

Charlie's long march



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ON THE battlefield the GI's call them "Charlie"; at headquarters in Saigon, the "V.C." In the conservative papers they're the Viet Cong and in the liberal press, the "NLF." In the East they are "the Front" or "our glorious comrades of the Vietnamese liberation army." In the West one would prefer not to call them anything. One fights them without knowing them.

by Jean Lacouture

Seen from Washington they were at first a fiction. Now, they are merely a faction. In the beginning it was a form of Red banditry, a *mélange* of folkloric agitation and fanatical refusal to obey the decent laws of the good Mr. Diem. Later one saw them as the advance guard of an invasion of free South Vietnam by a North Vietnam likened to Nazi Germany. This assumed a historical resemblance between Ho Chi Minh and Hitler which impressed at least Mr. Rusk.

Today it is a matter of different "groups" manipulated by the North but only representing, according to Mr. Goldberg or Mr. Ball, and according to the time of day, from one half to one and one half per cent of the population. A feeble proportion, but so active, it would appear, that with the support of Northern elements estimated at 25,000 men, it has prompted the shipment to Vietnam of hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers, supporting a "nationalist" army of more than 600,000. Accursed little groups, who are not content with being tough in combat, but who have lived to see themselves acknowledged "the major factor on the South Vietnamese political scene" by George Carver, a CIA agent and learned spokesman for the most conservative circles of the Administration, in a major article in *Foreign Affairs* (April 1966).

WE CAN UNDERSTAND neither the nature nor the present behavior of the "Viet Cong" without recalling several stages in its historical development. For revolution is not a new phenomenon in South Vietnam — it is a "long march."

It begins in the early '30s, with the formation of the Communist Party of Indochina (CPI), the appearance of powerful Trotskyist groups in Saigon, and the growth of politico-religious sects and the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang, the Vietnamese Kuomintang, more active in the North but present also in the South.

A second stage, opening in 1945, is the anticolonial insurrection against France, which ends in 1954 with the Geneva compromise. The revolutionaries of the South foot the bill, for the South is left in the conservative hands of Mr. Diem. The third stage in the history of the movement is Saigon's refusal to implement the Geneva accords (and to a lesser degree Hanoi's), touching off the formation of a *maquis* of rebels in places like Quang-Ngay, Zone D and the Plain of Joncs. During the fourth stage, the North becomes aware of the agitation in the South and seeks to harness this revolutionary force which will serve its objectives of reunification and socialization. And in the fifth stage, Hanoi comes out openly in support of the revolts in the South and gives its sponsorship to what is now officially called the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam.

From here we see the radicalization of the movement.

It starts in 1961 after the creation of the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP), the Communist section inside the "Front." At the same time there is competition between the autonomous "Southern" tendency in the NLF and the growing influence of Hanoi, due to escalation of the war and the increasing numbers of North Vietnamese troops and cadres in the South.

Revolution in South Vietnam is an old story. It is not an import from the North. In fact, political life under French colonial rule is always more violent in the South than in the North. The avowedly colonial regime imposed on the South (the North is a mere protectorate) leaves Saigon and its hinterland more open to modern and progressive influences. And while nationalism is developing at Hué and Hanoi, diverse revolutionary tendencies are making themselves felt in Saigon and the back-country. In the sizable French colony, largely composed of working class whites, leftist ideas gain currency, particularly after 1935, with a corresponding influence on the Vietnamese elites. The system of land distribution, much more feudal in the South, favors the flowering of radical movements, as does the growth of a proletariat in the urban area around Saigon. The CPI, created at Haiphong in 1930 at the instigation of Ho Chi Minh (then known as Nguyen ai Quoc), has a strong section in the South. And the Trotskyists are strong enough in 1932 to win four or five seats in the Saigon municipal election.

The Trotskyists owe much of their success to an exceptional leader, Ta Thu Tau, a popular figure known for his fiery oratory. The Communists have a competent leadership — Dr. Thach, Duong Bach Mai and Tran Van Giau — but they suffer, up to 1941, from the conservative directives of their French "brother" party, then hogtied by its support of the Popular Front government of Leon Blum. During the war the Communists are persecuted, and several dozen of them are sent to the prison at Poulo-Condors, an island in the Indian Ocean still considered to be "the university of the revolution."

If the Trotskyists are powerful in Saigon, the Communists are doubly so in the countryside. In 1941 a vast dragnet operation is launched in the Mytho region, 50 miles south of Saigon in the Plain of Joncs, resulting in the arrest of 3,000 Communists — which gives some idea of the party's strength in the area. The Plain of Joncs is to become a stronghold of the Viet Minh, and later of the Viet Cong. Few rural areas in the world of that time contain so many avowed Marxists.

THE ELIMINATION of the French administration by the Japanese in 1945, followed by the collapse of the Japanese, creates a vacuum which gives an extraordinary impetus to the Communists.

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Ho Chi Minh marches on Hanoi with the guerrillas he has been training for four years in southern China and seizes power, with a sense of timing and a genius for tactical alliances reminiscent of Lenin in 1917. But in the South, the Communist high command, obsessed by its rivalry with the Trotskyists, loses valuable time, devoting its energies to ill-directed violence and repression (Ta Thu Tau is assassinated). French units, freed from Japanese prisons and assisted by the British regiments of General Gracey, seize the occasion and take power. The responsibility for the ineffectiveness of the Communists can be laid to Tran Van Giau, whose fanaticism and taste for violence leave him soon isolated and unpopular.

Defeated, the Communists of the South take to the *maquis*, applying the strategy of alliances with the nationalists so well defined by Ho Chi Minh at the time of the creation of the Viet Minh Front and the dissolution of the Communist party. Of the 12 members of the Committee of Nam-Bo (South), Marxists hold only two posts (interior and economy). Military affairs are directed by a nationalist, the famed Nguyen Binh, who is to be liquidated in 1952, probably on the orders of the North Viet Minh high command.

The war against the French expeditionary corps is never as hot in the South as in the North. But the battle in the South has more political overtones and gives to the Communists, more than to their allies, the opportunity to train the population. They work the peasants "in depth," initiating an agrarian reform which succeeds better than in the North and wins them a great prestige among the peasants. As the war draws to a close in 1954, the Viet Minh controls wide areas of South Vietnam — more than half the Mekong Delta, the Camau peninsula in the far south and Quang-Ngay, along the 14th parallel.

Nevertheless the Geneva powers — including the Russians, Chinese and Viet Minh — decide to divide Vietnam at the 17th parallel, which will deprive the revolutionaries of several millions of their partisans, about a fourth of the population they formerly controlled. Viet Minh partisans are to be regrouped into five zones, and then move north. By and large the order is obeyed. The Communists order about 100,000 men north, leaving 5,000 as cadres for agitation, for the future. In carrying out the Geneva formulas, the Communists have to put considerable pressure on their nationalist allies, less ready than they to respect a treaty guaranteed by Messrs. Molotov and Chou En Lai. Once again, as in the years 1936-40, the Communists acquire a reputation as moderates and opportunists, a reputation they will try to live down later.

Thus, in 1954, the revolutionary movement in the South is delivered to the mercies of Mr. Diem. The Geneva accords provide that no one may be prosecuted for his

activities during the war. But the Diem regime respects the rule even less assiduously than the authorities in the North. Pro-Viet Minh partisans in the South, Communists and nationalists alike, are soon to be the victims of a witch hunt. Feeling betrayed, they will not be very good citizens of South Vietnam; nor will the survivors of the sects crushed by Diem in 1955.

The underground begins to take form in 1956, in the west, around Chaudoc and Long-Xuyen, and in the north-western plantation zone, near the Caoaiste center of Tayninh. The categorical refusal of the Saigon government to hold the elections called for in the Geneva documents and the growing severity of the repression push the revolutionaries into violent opposition.

Throughout the first phase of the revolt, it remains purely "Southern." The cadres left behind by the Communists play rather a moderating role, the watchword from Hanoi being "respect of the Geneva agreements," in accord with the then Moscow-and-Peking line. It is only slowly that Marxists begin to penetrate the anti-Diem movement. By this time the movement is anti-American as well, in view of Washington's unequivocal support of the Saigon government and the reinforcement of the U.S. military mission. As early as 1959 the revolt has already assumed sufficient magnitude for Diem to say on receiving the Gaullist vice-president, Antoine Pinay, in Saigon: "We, too, have our Algerian war . . ."

STILL HANOI GUARDS its reserve, but emissaries sent South report that the rebels are beginning to denounce the cowardice of the Northern regime. The Central Committee of the Lao-Dong (Communist Party reconstituted in 1952) studies a report presented by Le Duan, deputy secretary general and veteran of the war in the South. Le Duan recommends that North Vietnam give its total support to the anti-Diem movement, arguing that the Geneva accords no longer have any validity after the violations committed in the South. About this time Diem pushes through a law permitting the execution of suspects, and nullifies the landslide election to parliament of Dr. Dan, an outspoken but firmly anticommunist opposition leader.

It is only in 1960 that Hanoi clearly assumes its responsibilities. But it is not without considerable soul-searching. The "Viet Cong" (abbreviation of Vietnam Cong San, or Vietnamese Communists), as Messrs. Diem and Nhu like to call them, have at this time only a small minority of Communists in their ranks. Ho Chi Minh and his advisors note, however, that the anti-Diem nationalists are redoubling their activity — the solemn appeal of 18 leaders in April calling for a return to democracy; feverish intrigue in the Army that will result in the abortive coup of

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November 1960. Diem's regime appears to be tottering, and the Communists fear being outdone by the nationalists, fear the nationalists will be the beneficiaries of the coming victory over Diem.

Then, at the Third Congress of the Lao-Dong, September 1960 in Hanoi, in the presence of a strong Soviet delegation, Le Duan pushes through a program of energetic support for the revolutionary movement in South Vietnam. More important still, he is elected secretary-general of the party, replacing Ho Chi Minh, who retains the presidency. Thus the partisan of intervention in the South is at the controls. He circulates to his comrades in Hanoi the text of an appeal made the previous March by "a group of veterans of the South Vietnamese resistance," which says the time has come for a general insurrection against the "My-Diem" dictatorship ("My" means American). Ho Chi Minh and his comrades now intend to act swiftly to take control of this movement.

It is thus with their open support that the creation of the NLF is announced in December 1960, grouping together the forces which have struggled against Diem for four years. To all appearances, Communists are in the minority. And the ten-point program announced by the NLF might be that of almost any agrarian nationalist party of the Third World, except, perhaps, for the denunciation of American "imperialism" and "monopolies." The insistence on neutralism, on independence for the South, on the necessary alliance with Cambodia and Laos, gives the impression that the movement seeks the help of a variety of allies and prefers not to antagonize anyone but Saigon.

If Hanoi has surely approved the simple formula of an organization that will serve as cadre and high command for the uprising, it feels at the same time that this type of Front (as in the time of Nguyen Binh, in 1950), gives the nationalists an unnecessary predominance. These misgivings prompt the formation, early in 1962, of the People's Revolutionary Party, a resurrection of the Southern section of the CPI. This time the language is clearly Marxist, and the job of this hard Communist cell is to channel and control the activity of the Front.

The injection of the PRP inside the NLF — a spine, so to speak — is one of the factors in the radicalization of the Front. But this is not due simply to the calculations of Hanoi. The realities of the extension of the war inevitably give priority to elements that are the most battle-trained, most experienced in organizing, closest to Hanoi and thus most capable of making liaison with Northern units operating on Southern soil. These are estimated at 25,000 soldiers and specialists, comprising about 10 per cent of the revolutionary forces. But more than anything else, it is the U.S. bombings, North and South, that strengthen the PRP position inside the NLF and give it authority among the people.

Recent reports from "V.C." controlled zones show two startling developments:

1. That PRP strength has grown in four years from 7,000 to nearly 100,000 partisans.
2. That PRP cadres are less inclined to use ruses with the population, and tend to present themselves more and more as Communists.

It is hardly astonishing that from the point of view of the interests of the Party, a prolonged war is desirable. What is more astonishing is to see this opinion shared by Dean Rusk.

The long march of the "Viet Cong" is not finished. Everything indicates that as long as the war lasts, the movement's orientation will move more and more toward the left. But there is one other reality we must keep firmly in mind, and that is the profoundly Southern character of the movement. None of the fighters of the NLF, certainly, would deny that their goal is as much the reunification of Vietnam as its independence. But the program of the Front, and the comments of its spokesmen on the need for a long breathing period before reunification, show that the Front is still deeply marked by the original history of the revolutionary movement in South Vietnam. The sects, the secret societies, the Communists, the nationalists are still there, and to believe that they will blindly accept dictation from the North is to falsify their history and present development.

CURIOS, but we don't find the old chieftains of the Southern CPI at the head of the PRP, neither Dr. Thach, who has become minister of health in Hanoi, nor Duong Bach Mai, nor Tran Van Giau, purged for ultra-left adventurism in 1945 and consigned to an honorific post in Hanoi. The key figures in the PRP seem to be Vo Chi Cong, vice-president and, it is believed, acting secretary-general of the NLF, and General Trung, reputed to be a pseudonym for Nguyen Son, a top aide of Viet Minh General Giap at the time of Dien Bien Phu.

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