bit of what the Germans call *Schadenfreude* (joy in the troubles of others), a way of paying American imperialism back for what had happened during the postwar “process of decolonization,” culminating in the U.S. intervention to stop the Franco-British adventure against Nasser’s Egypt in 1956.

Since there were no European troops in Indochina, the immediate material interests of millions of people, which is what detonated the mass antiwar movement in the United States, were not in play on the European continent. The antiwar movement in Europe thus had to base itself on broader social, political, and moral interests, which could result only in a sentiment of identification with the Vietnamese revolution. That is why solidarity with the Vietnamese revolution against the imperialist aggression was the central slogan correctly used by European revolutionaries. It is around this slogan that tens and tens of thousands of people were mobilized in London, Berlin, Paris, Milan, and elsewhere. The mass impact of this slogan, incontestable in the light of the size of the solidarity movement, reflects the still higher level of political consciousness of a section of the European proletariat compared with that of the North American proletariat.

But this difference in tactics for the antiwar movement in the United States and Europe was based not only on a correct estimation of the differences in the objective and subjective conditions on either side of the Atlantic, but also on an understanding of the different function of the two movements in the aid they could provide the Vietnamese revolution. The movement of solidarity with the Vietnamese revolution that was launched in Europe and picked up in Japan, Latin America, and

even East Europe could have greater effects on the outcome of the war through its repercussions within the international workers movement and the bureaucratized workers states than through its repercussions in the United States. By unleashing a mass movement of identification and solidarity with the Vietnamese revolution, the revolutionaries of Europe, Japan, and the semicolonial countries profoundly influenced and dragged in their wake a good part of the rank and file of the Communist youth. They radically modified the relationship of forces among the youth between the advocates of "peaceful coexistence" and "peace at any price" on the one hand and the defenders of the victory of the Vietnamese revolution on the other hand.

They thus raised the international stakes to the point that the political price Moscow and Peking would have had to pay for a total betrayal of the revolution became very heavy. They thus erected an obstacle to the process of betrayal of this revolution by the bureaucracies of the workers states. That was the major function of this movement. It was fully crowned with success. The Vietnamese Communists were equally as conscious of that function as they were of the key role the U.S. antiwar movement played in aiding their revolution.

The role played by the Fourth International in the organization of this solidarity movement negatively indicated the extent of the failure of the Stalinized Communist parties. While the still weak revolutionary organizations were able to stimulate the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of ardent partisans of the Vietnamese revolution throughout the world, the leaders of trade unions that have millions of members did not undertake to organize a boycott of weapons and troops for the "dirty war" (with the honorable exception of the Australian trade unions). This contrast was exploited by Hanoi as much as possible. It worked to the advantage of the Vietnamese revolution.

The defeat of the Moscow and Peking bureaucracies

For the Soviet bureaucracy the Vietnamese civil war and the determined resistance of the Indochinese masses to the American military intervention constituted causes of growing embarrassment and irritation to which the bureaucracy tried to put an end as quickly as possible. Running counter to the bureaucracy's fundamental strategy of "peaceful coexistence," modifying the division of the world into spheres of influence that had been worked out in Yalta and Potsdam, inspiring and stimulating the rise of struggles and of revolutionary consciousness throughout the world, shaking the authority of the Soviet bureaucracy and of the Communist parties under its aegis, and contributing to the reconstitution of small communist vanguards even in the countries under the very domination of the bureaucracy, the Vietnamese revolution and its repercussions upset the political designs of the bureaucracy and threatened its vital interests. The Soviet bureaucracy therefore brought all its weight to bear to try to put an end to that revolution. It did this primarily by remaining passive in face of each new escalation of imperialist aggression and by resorting to the blackmail of limiting or even threatening to halt its military aid to the Indochinese fighters. These pressures were brought to bear most cynically in the middle of the 1960s and the early 1970s. When the imperialist intervention in the civil war in South Vietnam expanded to acts of aggression against the territory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Kremlin refrained from offering any response or even any warning. It thus gave U.S. imperialism the green light to continue its escalation. When the political crisis in the United States caused by the prolongation of the war compelled Nixon to maneuver in the direction of a retreat, the Kremlin intervened to help him "save face" instead of acting to stimulate a new rise of the antiwar movement and a new push for struggle in this field. In both cases, the masses of Indochina suffered enormous losses in human life, material destruction, and precious time as a result of these betrayals.

But in the end the Soviet bureaucracy did not succeed in strangling the Vietnamese revolution. The

most it could do was to slow down the pace of the victory.

The Sino-Soviet conflict, a concentrated expression of the crisis of Stalinism that resulted from the new rise of world revolution and from its resounding victory in China, had a contradictory effect on the unfolding of the Indochina war.

On the one hand, by weakening the Kremlin's grip on the Communist parties (especially in Asia), by stimulating a differentiation within the mass movement, and by fostering the emergence of a new vanguard prepared to act independently of the bureaucracy if not directly against its commands and interests, this conflict contributed to limiting the effectiveness of the bureaucracy's counterrevolutionary intervention. The margins of the Vietnamese CP for political, social, and military independence were broadened. The Vietnamese CP was able to take advantage of its independent, "equidistant" position relative to Moscow and Peking in order to avoid having its material aid cut off completely.

The prestige and authority of the Vietnamese leaders in the eyes of the masses throughout the world and in the eyes of Communist militants in particular was such that neither Moscow nor Peking could run the risk of being denounced publicly by Hanoi. This is undoubtedly one of the factors that ultimately prevented the Indochinese revolution from being strangled the way the 1936-37 Spanish revolution was strangled.

But on the other hand, the aggravation of the Sino-Soviet conflict, particularly beginning with the final phase of the "Cultural Revolution," and its increasing transformation into a conflict between states created supplementary obstacles on the road to victory in Indochina. These obstacles were not only logistical, results of the growing reluctance of the Moscow and Peking bureaucracies to collaborate on the most strictly technical level to send arms and ammunition to Hanoi. They were also and most importantly diplomatic and political, the two bureaucracies running a race to see which could win Nixon's favors more quickly and which could do more to facilitate the American "disengagement"; the interests of the Indochinese revolution were not taken into account.

The Fourth International adopted a principled position in this regard that objectively, and probably in part subjectively as well, coincided with the interests of the Vietnamese revolution and its leaders. The International demanded that regardless of their differences and without abandoning their right to public debate, the leaders of the bureaucratized workers states conclude a united-front agreement to defend the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Indochinese revolution. Far from reflecting any alignment behind the interests of the bureaucracy, this appeal expressed a consciousness of the class character of the Vietnam war, of the stakes involved for the world revolution, of the importance of making those stakes clear to the masses throughout the world, and of the need to force the leaders of the bureaucracy and the mass workers parties that they still control to line up behind the Vietnamese revolution.

During the first phase of the war it was primarily the Kremlin that suffered the consequences of rejecting such an option; it paid for this refusal with a loss of influence over hundreds of thousands of workers and youth throughout the world. During the final phase of the war, however, it was Peking that began to be unmasked. It must not be forgotten that while American bombs were still falling on the Vietnamese fighters, Nixon was invited to Peking and the Chinese leaders advanced the thesis of "two superpowers" placed on the same footing and of "social imperialism as the main enemy of the peoples of Europe and Asia."

Once again, the mirror of the war in Vietnam exposed the fundamental character of the policy of the bureaucracy in both Moscow and Peking: to cynically subordinate the interests of the international revolution to the changing needs of their own short-term, narrowly nationalist diplomacy. In this

sense, the victory of the Vietnamese revolution is a defeat for the bureaucracies of Moscow and Peking, just as it is a striking defeat for imperialism.

Historic Meaning of the victory in Vietnam

Historically, the victory of the Vietnamese revolution and the concrete form which it occurred synthesize all the changes that have occurred throughout the world during the past twenty-five or thirty years.

The victory expresses above all the shift in the worldwide relationship of forces between capital and labor, or more precisely between imperialism and all the anti-imperialist forces, since the end of the Second World War and the victory of the Chinese revolution, which broke the capitalist encirclement of the Soviet Union. It expresses the rise of the world revolution, which is in striking contrast to its retreat during the period 1923-43.

Of course, this rise of the world revolution is neither linear nor homogeneous everywhere in the world. After the first few years of the postwar period, it was accompanied by a relative stabilization of imperialism in West Europe, Japan, and the other imperialist countries, especially after the betrayal of the revolutionary opportunities of 1944-48 in capitalist Europe by the Stalinist and reformist leaderships. Beginning in 1965 there were grave and bloody defeats in a number of semicolonial countries (from the Indonesian and Brazilian defeats to the defeat in Chile), and these were not unrelated to imperialism's savage aggression against Indochina and the incapacity of the anti-imperialist movement under Stalinist leadership to respond politically and internationally in the way that was required. But the new rise of workers and revolutionary struggles in Europe, symbolized by May 1968, the rise of the antiwar movement in the United States, and the emergence of a new vanguard stimulated by the Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions in turn made a precious contribution to the shift in the worldwide relationship of class forces of which the Vietnamese victory is the product in the final analysis.

Further, the victory expresses the shift in the relationship of forces between the masses on the one hand and the bureaucratic apparatuses on the other, and, as a corollary, the shift in the relationship of forces between these apparatuses and the vanguard that has freed itself of their control within the mass movement. The comparison between the unfolding of the Spanish civil war and the Vietnamese civil war is especially instructive in this regard. In Spain the Stalinists and reformists (with the complicity of anarchist leaders turned bourgeois ministers) were able in less than a year to direct the torrent of the Spanish revolution toward channels aimed at reconstructing the bourgeois state, thus leading to the crushing of the revolution and its defeat by fascism; but in Indochina fifteen years of pressure - open and concealed, bloody and "peaceful," military and diplomatic - were unable to prevent the masses from bringing down the state and society of their exploiters. The Stalinist and Social Democratic leaders, who maintained almost total control over the powerful worldwide movement of solidarity with the Spanish proletariat, were able to abuse the movement and in essence press it into the service of strangling the revolution; but the antiwar movement and the movement of solidarity with the Vietnamese revolution, which were no less powerful or generalized, largely escaped such attempts at manipulation. These movements even became a generally independent factor that weighed positively on the outcome of the war.

But the concrete form taken by the victory of the revolution - the collapse of the Thieu and Lon Nol regimes seven years after the Tet offensive in countries covered with ruins and standing on the brink of famine, conditions that strongly favor the bureaucratic deformation of the new workers states in process of being born - is also not a product of chance, nor is it the fatal result of the enormous

power of "counterrevolutionary dissuasion" still commanded by imperialism. Above all it is an expression of the degree of control that the bureaucratic apparatuses still conserve over the workers and anti-imperialist movement throughout the world, of the absence of general strikes and generalized boycotts to respond to the imperialist aggression, of the absence of effective international coordination of the revolutionary mass movements, of the absence of a mass revolutionary international. It is an expression of the persistence of the crisis of the subjective factor, even if in a less severe form than in the past, at least in some countries. Thus, in the final analysis, the form taken by the Vietnamese victory is an expression of the fact that the new rise of world revolution is as yet only partial and fragmented, that this new rise is not yet sufficient to definitively break down the conservative role that the bureaucratic apparatuses continue to play within the mass movement.

The character of the Vietnamese Communist party is itself as much a reflection as a constituent element of all these changes. To say that the Vietnamese CP is a Stalinist party in the sense that the overall effect of its policy on a world scale is counterrevolutionary is manifestly absurd in face of the balance-sheet of the past fifteen years of the second Indochina war. To affirm that the VCP has "definitively gone over to the side of the bourgeois order" is delirium. The Vietnamese bourgeoisie has voted with its feet against this grotesque thesis so massively as to leave no room for doubt about the class content of the revolution being carried out and of the new state being constructed.

But the fact that the Vietnamese CP is manifestly neither Stalinist nor counterrevolutionary in no way implies that it is revolutionary Marxist or that it is an upholder of proletarian democracy, of the direct exercise of power by the proletariat and poor peasantry organized in soviet, or that it is clearly internationalist. The thesis that in no country of the world, under no conditions, and for no length of time can the regime of the owning classes be overthrown unless a revolutionary Marxist party stands at the head of the masses is a crude and mechanical oversimplification of the Leninist theory of organization. From the Paris Commune to the victories of the Yugoslav, Chinese, and North Vietnamese revolutions to the victory of the Cuban revolution we have seen victorious socialist revolutions overthrow the regime of capital under the leadership of groupings and parties that have had three features in common: their objectively proletarian political character; their option in favor of the revolution at the decisive moment, and thereby their break with counterrevolutionary strategies and tactics; and their crying programmatic insufficiencies, leading in all cases to serious bureaucratic deformations, except in the case of the Commune, where they led instead to rapid defeat.

This phenomenon of parties standing midway between the workers bureaucracy and the proletarian masses, midway between Stalinism and revolutionary Marxism, in turn results from the still pronounced weakness of the subjective factor on a world scale. In the final analysis it reflects the still limited participation of the proletariat of the industrially developed countries in revolutionary activity and the belatedness of the victory of the socialist revolution in the most important imperialist countries, while at the same time the worldwide crisis and decomposition of the imperialist system is continuing and deepening. But in detailing the causes of the particular phenomenon, revealed by Vietnam even more clearly than by Cuba, we can simultaneously trace out its historic limits and the preconditions for overcoming it: a new rise of the world revolution placing the industrial proletariat in the center of international revolutionary action; a new leap forward in the building of the Fourth International through its growing over into a mass revolutionary International composed of mass revolutionary parties.

The world situation after the imperialist defeat in Vietnam

The defeat suffered by imperialism in Vietnam has accentuated the effects of the rise of the antiwar movement in the United States to create an entirely new international situation: American imperialism is now incapable, and will remain so for a whole period, of playing the role of world capitalist policeman by massively sending American troops to intervene in ongoing revolutions or civil wars.

But no other imperialist power, beginning with West Germany or Japan, not to mention an "integrated capitalist Europe, "which still does not exist in terms of state apparatus and repression, is today capable of substituting for momentarily debilitated American imperialism. The result of this is not only an acute crisis of leadership of the world bourgeoisie as a whole, but also an important new modification of the worldwide relationship of forces. For the first time since the opening of the era of the decline of capitalism, the proletarian revolution in the industrialized countries is temporarily shielded from massive foreign military intervention. We owe this colossal historical advantage to the heroism and revolutionary determination of the Vietnamese masses. That is the enormous debt of gratitude all revolutionaries owe to the Vietnamese revolution. For the reasons outlined above, which go back to the defeats suffered by the colonial revolution since 1965 and to the still pronounced weakness of the revolutionary movement in the rest of Southeast Asia, it is in capitalist Europe rather than anywhere else that the effects of this new international situation will be most beneficial in the short term for a new rise of the revolution.

Consciousness about this shift in the world situation must, however, be tempered by several considerations.

Above all, it is a temporary modification. It would be irresponsible to begin from the idea that imperialism has been definitively paralyzed. Imperialism will try to recreate the internal political conditions that would allow it to use the striking force it commands militarily and technologically. But that requires time, time to alter the internal situation in the United States, West Europe, and Japan. During this interval the chances for socialist revolution are strongly increased. And if the class struggles now going on or looming on the horizon culminate in the victory and not the defeat of the European proletariat, the international situation will further shift to the detriment of imperialism and capitalism.

Moreover, what is involved is a partial modification. We have said that after the rise of the antiwar movement in the United States and the imperialist defeat in Vietnam, U.S. imperialism can no longer send masses of infantry troops against ongoing revolutions. But this does not mean that it cannot intervene militarily in other ways. It still commands powerful counterrevolutionary "relays" like the armies of Brazil, Iran, and Zaire, which because of the temporary victory of the counterrevolution in these countries, can act effectively against revolutionary developments in the neighboring countries, at least for a certain period. And there is an additional threat that becomes ever more precise and horrifying today: the threat of the use of tactical nuclear weapons against insurgent peoples. The very nature of nuclear weapons and the consequences of their use (not only materially but politically and psychologically as well) are such that this threat can be used only extremely selectively. But the warnings of U.S. Secretary of Defense Schlesinger must be taken seriously. Imperialism is preparing American public opinion for the use of nuclear weapons against the colonial revolution in at least two specific cases: in the event of a new outbreak of civil war in Korea and in the event of a threat of the imminent destruction of the Zionist state of Israel. Nothing suggests that this threat will remain limited to these two cases in coming years.

Finally, there is one weapon of counterrevolutionary intervention that preserves all its effectiveness

and that will be used all the more regularly as direct military intervention becomes more difficult. That is the weapon of economic pressure, of financial strangling, of attempts at starving out the revolution. In the case of some semicolonial and imperialist countries this is a weapon even more formidable in its psychological and political effects than in its immediate material effects. It is the duty of internationalists to prepare the international working class and the masses of the world to learn how to respond to that weapon, the use of which does not provoke as massive and spontaneous reactions as those provoked by barbaric bombing or the sending of troops to intervene.

Interaction of the various sectors of the world revolution

Objectively, this change in the world situation strengthens the trend toward the shift of the center of gravity of the world revolution toward the industrialized countries, increases the weight of the urban proletariat in the revolution in the semicolonial countries, and accelerates the return to forms of proletarian and socialist revolution that approach the "norms" of the revolutions of 1917-23, tendencies that were pointed out in the political resolutions adopted by the Ninth and Tenth World Congresses of the Fourth International (1969 and 1974).

The combination of the new international situation created by the imperialist defeat in Vietnam, the new rise of workers struggles in Europe, the worldwide crisis of leadership of the bourgeoisie, and the generalized recession of the international capitalist economy has created exceptionally favorable conditions for the development of an almost simultaneous revolutionary situation in a number of European countries: Portugal, Spain, Italy, France, and even Britain. We are not yet at that point, but the day is no longer far off. The events in Portugal are already beginning to demonstrate that we had not fallen in excessive optimism when on the hundredth anniversary of the Paris Commune we predicted that the time was approaching when we would once again see workers councils in Europe.

The determination of all our European sections to press within the rising wave of struggles of workers and youth for the increasingly extensive adoption by the masses of forms of self-organization like general assemblies of strikers, the democratic election of strike committees responsible to these general assemblies, and their local, regional, and national coordination has already borne fruit and will bear even more in the future. The working class that will confront the coming revolutionary crises in Europe is very different from the working class of the 1940s and 1950s. It is different not only in its strength, self-confidence, skill, and culture, but also in the level of its concerns, demands, and consciousness, and thus in its capacity to free itself from the bureaucratic apparatuses and to move to the highest form of self-organization: soviets.

The transformation of the Trotskyist organizations into mass revolutionary parties is closely linked to the emergence of situations of dual power, for it is only in such situations that the choice between the reformist and revolutionary road ceases to be a choice between an actual reality (with well known advantages and disadvantages) and an idea that, while it may be attractive, has no immediate weight and instead becomes a question of the practical daily experience of the masses.

The re-emergence of revolutionary situations more closely approximating the "norm" of the Russian and German proletarian revolutions, based upon workers councils, will have deep repercussions on the other sectors of the world revolution. In the semicolonial countries themselves it will stimulate the development of the proletariat's political and organizational class independence, cutting the ground from under the "frontist" ideology and experiences of Stalinist inspiration and thus reducing the risks of bureaucratic and nationalist deformations of the revolutions in these countries. The case of Angola is typical in this regard. While it was undoubtedly the revolutionary movement of the colonial masses that delivered the decisive blow to the Salazar-Caetano dictatorship and thus

touched off the process of decomposition of the Portuguese bourgeois army, the progress of the Portuguese revolution has in turn had repercussions on the revolutionary process in Angola, stimulating self-organization and self-defense among the urban proletariat; from this standpoint the revolutionary process in Angola has been raised to the highest level yet achieved in Black Africa.

The development of situations of dual power in the imperialist countries of Europe, and even the victory of the socialist revolution in one or several of these countries, will have no less profound repercussions on the revolutionary dynamic in the United States. The identification of "socialism" with "oppression" and "tyranny," with the reduction of the political and individual freedom of the broad masses, is not purely the product of imperialist propaganda. This identification was not at all accepted as obvious by the American proletariat during the 1920s and the early 1930s, in spite of an equally determined, if not even more hysterical anticommunist propaganda campaign than exists today. This identification is also the product of Stalinism and of what the American masses know the political reality of the bureaucratized workers states to be. The emergence in the industrialized countries of a "model" or workers state and planned economy free of the defects of the Stalinist bureaucracy will make a colossal contribution to the American proletariat's conquest of the highest level of political class consciousness.

The breakthrough of the proletarian revolution in capitalist Europe can also modify the situation in the Soviet Union and the "people's democracies." These countries are being shaken by a growing social and political crisis. But the political passivity of the Soviet proletariat constitutes the principal obstacle blocking the development of this crisis toward a victorious political revolution that would conserve and strengthen the conquests of October and open the road toward the accelerated international development of a socialist society without oppression or social inequality. And the lack of an overall political perspective is in turn the major obstacle blocking the politicization of the Soviet proletariat.

The Soviet proletariat detests the rule of the bureaucracy. It has no desire to return to capitalism, and the present capitalist crisis, with its 17 million unemployed in the imperialist countries, is not going to make the Soviet workers change their minds. They have thus taken refuge in private life, making occasional attempts to defend their immediate gains. A revolutionary breakthrough in capitalist Europe freeing the image of socialism from the discredit the bureaucratic dictatorship has heaped on it and creating a tangible alternative to the dilemma "bureaucratic dictatorship or restoration of capitalism" will accelerate the repoliticization of the Soviet proletariat, prevent any new counterrevolutionary intervention by the Kremlin in East Europe of the sort that crushed the Hungarian and Czechoslovak revolutions, and stimulate the victory of the political revolution in the "people's democracies" and the USSR.

Europe on the threshold of workers councils; the world on the threshold of a new leap forward of the international revolution; the Fourth International on the threshold of mass revolutionary parties in several countries - such is the opportunity for revolutionaries that has been strengthened by the Vietnamese revolution. Let us seize this opportunity; it will not be with us forever.

P.S.

* From *Inprecor* #32, July 31, 1975, pages 16-25. Reproduced on "Ernest Mandel" website. Thanks to Joseph Auciello.