

Seventy-five years since the Stalinist murder of Vietnamese Trotskyist leader Ta Thu Thau

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On August 26, Dr. Joseph Scalice delivered a lecture at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore on the support given by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), and the various organizations that follow its political line, for Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016. Scalice examined the historical and political origins of this policy of the party by exploring the historical parallels with the actions taken by the CPP and a rival party, the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP), in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as then President Ferdinand Marcos took steps toward the imposition of military dictatorship.

The response of Joma Sison, the longtime Stalinist leader of the CPP has been to launch a campaign of brazen slanders against Professor Scalice, accusing him of being a “CIA agent,” without a shred of evidence. Sison and his supporters are combining these lies with thinly-veiled or not-so-veiled threats of violence against Dr. Scalice and “Trotskyites.”

In a recent reply to Sison, Dr. Scalice noted, “Icepick memes were posted in the thread in response to Sison as ‘the only response to trots.’ There is nothing funny about this. It is a reference to the assassination of Trotsky and the Stalinist mass murder of members of the Fourth International, the Left Opposition, and the old Bolsheviks, with literally hundreds of thousands of victims. While their historical origins are different, the function of icepick memes is politically analogous to that of swastikas.”

In this political context, it is appropriate and timely to recall one of the worst crimes of Stalinism in southeast Asia, the execution of Ta Thu Thau, leader of the Vietnamese Trotskyists, which took place 75 years ago this month. The Trotskyist leader was arrested September 14, 1945, then tried by a “people’s court,” which refused to convict him. He was then shot anyway by a Stalinist Viet Minh firing squad. The exact date of his death, while known to the Vietnamese authorities, has not been made public.

This month marks the 75th anniversary of the execution of Ta Thu Thau, leader of the Vietnamese Trotskyists, carried out by a Viet Minh firing squad near the city of Quang Tri, in central Vietnam (Annam). Thau was seized on September 14, 1945, as he sought to reach Saigon in the south, the country’s largest city and the center of Trotskyist influence in the Vietnamese working class. He was put on trial before a “people’s court” run by the Viet Minh, the nationalist political front controlled by the Indochinese Communist Party under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh.

According to some reports, the people’s court refused to convict the well-known working-class militant, a hero of the struggle against French colonialism. A Viet Minh firing squad nonetheless carried out a death sentence, reportedly on the orders of Tran Van Giau, the Stalinist leader in southern Vietnam, although it is unlikely that he took such a grave decision without consultation with the top party leaders in Hanoi.

Ho Chi Minh later defended the execution, admitting that Thau was “a great patriot,” but declaring, “All those who do not follow the line I have laid down will be broken.”

The “line” which Ta Thu Thau was opposing was the decision of the

Stalinist leadership in Vietnam, acting at the behest of Stalin himself, to accept and even welcome the return of French colonial forces to Vietnam, accompanied by British troops as well, after the surrender of Japan ended World War II.

Under the Tehran Agreement of 1943, between Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt, military control of the former French colony of Indo-China was to be divided between the Chinese Kuomintang, whose forces would occupy the north, and Great Britain, whose troops would be deployed into the south.

At the subsequent summit at Potsdam in 1945, between Stalin, Truman and Churchill—with Clement Attlee replacing Churchill towards the end—this military partition was confirmed, with the British troops to act as the armed enforcers of the old French colonial administration, which was to be restored to power.

These arrangements were undertaken by Stalin without any consideration of the struggle which had been waged by the forces led politically by Ho Chi Minh and militarily by Vo Nguyen Giap, which had waged guerrilla warfare against the Japanese occupiers and their French puppets.

Ho bowed to Stalin’s dictates, while seeking to escape the consequences, particularly the large Kuomintang army in the north, where his Viet Minh forces had their strongest base. He sought to maneuver among the various hostile powers, China, France and Britain, rather than appealing to the working class in these countries for solidarity with the Vietnamese revolution.

Ta Thu Thau and the Vietnamese Trotskyists opposed the return of the old European colonial powers and helped mobilize widespread popular protests, particularly in the south, where for more than a decade Thau and his comrades had played a prominent role in the workers’ movement, particularly on the docks and among rail, streetcar and other transport workers.

The Vietnamese workers’ movement

The political conditions in the workers’ movement of southern Vietnam between 1931 and 1936 were quite unusual, in that the Stalinist party was not following the Comintern line in relation to the forces affiliated with the Left Opposition led by Trotsky, and there was considerable contact and even joint work between the Stalinists and Trotskyists, who made common cause against the repression of the French colonial authorities.

The two sides collaborated in the production of a common French-language publication, *La Lutte*, which was not subject to the same censorship that the French government applied to all Vietnamese-language publications. The faction of Trotskyists led by Ta Thu Thau participated in several joint election campaigns with the local

representatives of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), the official name of the Stalinists, and Ta Thu Thau had been elected to the Saigon city council in 1935 on one such slate.

(Another faction of Trotskyists opposed joint work with the Stalinists, and the political issues involved in this dispute are complex and require further analysis. Suffice it to say that under the impact of the Moscow Trials and the beginning of the political genocide against Trotskyists and Old Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union, the ICP ended all joint activity with the Vietnamese Trotskyists and the factional differences among the Trotskyists receded.)

In April 1939, the Trotskyists, with Ta Thu Thau heading a “Workers’ and Peasants’ Slate,” defeated both the bourgeois “constitutionalists” and the Stalinist-backed “Democratic Front” in elections for the provincial council of Cochinchina, as the southern region was known under French rule. The main issue in the election was the Trotskyists’ opposition to a “national defense levy” to provide financial resources for the French military, which the Stalinists supported as part of their alignment with the Popular Front government in power at that time in France.

According to the account of Ngo Van Xuyet, a leading member of the Trotskyist faction critical of Ta Thu Thau, Governor-General Joseph-Jules Brévié set aside the results of the 1939 provincial election on the grounds that “the Trotskyists under the leadership of Ta Thu Thau, want to take advantage of a possible war in order to win total liberation.” The Stalinists, on the other hand, are “following the position of the Communist Party in France” and “will thus be loyal if war breaks out.”

This assessment preceded the Stalin-Hitler Pact of August 1939, which led both the French and Vietnamese Stalinists to shift abruptly to a militant anti-war position. On September 26, 1939, the French government adopted a law outlawing the Communist Party of France, which was applied in Indo-China to outlaw both the Stalinists and the Trotskyists.

Ta Thu Thau was arrested by the French colonial authorities and imprisoned for more than five years at the penal settlement of Poulo-Condore, an island in the South China Sea. Thirty years later, this island, under its Vietnamese name, Con Son, became notorious as the site of the “tiger cages” in which Vietnamese liberation fighters captured by the South Vietnamese puppet government were tortured and confined under barbaric conditions.

The betrayals of 1945

In March 1945, Japanese forces liquidated the French colonial regime and assumed direct rule over Indo-China. Ta Thu Thau had been released from Poulo-Condore at the end of 1944, after a five-year term. He resumed political activity, and during the summer travelled to the north, meeting with Trotskyist supporters among striking coal miners. It was on his return from this trip, halfway back to Saigon, that Thau was captured by the Stalinists in Quang Tri.

In Saigon, the restoration of French colonial rule and entry of British troops touched off a general popular uprising in which the Trotskyists played a major role, forming a workers’ militia which was brutally suppressed by British and French forces, including a slaughter of more than 200 workers at Thi Nghe bridge on October 3, 1945. Trotskyist militants forced to flee the mass repression in the city were caught in the countryside between the Viet Minh and the restored landlord-colonialist military forces. Only a handful survived by leaving the country altogether.

As the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka noted in its founding document, The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka):

As tensions sharpened in September 1945, the Stalinists disarmed the peoples’ committees, suppressed the provisional central committee and murdered scores of Trotskyists, including *La Lutte* leader Ta Thu Thau. Far from securing independence, the ICP’s collaboration with the French only helped restore colonial rule in the south. The Vietnamese people were to pay a horrific price for the betrayal of the post-war revolutionary upsurge and the subsequent manoeuvring of the Stalinists with French and then American imperialism. Thirty years of war left the country devastated and millions dead.

For many decades, the tragic fate of the Vietnamese Trotskyists, as well as their prominent political role in the 1930s, were little known or understood among the supporters of the Fourth International. The revisionists headed by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, who held leadership positions until 1953, had dismissed both the Chinese and Vietnamese Trotskyists as “refugees from a revolution.” Later, in the 1960s, the Pabloites hailed the Vietnamese Stalinist leadership under Ho Chi Minh for its resistance to American imperialism during the US intervention in Vietnam, and opposed raising the question of the Vietnamese Trotskyists.

But in the conflict in 1945, Ho Chi Minh revealed the nationalist orientation that is the hallmark of Stalinism. As he told his associates, he preferred to permit the reentry of French and British forces because the old colonial powers were weak and discredited, while the Chinese forces, much larger and closer, were the greater threat.

He thus revealed a deep skepticism about the prospects for a successful revolution in China—the supposedly powerful Kuomintang armies disintegrated in barely three years and the Chinese Communist Party came to power. At the same time, reflecting the anti-Chinese prejudices of a Vietnamese nationalist, he regarded China, whether led by Mao Zedong or Chiang Kai-shek, as more to be feared by Vietnam than the European imperialists, because of its proximity and long history of conflict with its smaller southern neighbor.

Ho, following the logic of Stalinism, had long rejected the fight for a worldwide socialist revolution and proceeded on a nationalist perspective, with the goal of establishing an independent Vietnam. On the basis of his nationalist *raison d’état*, he approved the killing of the revolutionary internationalists, including Ta Thu Thau.

The American intervention

This reliance on nationalist maneuvers with the great powers was to prove the Achilles heel of the Vietnamese Revolution. After the great military victory of the Viet Minh in the siege of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, which ended in French surrender, the Soviet and Chinese Stalinist leaders engineered the betrayal of the Geneva Accords, in which Vietnam was effectively partitioned, with a right-wing administration set up in the south, headquartered in Saigon, with heavy American backing.

The Viet Minh came to power in the north, and set up a regime in Hanoi headed by Ho Chi Minh, but in the south the new American-backed strongman Ngo Dinh Diem was installed, and he blocked the promised national elections that the Viet Minh would certainly have won, instead proclaiming a Saigon-based Republic of Vietnam, or South Vietnam, in defiance of the Geneva agreement.

Guerrilla war resumed again in 1960, and the US dispatched an increasing number of military “advisers,” and ultimately a gigantic army exceeding 500,000 troops, using the most modern weaponry and with

complete domination of the air and the sea. Throughout this period, the National Liberation Front (NLF) was unable to establish a strong popular base within the working class of southern Vietnam, especially the Saigon proletariat, where the savage Stalinist repression of the Trotskyists had left a deep and unhealed wound. While the Tet offensive demonstrated the strength of the NLF among the peasantry, there was no uprising of the urban proletariat to join forces with the guerrilla fighters against the American occupiers and their puppet regime.

The war continued on an increasingly bloody basis—an estimated three million Vietnamese lost their lives, along with nearly 60,000 Americans—until the US withdrawal in 1973. The regime in South Vietnam survived another two years, before collapsing under the impact of a National Liberation Front offensive that culminated in the storied helicopter evacuation of the US embassy in Saigon in April 1975.

Postwar Vietnam

While the Vietnam War ended in a debacle for American imperialism, the independence of Vietnam under Stalinist rule proved to be illusory and temporary. Vietnam remained part of a global economy and a world system of nation-states dominated by imperialism. Vietnam came into conflict with neighboring Stalinist-ruled states, invading Cambodia in 1978 to put an end to the genocidal rule of the Khmer Rouge, then waging a bloody border war with the People's Republic of China, the Khmer Rouge's main ally, in 1979.

The turn by the Chinese Stalinists towards the restoration of capitalism, beginning in the 1980s, created conditions for a similar development in Vietnam. From 1986 on, under the policy of *Doi Moi* (renovation), the Vietnamese Communist Party oversaw the establishment, first of specialized zones for foreign capitalist enterprises, then of a full-fledged development of Vietnamese capitalism, while retaining a one-party dictatorship to suppress the working class.

Today, Vietnam is fully integrated into the production chain of giant transnational corporations, Japanese, American, South Korean, as well as those based in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. A substantial working class has developed, brutally exploited at wage levels well below those prevailing in China itself.

As a nation-state, Vietnam has been courted by American imperialism and is regarded as a potential ally against China. Diplomatic relations between Hanoi and Washington were established in 1995. American warships have returned to ports like Cam Ranh Bay, their main base during the Vietnam War, and American military officials regularly consult with their Vietnamese counterparts on such issues as the Vietnamese conflict with China over various islets in the South China Sea.

In 2016, US imperialism ended its four-decade-old embargo on arms sales to Vietnam, in a step which President Barack Obama hailed as a decisive step in the “normalization” of relations between the two countries. The WSWs wrote at the time:

Vietnam's evolution in the aftermath of the US war provides an historical vindication—in the negative—of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. The liberation of this oppressed country from imperialist domination could, in the end, be accomplished only through a revolution of the working class, leading the oppressed masses behind it. Moreover, none of the immense economic problems confronting a war-shattered Vietnam could be resolved on the basis of nationalist policies such as those advanced by the Stalinist leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party

(VCP). In the epoch of the domination of the world capitalist economy over all national economies, socialist transformation, while beginning on the national soil, could be completed only on the international arena.

The principles for which Ta Thu Thau and other Vietnamese Trotskyists gave their lives have been vindicated in decades of bitter historical experience. The opportunist maneuverings of Ho Chi Minh and his Stalinist successors have led the Vietnamese people into a blind alley. Only the building of a genuinely socialist and revolutionary movement, a Trotskyist party as a Vietnamese section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, offers a road forward.



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