Vietnam: where the US lost its first war

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This is the first in a series of articles about 1968. This year has gone down in history as one of the "mad years" like 1848, 1919, 1936. In such years, conservatives of all political colours believe that some terrible infection takes hold, as a result of which unconnected issues and grievances spark off one another, producing a series of explosions. A second feature of such "mad years" is that they seem to fail to achieve what they promised they are not years of successful revolutions, like 1789 or 1917. As such they are jeered and mocked by relieved reactionaries and patronising liberals. 1968 is no exception.

At its root, 1968 was the key year of the war in Vietnam. The strains and pressures this put on the world economy led to the end of the "long boom" and a decade of sharp crises. It witnessed the rapid growth of a mass antiwar movement. It was the year that the US Civil Rights Movement turned into "Black Power", triggered by the assassination of Martin Luther King. This rising of the oppressed those denied equal rights, jobs and wages inspired women to demand their rights as well. It was the year of hundreds of student occupations, of barricade fighting in Paris, which turned into a 10 million strong general strike.

These events helped put the prospect of revolution on the agenda again, even in the imperialist heartlands. With the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, despite its brutal suppression by Soviet tanks, it brought the ferment of "socialist democracy" to Eastern Europe.

The inspiration of '68, embodied in a generation of young militants, was to be felt right through the 1970s, boosting a radical youth culture, a combative rank and file workers' movement, and a militant Black movement. It revived old, and launched new national liberation struggles. It created a "second wave" of the women's movement, and a new movement for lesbian and gay liberation. It privileged "direct action" sit-ins, demonstrations, riots and barricades over elections.

Of course none of these developments emerged out of nothing but '68 was a year of enormous interaction and lesson learning, a year when the post-war capitalist boom was already beginning to falter, and the cold war all but disintegrating. Above all, it was a year of internationalism, when the response to militant struggles in different parts of the world was: "We can do that here... and we will."

In this first article of the series Dave Stockton looks at the event that started it all, the Vietnam war. The most bloody colonial war of the twentieth century saw some 1.4 million military personnel killed, though only 6 per cent were members of the United States armed forces, while estimates of civilian deaths range from two million to five million.

Vietnam had already waged one war for its independence, against the French colonialists between 1946 and 1954. As the Second World War ended and the Japanese surrendered, in August a mass movement erupted in the cities and countryside of Vietnam. This was initiated in large part by a peasant based guerrilla movement the Vietminh, led by the Vietnamese Communist Party. But in the cities and mining districts, it was spearheaded by significant Trotskyist-led forces, who organised popular committees and workers' militias.

Together these forces helped seize control of the country from the disintegrating Vichy French colonial administration and Japanese occupation forces, as the war in Asia ended. But a British expeditionary force under General Gracey was preparing to occupy the country and hand it back to its French colonial masters.
Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) were, in these years, still operating a strategic bloc, a popular front, not only with the Vietnamese capitalists and landowners (and therefore defending their ownership of the fields and factories) but also with the "democratic imperialists", i.e. the British, the Americans and General De Gaulle's "Free French". The leader of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), Ho Chi Minh, believed he could negotiating independence from the French. If this meant allowing British and French forces back into Vietnam this was an unpleasant but temporary necessity. Their policy was, while trying to hold on to their governmental power, to negotiate with General Gracey and the British forces, which they allowed to occupy the cities without opposition. The French colonialists soon arrived, and to no one's surprise except the Vietnamese Stalinists, promptly kicked them out of government restoring colonialism. Only after the deep freeze in relations between the Kremlin and the White House, which set in in 1946, turning into the Cold War in 1947, did Ho Chi Minh and the VCP return to armed resistance to the French.

The Trotskyists strongly criticised the welcoming of General Gracey. But, Stalinists as they were, Ho and the VCP had no intention of tolerating any criticism from within the anti-colonial movement. In September and October Vietminh firing squads liquidated, hundreds of Vietnamese Trotskyists. They were sacrificed on the altar of class collaboration in an act of treason to the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist cause.

The Stalinists reactionary utopian project  a democratic capitalist republic with the Stalinists in power  failed, just as it failed in Europe and elsewhere in Asia. Only in countries where the Stalinists already had total military power and where the hostility of the imperialists forced them to liquidate capitalism was the result a bureaucratically ruled workers state.

But in Vietnam the CP had to take up the armed struggle even to survive. This turned into the First Indochinese war (1946-54) and then into the Vietnam war (1960-75). The results were millions of deaths and untold suffering; a direct result of handing back power to the imperialist in 1945. This crime of Vietnamese Stalinism and its Chinese and Russian backers needs to be remembered, even whilst recognising the incredible heroism of the militants of the VCP in these wars.

The Indochinese War broke out in December 1946, culminating in the humiliating defeat of the French expeditionary force at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, where nearly 12,000 French paratroopers surrendered. This was a catastrophic defeat for French colonialism; their casualties in the war totalled 94,581 dead, 78,127 wounded, with 40,000 taken prisoner. But victory for the Vietnamese too came at a terrible price. They lost over 300,000, with half a million wounded.

Worse still, they were robbed of much of the fruits of victory at the Geneva Peace Conference. The Communist-led Viet Minh forces were militarily well able to take control of the whole of Vietnam. But the Soviet and Chinese put heavy pressure on their delegation to be satisfied with only the northern half of the country and the northern city Hanoi. The country was duly divided at the 17th parallel and a fiercely anti-Communist regime, under Ngo Dinh Diem, established itself in South Vietnam with American support, violating the Geneva agreement, which promised elections within two years.

Ho Chi Minh and the VCP loyally restrained themselves from taking any military action, even withdrawing many VCP cadres from the South. For five years Diem conducted a ferocious witch-hunt, which drove Communist and Buddhist nationalist oppositionists out of the cities. The Communists formed the National Front for the Liberation of Vietnam (NLF), involving other nationalist forces, and finally launched a guerrilla war with the aggressive Diem regime in 1959-60.

Their forces grew by leaps and bounds in the rural areas, where they fought the rich landlords and moneylenders tied to the Diem regime, which viciously exploited the peasants. By 1963 Diem's forces were already shaky. There was a Buddhist rebellion against his pro-Catholic policies, and the dictator was considering some sort of peace overtures to the NLF, even floating the idea of neutrality for the South, i.e. taking it out of the anti-communist alliance the US was busily constructing in South East Asia.
United States fears 'domino' effect

The CIA and the Pentagon's response was, with a powerful clique of South Vietnamese generals, to engineer a coup against Diem (though without notifying the Catholic president John F Kennedy). This led to a rapid deterioration of the situation, with two further coups against Vietnamese puppet leaders, when they in turn tried to open secret negotiations with the Communists. Eventually Air Vice-Marshal Ky provided a subservient regime as the numbers of US troops, as a opposed to advisers, increased. By 1964 there were 200,000. Meanwhile the numbers of NLF guerrillas rose from 5,000 in 1959, 100,000 in 1964.

The decision to send large numbers of US troops to South Vietnam was taken not by President Lyndon Baines Johnson ("LBJ"), but by his supposedly more liberal predecessor, Kennedy. He, like other US presidents, regularly talked about a domino effect whereby country after country in the Third World might "go communist", following the lead of China (1949), North Korea (1951), North Vietnam (1954) and, most recently, Cuba (1959).

For Kennedy, Cuba was the big bugbear a state going Communist right in the USA's Latin American "backyard." He launched the Bay of Pigs invasion on 19 April 1961, using 1,500 CIA-trained Cuban exiles, hoping to depose Fidel Castro. Within 24 hours they had all surrendered, and a humbled Kennedy had to negotiate the release of the survivors.

In August 1961, in the wake of the East German regime building the Berlin Wall to stem the flow of its citizens, especially professionals and skilled workers, towards the booming West, Kennedy launched a new ideological assault on communism. In October 1962, discovering that the USSR had stationed long range missiles in Cuba, 90 miles from the US, Kennedy threatened to take the world to nuclear war. The Russians eventually agreed to remove the missiles, if Kennedy guarantee the US would abandon all attempts to invade Cuba, and remove its missile bases from Turkey.

When the US Administration turned its eyes towards Asia, here too it could imagine the Reds were on the march, especially since it saw any sort of anti-American nationalism as tantamount to communism. If the South Vietnamese domino were allowed to fall then Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand - the whole of South East Asia would crumble. From 1954 onwards, the US tried to build a South East Asian alliance on the model of NATO, called SEATO, an action that prompted the formation of the Bandung Conference, which later became the Non-Aligned Movement.

But the USA regarded attempts at neutrality in the Cold War as little better than disguised support for Russia and China. Hence, throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s, the CIA engineered or supported a whole series of right-wing military coups in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and even Europe (Greece). Most horrific was the 1965 Indonesian massacre of between 500,000 and 1 million Communists and their supporters. Thus for the US ruling class the Vietnamese domino could not be allowed to fall. In large measure, the US imperialists fell into a trap of their own making.

In January 1965, following a bogus North Vietnamese attack on US warships in the Gulf of Tonkin, the air attacks on North Vietnam started. Between March 1965 and November 1968, operation "Rolling Thunder" deluged the north with a million tons of missiles, rockets and bombs.

The Americans, then as now, imagined that their enormous superiority in air power and weaponry was bound to tell and quickly at that. US ground forces too began to pour. In 1961-62, the Kennedy administration authorised the use of chemicals to destroy rice crops. Where NLF guerrillas were active, corporations like Dow Chemical and Monsanto developed virulently toxic herbicides and defoliants, most infamously Agent Orange, which involved dioxin in its manufacture.

About 12 million gallons (45 million litres) of it were sprayed over South-East Asia during the war. In some areas of southern Vietnam, 40 years on dioxin levels remain at over 100 times the accepted international standard. In 2006, the Vietnamese government estimated that there are over 4 million victims of dioxin poisoning in Vietnam. Effects included various types of cancer and genetic defects. The United States government, despite being forced to compensate US veterans (very miserably), still denies "any conclusive scientific links" between these victims and the
use of Agent Orange.

General William Westmoreland, US commander in chief in Vietnam, was typical of his class and generation, a racist through and through. He developed his so called attrition strategy to kill the maximum number of guerrilla fighters, and civilians in their supportive milieu. To those who objected to the savagery of his "kill ratios" he famously observed: "The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does a Westerner. Life is plentiful. Life is cheap in the Orient." For this reason the US placed great emphasis on statistical indicators of progress, like "kill ratios" and "body counts," numbers of villages "pacified", all of which was fed to a gullible media and Congress.

The Tet Offensive

By the end of 1967 Westmoreland was commanding 485,000 troops in Vietnam. He famously told the National Press Club in Washington: "We have reached a point when the end begins to come into view," though he added modestly, that "mopping up the enemy" might take another two years. The Washington Post headlined his speech: "War's end in view Westmoreland." When Time Magazine asked whether the NLF might try anything, the he feisty general replied, "I hope they try something, because we are looking for a fight." They did indeed but the outcome was not what he expected.

In 1968, 30 January was New Years Day in the Vietnamese; it was also the first day of the Tet offensive. Much of the large-scale mobilisation by NLF forces was carried out under cover of people returning to their homes for the celebrations. Indeed the initial explosions of the offensive were mistaken for fireworks. The NLF carried out a diversion, attacking the huge US airforce base at Khe Sanh. President Johnson and Westmoreland were obsessed with defending it. "I don't want any damn Dinbinphoo!" yelled LBJ down the phone. Yet this was not the real target. A year before, the VCP had decided on a general offensive to be combined with a mass uprising in the cities of the South. This had met strong resistance in discussions from General Giap the VCP's veteran strategist. He was opposed to a major change of strategy for the NLF guerrillas and North Vietnamese regulars, from small-scale mobile war to a fullscale offensive to take the South's cities. He was over-ruled.

In more than 100 cities and towns, surprise attacks, like the one that broke into the compound of the US Embassy in Saigon, were followed up by waves of supporting troops. The most ferocious battle was fought in Hue in central Vietnam. There the NLF's red and blue flag with its yellow star flew over the old citadel for three weeks. In Saigon too, a thousand NLF troops held a major part of the city for a similar period against a combined force of more than 11,000 US and South Vietnamese troops. But the urban uprising that the VCP had been expecting did not occur, and this eventually doomed the offensive. The reason was straightforward enough. The VCP had drawn nearly all its cadres into the rural guerrilla struggle. It had ceased to be (if it ever was) a party of the working class in the cities and the mines.

Once the assault on the cities was repelled the Americans took a terrible revenge on the civilian population in the areas they thought supported the "Vietcong". The village of Ben Tre in Kien Hoa Province was wiped from the face of the earth, occasioning the infamous excuse given at a press conference, "We had to destroy the town to save it." In another filmed incident South Vietnam's police chief summarily shot an NLF fighter in the head. But the most horrific incident took place in a village called My Lai in March 1968, when an American patrol, led by Lieutenant William Calley, massacred more than 300 unarmed men, women, and children in ditches.

By the end, some 37,000 guerrillas and North Vietnamese regulars had been killed. Casualties included most of the NLF's best fighters, political officers and underground organisers. Militarily speaking, Tet was a terrible defeat for them. Their objectives had not been met and their finest forces decimated.

Yet for the Americans it was a victory that began the complete unravelling of their "empire" in South East Asia. American casualties in the fighting in 1968 14,592 killed and 35,000 seriously wounded were less than half those of the NLF, but of the 543,000 American troops in Vietnam that year only 14 per cent, i.e. 80,000, were combat troops. This is a staggeringly high percentage of seriously injured and killed, when compared with the other wars the US has been involved in. It rapidly and disastrously affected morale amongst the troops and thus constituted a turning point in the
war. In short, the Tet Offensive constituted an almost classic Pyrrhic victory—a victory won at irreplaceable cost to the victor, but where the vanquished can more easily resume the combat. For the Americans, it was one that fatally undermined the capacity of the victors to carry the war to a successful conclusion. To this effect on its ground troops must be added the enormous effect that the Tet fighting had around the world—particularly in the USA itself. The propaganda about winning the war, mopping up, etc. was blown away by the pictures on millions of TV screens, vouched for by veteran journalists like Walter Cronkite, anchorman for CBS news. The effect this had on the antiwar movement will be the subject of a future article in the series, but it is noteworthy that this was not the intention of the VCP leadership. The North Vietnamese General Tran Do later recalled:

"In all honesty, we didn't achieve our main objective, which was to spur uprisings throughout the South. Still, we inflicted heavy casualties on the Americans and their puppets, and this was a big gain for us. As for making an impact in the United States, it had not been our intention, but it turned out to be a fortunate result."

Many statistics confirm the shattering effect of the 1968 fighting on the morale of US troops. Desertions increased fourfold within a year. In 1969, an entire company of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade simply sat down on the battlefield and refused to move; a rifle company of the crack 1st Air Cavalry Division right in front of CBS cameras simply refused to advance. Over the next year, this same division saw 35 further combat refusals. By 1970, the Army had 65,643 deserters, roughly the equivalent of four infantry divisions. To this must be added "fragging", the killing of disciplinarian and gung-ho officers, using fragmentation grenades. Congressional hearings held in 1973 estimated that roughly 3 per cent of officer and NCO deaths in Vietnam between 1961 and 1972 were a result of fraggings.

Marine Colonel Robert D. Heinl Jr, a veteran commander with over 27 years experience, and later a historian of the Marine Corps, wrote at this time:

"Our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and noncommissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near-mutinous. Conditions exist among American forces in Vietnam that have only been exceeded in this century by...the collapse of the Tsarist armies in 1916 and 1917." Armed Forces Journal, 7 June 1971

Consequences

1968—the Tet Offensive, in particular—was a turning point in the entire Vietnam war, or American War as the Vietnamese naturally call it. This American war lasted 10 years (1963-73), when US forces were the core of the anti-NLF combatants. Between 1964 and 1972 the war cost US $133 billion or $5.1 billion a month at present-day values. The rocketing costs helped bring to a grinding halt the welfare reforms carried out by the Johnson administration (hyped as the Great Society) partly to stabilise the inner cities, wracked by rioting and the Black rebellion of the mid-to-late 1960s.

The Vietnam war enormously accelerated inflation in the US, and the country began running a trade deficit for the first time in the twentieth century. This put the dollar under enormous pressure as the world reserve currency "as good as gold" because of the huge deposits of the precious metal in Fort Knox. The Federal Reserve issued dollars in increasing excess of these reserves, dropping from a ratio of 55 per cent to 22 per cent in 1970 alone. In August 1971 America was finally forced off the Gold Standard and the whole Bretton Woods postwar international monetary order was soon abandoned, adding to the stormy recessions of the 1970s and early 1980, when the "long boom" definitively ended, and with it the low levels of the class struggle in the imperialist heartlands. Here too then the effects of the Vietnam war were epoch changing.

The political effects were immediate. As a direct result of media revelations of the scale of the Tet fighting and its casualties, President Johnson's popularity collapsed so totally he was obliged to announce he would not run for re-election that November. The Democratic Party revealing its imperialist nature chose a pro-war candidate, Hubert
Humphrey, while the Republicans' cynical candidate, Richard Nixon, claimed he had a plan to end the war and bring “our boys” back home. Of course, once in office, he tried all he could to shore up the US empire in the region.

The result of the collapse of the morale of US ground troops led Nixon to attempt to plug the gap with his policy of "Vietnamisation," direct ancestor of today's "Afghanisation". This meant pushing South Vietnamese troops into the front line and switching to even more massive bombing, which spread to Laos and Cambodia in a vain but bloody attempt to cut the enemy's supply lines. In effect, from 1968 the White House and the Pentagon were looking for ways to get the bulk of US forces out of Vietnam itself without losing the war. The long protracted Paris peace negotiations which lasted, on and off, from May 1968 to 1973 ended with the complete withdrawal of US forces.

Nixon and his Machiavellian Secretary of State Henry Kissinger also took advantage of the 1969-79 border clashes between Soviet and Chinese troops and friction between China and Vietnam (which included the Chinese impeding the transit of munitions and other war materiel to Vietnam from Russia) to achieve a major strategic turn a de facto alliance with China against Russia. Again US strategic weakness, revealed by the collapse in Vietnam, had a double effect in terms of world politics.


In the longer term this in trun led to Reagan's counter-offensive in the 1980s, which Stalinism proved unable to resist, the consequences of which we are still living with today neoliberalism and the world order of the single superpower.

Thus the economic and military effects of the Vietnam War, which reached a tipping point in the year 1968, set new trends going, which massively affected the class struggle in the 1970s and 1980s. Vietnam helped raise the level of this struggle around the globe even in those countries where the reformist leaders had no sympathy with the NLF, and actively supported the US war effort. Indeed, it took until the new millennium for the US to shake off the Vietnam Syndrome and undertake another major foreign ground war.

Vietnam was the first war the US lost but it will not be the last. The US is repeating its 1960s errors and bringing down upon itself similar consequences, for all the many circumstantial differences, This should alert us to the enormous possibilities which a defeat for imperialism can open up in the years ahead. This time we must not squander them, as the 68 generation all too often frittered away those given them by the heroic Vietnamese fighters.

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