

THE INTELLIGENCE OFFICE

The Communists and Viet Nam

Sir:

I read with interest George Padmore's article on Viet Nam. But I was surprised that the author, an I. L. P. militant of many years' standing, omitted to inform us on a capital point. Namely, the implications of the fact that Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Nameese leader, is a Communist. (I have even seen him identified as Nguyen-Ay-Quac, whom I used to know in Moscow.) George Padmore mentions only in the vaguest terms Ho Chi Minh's connection with Moscow.

As a Communist, Ho Chi Minh rules in the name of the Kremlin. That means that he follows a policy of persecuting, if not exterminating, Trotskyists, Socialists and other independent radicals. It means that "the national emancipation of Indo-China" is actually the establishment of a totalitarian regime, and that the bloody events now taking place there are simply one phase of a worldwide campaign directed by a power which cares nothing for the liberty and well-being of the Anamese. And that poses to all of us—liberals, socialists, radicals alike—this question: should we sympathize with colonial revolts when their real meaning is the expansion of totalitarianism?

I am all the more anxious to know George Padmore's opinion on this point because I note he has just published a book entitled, "How Russia Transformed Her Colonial Empire: a detailed and authoritative account of the federal state structure of the Soviet Union." Any one who has studied the Russian totalitarian system knows that Soviet "federalism" is a lie cemented with blood, that the personnel of all the "federated" state governments in central Asia, the Caucasus and the Far East have been purged again and again on orders from Moscow, with many executions each time; that the native populations have been decimated by mass deportations; that no less than five "national republics" have been liquidated; and that almost all the Old Bolsheviks who carried out the nationality policy of the revolutionary period have since then been shot (as, in Georgia alone: Budu Mdvani, Okudjava, Kavtaradze; or, in Central Asia, the most prominent Soviet leader there, Faycoulla Khodjaev). The Menshevik journal, *The Socialist Courier* (New York) in its issue of October 23 last published a moving report on the tragedy, during the war, of the Kalmuck people. The purges and terror in the Ukraine have been on such a scale as to be widely reported in the American press of late.

It is not high time for those who are concerned about freedom and the most elementary human rights to clarify their attitude towards the problem posed by such facts as these?

MEXICO CITY

VICTOR SERGE

Sir:

George Padmore, as the leading spirit of the International African Service Bureau, the coordinating center of the African anti-imperialist movements, and as a contributor for many years to British ILP and other publications, has always approached the whole independence struggle from a generally revolutionary socialist standpoint. It was all the more shocking, therefore, to read his article on Viet Nam in the December *POLITICS*. I sought in vain a single sentence that criticized the present colonial policies of the French Socialist and Communist Parties.

Padmore quotes approvingly absolutely hair-raising statements made by Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Nam President, in his

interview. Ho Chi Minh assures Padmore that "the French people as a whole, especially the sections under the influence of the Communists and Socialists, are in sympathy" with the Viet Nam aspirations. Ho goes on to assign responsibility for the reactionary French policy to the MRP and the MRP-dominated cabinet of Bidault, and states his belief that if a Left Government is democratically elected in France, it will reach an amicable settlement with the Republic of Viet Nam.

Thus Padmore creates an impression of the French Socialists and Communists being held back by the MRP from carrying out what is really their heart's desire—freedom for the Viet Nameese (within the "French Union", of course). How ironical this sounds as this letter is being written, at the very time when an all-Socialist cabinet in France headed by Blum has decided on all-out support of Argenlieu's military campaign against the Viet Nam. Today's paper announced a unanimous vote in the Council of the Republic (new upper house), *including the votes of the Communists*, in support of the government's military moves.* The Socialist Colonial Minister, Marius Moutet, has personally gone to Saigon to direct the struggle.

Nowhere is the art of hypocrisy so well developed as in France. The French Socialists, at their last convention, adopted a ringing manifesto for colonial independence and the right of self-determination. The manifesto was adopted unanimously. Far from admitting any contradiction of this manifesto, Moutet, in his first broadcast after arriving at Saigon, said that France was defending Cochin China (whose population is 90% Viet Nameese) against annexation by Viet Nam. "It is not for us to yield up the right of the peoples of Cochin China and of Annam to self determination." (*New York Times*, December 28th).

We might excuse an innocent liberal for not being able to predict the behavior of the Socialists, but Padmore, in his resume of Indo-Chinese political history showed a pretty thorough knowledge of the recent period, except for one gap, the period of the Blum Popular Front Cabinets of 1936-7. His entire summary of the Peoples Front period, sandwiched between substantial accounts of French repressive acts before and after the Popular Front period, consists literally of three words: "However, nothing happened".

Nothing happened, Mr. Padmore? Tell that to the hundreds of Annamite workers jailed for strikes and demonstrations under Blum and Moutet's benevolent colonial regime. Tell that to the editors of nationalist and revolutionary papers imprisoned for protesting against French oppression. Tell that to the Annamite Municipal Council of Saigon, elected three times in six years, and always in jail within a couple of weeks of election day.

I would like to believe that the French people as a whole are in sympathy with the Viet Nameese, as Ho says in the interview. But to believe this would be a fatal illusion. The French workers have been subjected over a period of years to a barrage of chauvinist propaganda from their own Stalinist leaders. Hate the Germans, sing the patriotic Marseillaise, believe in the "civilizing mission" of France abroad—these are the poisonous lessons that have been drilled into them. Of

* Editor's Footnote: I must protest this as grossly unfair to the Communists. The "N. Y. Times" reports that when the delegates of all the other parties spontaneously rose to their feet and applauded Blum's policy of socialist extermination of the Viet Nameese rebels, the Communist delegates remained seated. Naturally, being responsible workingclass leaders and not Utopian crackpots, the Communists did not carry this gesture too far. A short time later—accounts differ as to whether it was 60 or 65 seconds—"at a signal from their leader" the Communists rose en bloc and joined in the applause. Thus the Vietnamese were *not* deserted by their French Communist allies—at least not for 65 (or perhaps 60) seconds.—D.M.

course, there is resistance to this, and a substantial section of radical workers sympathize with the struggles of the colonial peoples, but the majority are passive, or support the chauvinist actions of their leadership.

The omissions of Padmore in dealing with the French political parties' attitude toward Viet Nam are supplemented by similar omissions with regard to the internal politics of the Viet Minh movement. Outside of mentioning its foundation in 1925, Padmore never mentions the existence of an Indo-Chinese Communist Party. Casually remarking that Ho happened to drift into the Soviet Union and later worked in a Soviet Consulate, he omits to mention that Ho was the leader of the Indo-Chinese Communist Party (dissolved when the Viet Minh was formed). But with this added information, the sensitive anti-Stalinist reader can begin to smell a rat in what Ho has to say about continued ties with France. Padmore says, "However, they (the Viet Nameese) are prepared, as President Ho told me, because of their historical ties on the one hand and their immediate technical and cultural requirements on the other, to remain within the framework of a French democratic union". Cultural requirements? Later in the article it is stated that illiteracy was produced by the French suppression of a previously existing native educational system. Technical requirements? Padmore a few paragraphs earlier explained that the French had consistently sabotaged the industrialization of the colony! The colonial regime of the French in Indo China was the bloodiest in the world. Compared to it, the British rule in India was enlightened (yet the Indian Congress, namby pamby as it is, renounces *all* ties with the British Empire!). Obviously the Viet Nameese want nothing to do with the French. And to give the lie to Ho, let me quote from the Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Viet Nam, September 2, 1945: "We, members of the provisional government, representing the population of Viet Nam, declare that we abolish all connection with imperialist France, annul all treaties that France has signed on the subject of Viet Nam, abolish all the privileges that the French have arrogated on our territory". (From *Verite*, Paris, 26th July).

What has happened is that the native merchant and land-owning class, fearful of more basic social upheavals that would threaten its property rights, seeks to compromise with the French; and in this attempt finds an ally in the Stalinists, who want in Indo China not a social revolution but a nationalist government, oriented in foreign policy toward the Soviet Union.

To understand the role of these political forces in the country, let us give a brief account of that part of Indo-Chinese history that Ho and Padmore so consistently leave out. In 1931, whole series of executions had decimated the Indo-Chinese Communist Party.* In self defense, this party took the unprecedented step of forming a united front underground with the small group of Annamite Trotskyists in Saigon, capital of the Province of Cochin China. In the ensuing years, the workers and peasants of Cochin China asserted themselves more and more successfully, and in this province, by 1935 the united front had assumed undisputed leadership of the nationalist movement. It was in 1935 that the united front first won the Saigon elections, electing Duong Bach Mai, Stalinist leader, Tran van Tach, at that time a Stalinist sympathizer, and Ta Thu Thau, Trotskyist leader.

When the Peoples Front came to power in France, the masses that followed the Stalinists in Saigon expected amnesty for political prisoners, free speech, the right to organize

unions. The attempts of the Stalinists to mediate between the masses and their "peoples" government in France ended in their being totally discredited. The united front broke up and the Trotskyists emerged as the undisputed leaders of the independence movement in Saigon. In the 1939 municipal elections the ticket of the Fourth International swept into office (and into prison a week later), beating by a large margin a nationalist-Stalinist coalition. In Cochin China as a whole the 4th International elected four out of nine Annamite deputies to the Colonial Council. And this in spite of an elite electorate limited to less than 60,000 people out of 3,500,000 in the province! A Stalinist Senator from France, "investigating conditions", landed in Saigon, and after one conference with the delegation of the Saigon illegal unions, which turned out to be composed of Trotskyists, fled the scene. He had no chance to sell the Peoples Front.

Unfortunately, under the repressive conditions, the Trotskyist movement in Cochin China exerted no influence over the mass Stalinist peasant movement in the populous northern province of Tonkin, the main base of the present Viet Nam government. With the end of World War II, the Trotskyist leaders, released from Japanese prison camps, unable to get to Saigon, isolated in the countryside, were at the mercy of the nationalists and Stalinists. Despite the meager connections with the Indo-Chinese hinterland, the French Trotskyists and the Indo-Chinese Trotskyist delegation in France have already learned of the death, under mysterious circumstances, in different parts of the country, of Ta Thu Thau and two other Trotskyist leaders, Phan Van Hum and Nguyen Aan Dat. In addition, Nguyen Van Tao, ex-secretary of the Indo-Chinese Communist Party, who had finally broken with Stalinism, was stabbed coming out of a meeting. Already an Annamite paper in Hanoi, the Viet Nam capital, has charged that members of the Viet Minh (the Independence League which set up the Viet Nam Republic) organized the assassination of the Trotskyists throughout the country. These dead Trotskyists, veterans of nineteen years of illegal struggle, would have been especially interested in Padmore's report that "for the first time elections took place recently on the basis of universal suffrage". I would like some details on these elections. What parties ran? How many votes were cast? And in view of his appalling ignorance of everything else that goes on in the country, from what magic sources did Padmore find out about elections that have never been mentioned in the French or American press?

What a far cry this whole picture is from the sweetness and light of Padmore's article where the "greatest democrat since Sun Yat Sen", Ho, leads a united Viet Nameese people towards independence with the sympathy of the entire French people!

We know now that the compromise wouldn't take. Already the dispatches talk about the Viet Nameese' "treacherous" attack on the French garrison in Hanoi. The entire French army, together with all the pleas of moderates, cannot keep the people of Indo-China from fighting relentlessly to oust everything French. In 1945, arms in hand, they briefly tasted freedom—they will not give it up lightly.

NEWARK, N. J.

SAUL MENDELSON

—*The immediate issue in Viet Nam, and the one which is actively engaging all the nationalist parties and groups, is the fight for national independence. Moscow is really very remote from Hanoi, and it is rather difficult to see, except for those who wish wilfully to distort, how day-to-day guidance of events in Viet Nam can be conducted from the Soviet Union.*

Regarding the letter from Victor Serge, I want to say that I have always had a great respect for his socialist intransigence, but I consider the views expressed in his letter entirely sub-

* For an account of the horror of French repression in Indo-China, read "L'Indochine S. O. S.", published by Andre Malraux, Andree Viollis, and a group of French writers in the early '30s.

jective. For my part, I cannot see anything but a totalitarian outlook in the French desire to reconquer Viet Nam, and it shocks me that there has been no popular manifestation by way of a sympathetic strike or mass demonstration on the part of the French workers, who so recently were themselves suppressed under the totalitarian yoke of Nazism. If we are to follow Victor Serge's question to its logical conclusion, surely we should not support the French workers who, tacitly or expressly, condone French totalitarianism. Or perhaps he would confine himself merely to "colonial revolts".

It is the expression of such views which are more and more leading Colonial peoples to the conclusion that if they are to win their freedom from alien totalitarianism, they are unlikely to find allies among the white workers and their political theorists, and that they must rely more and more upon their own efforts and their own forms of struggle. In the case of Viet Nam, support has come from the Indian and Burmese workers and peasants, who have refused to load boats going to Indo-China, and are offering themselves to fight for Viet Nam. It is significant, too, that, despite her large Colonial divisions, France is obliged to send metropolitan troops to Viet Nam because she cannot rely upon her Senegalese fighters.

It is this awakening political consciousness among the Colonial and subject peoples all over the world that makes them acutely resentful of the attitude of white workers, socialists and "sympathisers" which presume that these oppressed peoples must of necessity look to the whites for leadership and political guidance in their fight for freedom. I am perfectly aware of the inequalities in the Soviet Union, and I have myself been a victim of Communist slander. I don't think anybody would ever dare to question my persistent adherence to my socialist and internationalist principles. I do therefore maintain my contention that it is a distortion of Marxism to talk of Russian imperialism today. I still say that despite all the inequalities in the Soviet Union, despite all the drastic purges and all the defects which intellectuals with a white skin functioning in a Western democracy so loudly deplore (I confess I also deplore them), the erstwhile subject peoples of the Union enjoy more actual democracy than the subject peoples oppressed by Western imperialists, since they are placed on a footing of equality with the Russian "master" race, and gain or lose rights with them.

What I do often wonder is what Western Socialists—and especially American Socialists—who so persistently criticise the Soviet regime, and who do so in the enjoyment of their greater personal comforts and higher standards of living, would have done if they had been placed in the same position as the Soviet leaders and given their set of circumstances. I am always astonished when I read the left-wing papers, especially from the United States, to see how much space is given up to anathemas on the Soviet Union, and how little to the problems of winning power from American capitalism, and by doing so, help to correct the defects which are so glaring in the Soviet regime.