



Nguyen Khac Vien

## Nguyen Khac Vien: The Itinerary of a Marxist Intellectual

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EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, in the history of nations, the so-called national destiny finds its concentrated expression in the unfolding drama of the life of an exceptional man or woman. In the case of Vietnam, the communist patriot Ho Chi Minh immediately comes to mind as one such maker of history. In a less triumphalist manner, the writer-propagandist Nguyen Khac Vien also "made history," but with a catch: viewed through the unsentimental lens of post-Gorbachevism which he lived long enough to run up against, he typifies several generations of Marxist intellectuals around the world who participated wholeheartedly in the effort to overthrow structures of exploitation and injustice, but at one point or another in their life or career, were undone by the contradictions inherent in the belief system they had chosen to live by.

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Nguyen Khac Vien was born in 1913 in Ha Tinh, some 300 kilometers south of Hanoi, to a high-ranking mandarin family. His entire formal schooling was done at French schools, both in Vietnam and in France. He began his medical studies in Hanoi and in 1937 went to Paris for further training; in all, he stayed in France for 26 years. "My cultural background is therefore completely French, that is to say bourgeois (in the original meaning of the word), which has no pejorative connotations," he stated in an interview.<sup>1</sup> But as early as the 1930s, he later claimed, he had realized that the "dreams" of Vietnamese intellectuals "nourished on Western-style bourgeois democratic theories" had come to grief against the massive anti-patriotic repression unleashed by the French.<sup>2</sup>

Even as a student, he helped organize Vietnamese immigrant workers in France after the war. He then joined the French Communist Party (PCF) in 1949, after several years of work, reflection and theoretical study.

Marxism brought a clear, coherent, rational response to the crucial problems tormenting me. The son of an intellectual, I understood at once the limits of Confucianism; trained by the French university after many years of stay in France, I ended up understanding the insufficiencies of bourgeois democracy. The western model has neither universal, nor eternal value. The option for Marxism had come without internal turmoil, without conflict, like a fruit which had long ripened.<sup>3</sup>

In 1963, Vien returned to North Vietnam and, apparently without passing through the obligatory trial period before membership, was admitted to the Vietnamese ruling party as a senior member.<sup>4</sup> Vien served as director of the regime's Foreign Languages Publishing House and of the review *Vietnamese Studies* and as editor of the monthly *Vietnam Courier*. In February 1983, at the age of 70, he retired from public service. In his capacity as official historian and senior propagandist of the communist regime for the previous two decades, Vien had influenced countless foreign sympathizers, scholars and plain

"Vietnam watchers," and certainly more than his counterparts in other Asian socialist republics, helped give Vietnam an image of "socialism with a human face."

Predictably enough, Vien's political trajectory by the 1990s would resemble an arc similar to that generally taken by "actually-existing socialism": within a 40-year period it took off and enjoyed a measure of wide international and domestic approval; it peaked by the 1970s, then went into an inexorable decline, considerably weakened by contradictions engendered by the dynamics of the Vietnamese revolution and compromised by the global crisis of socialism. Vien's "last hurrah" for democracy was directed against his own party, beset by problems which neither he nor the old guard could effectively resolve without objectively eroding the edifice of the revolution. In a manner of speaking, Vien's itinerary is symbolic of the triumphs and tribulations of the cohort of the 20th century's Marxist intellectuals.

### **An Un-innocent Commitment**

The quality of Vien's commitment to the Marxist-Leninist cause cannot be put in doubt. For a young Vietnamese intellectual who by then had lived more than a decade in France, becoming a communist in the late 1940s was not an innocent act. Vien did not join the PCF during the heroic moments of the Popular Front,<sup>5</sup> nor of the anti-fascist resistance,<sup>6</sup> but at the beginning of the Cold War. This was the period when the PCF's "big brother," the Soviet Union, was being portrayed by the "Free World" as a threat to democracy and freedom; the maverick communist Tito had just been denounced by the Kominform as a "revisionist";<sup>7</sup> French, and indeed European intellectual circles were still in an uproar over the extended debate between Sartre and Camus over such issues as the price of political commitment, the Soviet prison camps, etc.<sup>8</sup> Later, when several French communists would resign from the party and so-called fellow travelers would denounce communism after Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's crimes, and then over the Soviet troops' suppression of the Budapest uprising,<sup>9</sup> Vien would remain loyal to the PCF and above all to the USSR and its ruling party.

Vien's subsequent "transfer" to the Lao Dong (Worker's) Party of Vietnam entailed a similar acceptance of Leninist discipline. Even more than the PCF, the Vietnamese party had internalized the need for strict conformity to doctrinal orthodoxy; in fact, it even adopted for its own use the Maoist practice of *cheng feng* (rebaptized *chinh huan*), that had been perfected in Yenan several decades before.<sup>10</sup> Vietnam was not France; even Marxism-Leninism took a different tonality once it crossed the seas.

As a ranking Lao Dong official, Vien certainly was aware of the prejudice against "petty-bourgeois intellectuals" — the class reference was a constant — openly manifested by the party leadership. For instance, Le Duan attributed the failure of modern social movements led by these intellectuals to the "short-lived mettle and audacity" allegedly inherent in their class. They tended to vacillate "between the bourgeois road and the proletarian road"; they were vulnerable to "bourgeois ideology" and thus tended towards pessimism about the revolution; they had naive ideas about classless democracy, etc.<sup>11</sup> Another party theoretician put it in this brutal fashion: "The view that the petty-bourgeois intellectuals of Vietnam can lead or can take part in leading the revolution is wrong."<sup>12</sup> Vien had apparently committed class suicide, and had become not so much an "organic intellectual," as a remolded ex-petty bourgeois intellectual.

Up to the early 1990s, Vietnamese intellectuals and artists who were unable or unwilling to submit to the party's "line" were subjected to different forms of persecution.<sup>13</sup> The various official histories written by Vien manifest this inflexible conformism, particularly in his treatment of the Trotskyist rivals of the communists in the 1930s and early 1940s. If they are mentioned at all, they are presented in virulent terms as provocateurs and saboteurs; as "anti-communists," extremists, irresponsible, divisive, destructive, and hostile to the (communist-led) united front; if the party had ever erred in their regard, it was precisely due to "lack of vigilance against the Trotskyites and unprincipled cooperation with them."<sup>14</sup> Yet, as we will see later, the last surviving Trotskyists in the West would try to co-opt Vien, as he finally fell victim to



the same logic of Marxist-Leninist discipline that had made him condemn those ideological deviationists.

### **Accommodation of Confucianism**

Nguyen Khac Vien made his first impact on non-Marxist circles through an essay on "Marxism and Confucianism in Vietnam."<sup>15</sup> In this popular work, Vien went against the received knowledge by arguing that the centuries-old Confucian doctrine still had ideological relevance for Marxist-Leninists in 20th century Vietnam. He pointed out that Ho Chi Minh's speeches and articles were marked by an "easily recognizable Confucian moralism."<sup>16</sup> But, Vien asserted, Ho Chi Minh was not so much alluding to conventional moralism as he was giving "directions for rectification campaigns" — that is, ideological rectification — for according to Vien, there existed a congenial relationship between Confucian ethics and Marxist principles. In his view, Vietnamese Buddhism — the most popular religion in contemporary Vietnamese society — was a less desirable vehicle for the introduction of Marxist theory and practice:

In [the] face of Buddhism which affirmed the vanity, even the unreality of this world, preached renunciation, and directed men's minds towards superterrestrial hopes, Confucianism taught that man is essentially a social being bound by social obligations. To serve one's king, honor one's parents, remain loyal to one's spouse until death, manage one's family affairs, participate in the administration of one's country, contribute to safeguarding the peace of the world, such were the duties prescribed by Confucianism to all. To educate oneself, to improve oneself so as to be able to assume all those tasks — this should be the fundamental preoccupation of all men, from the Emperor, Son of Heaven, down to the humblest commoner.

In fact, adaptation of the Western doctrine to Vietnamese society was more easily accomplished than in other Asian societies precisely because of the ideological compatibility of Confucianism and Marxism:

Marxism did not at all upset Confucians as centering man's reflection on political and social problems; the Confucian school had done the same. When it defined man according to the totality of his social relations, Marxism was scarcely shocking to the [Confucian] scholars, who considered that man's highest purpose was to correctly assume his social obligations. From the purely moral definition of social obligations in Confucianism to the scientific definition of social relations in Marxism there is of course all the distance that separates a scientific way of thinking from a purely ethical doctrine, but both move on the same level, within the same order of preoccupations ... For their part, Marxist militants readily take up the Confucian's political moralism. The idea that those who have responsibilities should display exemplary moral standards is deeply rooted in Confucian countries and, while giving it a different meaning, the Marxist militants of our countries continue the tradition of the famous scholars of ancient times.<sup>17</sup>

The crowning argument imparted a nationalist flavor to the Confucian heritage: "[C]ontrary to the pseudo-revolutionaries, Vietnamese Marxists consider Confucianism and the work of the scholars as a national patrimony which the new society must assimilate."<sup>18</sup>

Vien's "against the grain" attitude of 1962 vis-a-vis the Confucianist orthodoxy may be explained in part by the fact that he belonged then to the PCF, which was less rigorous about its mostly French members' individual positions on such a recondite subject as Confucianism which obviously had little relevance for the party's domestic political line; and in part by the still-uncontroversial nature of Confucianism.<sup>19</sup>

In any event, Vien's candor and willingness to transgress certain ideological taboos would become the hallmark of North Vietnamese propaganda efforts.<sup>20</sup> For example, after the 1975 victory of the communist forces, he could joke that "the hardest part for the [Vietnamese Peoples Army] was not winning the war, but trying to

march in step at the victory parade.”<sup>21</sup> On another occasion, Vien took up the defense of the poet Nguyen Du, author of the famous work *Kim Van Kieu*, who, although a mandarin with a reactionary reputation and notorious for his resistance to the Tay Son peasant rebellion,<sup>22</sup> “had the courage, as the subject of an absolute monarchy, to praise a rebel.”

In a society in which women lived according to Confucian do's and don'ts, Nguyen Du defended young women's freedom to love. He also revived our national language, putting the rich treasure of classical literature within reach of the popular masses. One cannot reproach him for not being a Marxist, for not grasping the historical significance of the Tay Son uprising.<sup>23</sup>

### Back to Orthodoxy

On the strength of such passages in his writings did Vien acquire his “independent,” non-dogmatic image. On the rare occasions that visiting Western intellectuals *did* register disappointment with dogmatic, stereotyped and stilted language parroting the “official line,” other officials, not Vien, were singled out as the erring party. Yet on the subject of the alleged ill effects of “Western culture,” Vien could sound as orthodox as the Chinese Red Guards and the “Gang of Four,” pontificating in their capacity as self-appointed guardians of ideological purity at the height of the Cultural Revolution. By identifying writers such as Nietzsche, Freud, Sartre, Camus and Sagan as (involuntary) purveyors of counter-revolutionary pessimism and defeatism in South Vietnamese society, Vien perhaps inadvertently bracketed himself in the same category as his contemporaries in China and Soviet Union, who insisted — certainly taking a conscious anti-Trotskyist position — that “art should serve the revolution and serve the people.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, at the same time that he defended Nguyen Du, Vien admitted that *Kim Van Kieu* was full of “lines that preach resignation to destiny.”<sup>25</sup>

As the so-called Second Indochina War intensified, Vien's "nonconformist" views gradually gave way to more orthodox positions.<sup>26</sup> At the risk of sounding self-contradictory, Vien in 1973 noticeably backtracked from his firm convictions of 1962 on the Confucian-Marxist compatibility paradigm. In the equally celebrated polemic "Myths and Truths," Vien declared that:

By the early 20th century, Confucianism in Vietnam, deprived of its leader [the king], of its keystone, had become a mere survival. A persistent survival, present in many fields, but no longer playing the leading role that had been its own for centuries ... This doctrine no longer presided over the great events, the great trends that determined the course of the country's history.<sup>27</sup>

In retrospect, the central argument in the 1962 essay sounded unduly favorable to Confucianism; not sufficiently "politically correct," to use the currently fashionable phrase. To explain the apparent contradiction, Vien developed in "Myths and Truths" the concept of *dual cultures*, which states that in pre-colonial Vietnam, "running side by side with Confucian orthodoxy, the ideology of the ruling classes, mandarins and notables, there was a stream of deep-rooted popular culture, essentially present."<sup>28</sup> However, this identification of peasant culture with popular beliefs and values went against the grain of the Vietnamese communist party's orthodoxy — already tinged with anti-Maoism after the outbreak of the Chinese Cultural Revolution — which downplayed the peasantry as a revolutionary class; and which, in the late 1970s, would scorn the Chinese/Maoist party's alleged "peasant ideology" as, presumably, one not up to the "real" Marxist standards.<sup>29</sup>

### **Defending the Revolution**

For the most part, Western intellectuals' sympathy with the Vietnamese struggle for national liberation was not meant to be unconditional or eternal. Their demonstrations of support for, and solidarity with the Vietnamese revolution stopped with the



communist takeover in 1975. Either bitter critics of Soviet-style Marxism, or else partisans of the “Chinese way,” or simply old-style liberals unhampered by ideological considerations, these ex-sympathizers were not inclined to close their eyes to perceived shortcomings and distortions of the socialist vision in Vietnam — an underdeveloped country crippled by more than a decade of war, its culture undermined by the inroads of Western cultural influences, its leadership’s decisions subjected to the pressures of the socialist “big brothers.”

By 1975, many Western leftist intellectuals had reasons to be less sanguine than they were 30 years before about the chances of democracy in countries allied with either the Soviet Union or with China. Vietnamese propagandists were particularly sensitive to the mood of non-Marxist or non-communist Westerners who exchanged their sympathetic attitudes for one of “critical support,” if not of “critical expectations” for the victorious communist party and government.

Vien did not shirk from the challenge. In the article “Writing About Vietnam,”<sup>30</sup> he responded to certain allegations made by Jean Lacouture in *Vietnam: Voyage a Travers une Victoire*, the first major work about Vietnam published in the West after the communist victory. In particular, Vietnam’s official spokesperson was put on the defensive about three sensitive issues raised by Lacouture: the imposition of Northern or communist control over the South; the fate of the so-called “Third Force”; and democratic processes in post-revolutionary Vietnam in general. Whereas Vien’s response to Frances Fitzgerald had been civil and moderate,<sup>31</sup> the Lacouture-Vien polemic was noteworthy for its overtones of the “revolution betrayed.” In effect, it was easier for Vien to deal with a non-Marxist like Fitzgerald than with a “fellow traveler,” familiar with the constraints of Third World social movements yet critical of their long-term consequences, like Lacouture.

The term “Northmalization” was coined by Lacouture to designate North Vietnam’s hegemony over Southern affairs after the

fall of the Saigon regime. Like so many Western journalists, Lacouture made much out of the fascination which consumer goods, seen in abundance in recently liberated Southern cities, exerted on North Vietnamese soldiers who had never been exposed to such "dangers." Vien countered by saying that in fact there was more ideological "contamination," as he put it, from the socialist North towards the ex-capitalist South, than the other way around. As proof, Vien cited the million tons of food, medicines and other basic necessities which the North sent as "emergency aid to the most devastated areas of the South" during the 1975-76 period; for him, this was a "clear demonstration of the superiority of the socialist regime."<sup>32</sup>

The so-called "Third Force"<sup>33</sup> was portrayed by Vien, in an obvious effort at co-optation, as "patriots" who were "well aware of the fact that there was no other path that would lead Vietnam in the direction of independence and social progress than that of close cooperation with the Communists."<sup>34</sup> Vien further asserted that after the liberation of South Vietnam, Third Force personalities "chose to stand for election on lists approved by the NLF (National Liberation Front)." However, he omitted the fact that the *original* Third Force, i.e. those middle-landers who, before the 1975 debacle had recoiled from the prospects of communist rule while rejecting the American-backed "puppet" regimes which succeeded each other in Saigon, were expressly excluded from these elections. In fact, in 1977 Vien would argue that the Third Force had become irrelevant in post-revolutionary Vietnam: "Why a third force today? The point is not to share out (*sic*) seats as in an electoral bout in bourgeois democracy, but to work together to rebuild a country ravaged by 30 years of war."<sup>35</sup>

The thorniest problem of all raised by Lacouture, one that would bedevil the Communist leadership a decade and a half later, was that of pluralist democracy. This was answered by Vien in the most orthodox Marxist-Leninist manner, i.e. he accused the French journalist of proffering Western-style bourgeois democracy as the ideal universal standard. Vien countered that the Vietnamese brand of democracy, on the contrary, had a specifically Marxist-Leninist orientation born out

of over a century of struggle against imperialism, from where the so-called national bourgeoisie was largely absent.<sup>36</sup>

Vien took advantage of the polemic to ridicule Western elections and the pluralism inherent therein; for example, he inquired, why had the French Communist Party (just as pro-Soviet as the CPV was) been excluded from the government "for the past 30 years" if the French regime was really pluralist?<sup>37</sup> As if to foreclose the debate, Vien resorted to an argument that, with its hint on the need for discipline and conformity, probably could not help but sound "Confucianist" and "Stalinist" to Western ears:

Insistence on systematic opposition can also be a sign of a lack of maturity, if not political naivety (*sic*). Different opinions do not necessarily lead to the formation of parties inimical towards one another; and accepting the leading role of a party, even though one is not a member of it, does not by any means imply resignation.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately for Vien, his intended audience in the West — and the rest of the world in general — had already reached a point of "ideological saturation" by the time his essay saw print. Lacouture's deliberate portrayal of a Vietnam on the verge of authoritarian dictatorship was in conformity with the "reactionary backlash" of the mid-1970s which successively saw: the phenomenon of the boat people; the fallout from the publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, the consequences of the failure of Che Guevara in Latin America and disappointment with the Cuban revolution; the advent of the anti-Marxist "new philosophers" in France; and finally the revival of old tensions between Vietnam and China, and between Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia which would erupt in open war by 1978-1979.

It was a specially unpropitious time to engage in apologetics for a hardliner Marxist-Leninist regime. In retrospect, Vien's resort to ideological arguments in his polemic against the blasé Parisian journalist Lacouture was ill-advised. But he did not have the

luxury of a choice; the architects of Vietnam's victory were willing to pay the price for the defense of their hard-won "socialist gains." As the Lao Dong's doctrinal zeal intensified (a development apparently corresponding to his desire), Vien's ideological contradictions would worsen.

### The Limits of Third World Socialism

Reunified Vietnam's ascension to the ranks of the socialist nations, it seemed, had not necessarily resulted in the creation of a more technologically advanced (i.e. more advanced than the United States, Japan or Europe) Vietnamese society.<sup>39</sup> If there had been progress in the elimination of illiteracy, malnutrition, prostitution and mendicancy by the late 1970s, these efforts were offset by the general hemorrhage of the economy as a result of Vietnam's military occupation of Cambodia. Vietnam's isolation in Asia was dramatized by the hostility of the ASEAN and China, not to mention the US, which imposed a trade embargo on Vietnam to avenge its defeat.

The productive forces of the country had likewise started to chafe under the objective limitations of a largely agrarian, Third World "socialism"<sup>40</sup> whose vanguard party may have won the war against the US, but was ill-prepared to keep the promises of socialism: greater productivity, higher standards of living, and more substantial democratic freedoms than had been made available during the wartime years.

In late 1981, as candidly as circumstances warranted, Vien acknowledged that Vietnamese society was a "blocked" one, stifled by the regime of administrative subsidies which killed the spirit of initiative, inhibited capital, immobilized stocks and short-circuited import-export activities, among others. He thus expressed optimism with recently passed measures, such as the Central Committee's Resolution No. 6, and government directives Nos. 25 and 56, meant to "unblock" the pernicious situation where, in the name of anti-capitalism, a climate of anti-private enterprise had reigned supreme, leaving all economic initiatives in the hands of the State sector.<sup>41</sup>



But as Vien was well aware, to liberalize the economy was to play with fire. He warned of the revival of the evils of the consumer society which the US had introduced in South Vietnam as part of its overall war plan. He complained that "it is not easy to make a free market march in step with the socialist market."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, a cautious Vien admitted that he entertained "no illusions" about the outcome of Vietnam's transition to socialism.<sup>43</sup> If so, why did he endorse the socialist option; why did he insist on the historical timeliness of Vietnamese socialism; above all, why was he gratuitously exposing his flank to the communist party's hardliners? It is true that this early, Mikhail Gorbachev's example of well-meaning, but self-destructive reformism had yet to make its impact on the socialist world. But just like Gorbachev, Vien would realize, perhaps too late, that the Marxist-Leninist brand of socialism was impermeable to all attempts to "democratize" it.

Vien resorted to drastic measures to ensure himself of a proper hearing. In an open letter dated 21 June 1981 addressed to the Socialist Republic's national assembly — and not, as one might have expected, to the ruling party of which he was a member and where his criticisms could have been discussed, if at all, as an internal matter — Vien aired his views about the national impasse. However, Vien's profound Marxist-Leninist commitment may have prevented him from taking a more radical viewpoint.<sup>44</sup>

Vien's letter identified as a grave problem the overwhelming control exercised by the ruling party over all levels of government, from the top down to the district, commune and enterprise levels. "[N]obody is responsible. This is bureaucratic inflation. Each party branch has created its own organs duplicating the counterpart services of the government to resolve concrete case[s] ... People's organizations and cooperatives no longer play any role: everything is decided by two or three persons." The monopoly started at the grassroots and ran all the way to the top where, according to Vien, "the Party organization commission has encroached on the powers of the government."<sup>45</sup> Similar complaints about party monopoly of government prerogatives

would become a familiar leitmotif of reformists in the Soviet Union as Gorbachevism continued to ravage the bureaucracy; yet apparently for Vien in 1981, the Soviet model could not be put in doubt.

Vien's ideological preference for the Soviet Union as against the Maoist temptation was reaffirmed, *positively* by his argument that it was "dangerous" to take up the idea, inspired by "narrow nationalism," that socialist Vietnam distance itself from the USSR and instead "play on two or three sides"; and *negatively*, by his suggestion that all of the party's errors in question were due, allegedly, to its having adopted Mao Tse-tung Thought as early as 1951, and to Chinese-influenced policies on the party's organization, ideological training and agrarian reform. Yet it would seem that any pro-Chinese excesses committed by the party as a whole, in the interval between 1951 and 1982, had been compensated for by the purges of 1959 (subsequent to the self-criticism of the "pro-Chinese" leader Truong Chinh, assuming responsibility for the over-radical agrarian reform of 1956) and by the wholesale purge of real or suspected pro-Chinese party members (e.g. Hoang Van Hoan, ex-ambassador to Beijing), which was carried out in the wake of the conflict with the Khmer Rouge, then with the Chinese, in 1978-79.

### Gorbachev: Problem for Vien

It seemed as if Nguyen Khac Vien, two years away from retirement, was losing ground within the inner circles of the ruling party. Far from appreciating his (unsolicited) criticism, the party's powers-that-be apparently chose to hush up the affair. A hint of his growing marginalization within the Communist Party could be gleaned from his mention, in his letter, of the "scientific and creative minds" who had been upstaged by "opportunistic intellectuals" and likewise from his criticism of the "too simplistic," unimaginative propaganda turned out in previous years.<sup>46</sup>

But, it could be argued from an *even more radical point of view than Vien's*, these unwelcome developments were only reflections of the deepening crisis of Marxism-Leninism both as theory

and as praxis in the countries of "actually-existing socialism." The police-state character of Vietnam, like that of the USSR and its Eastern European satellites, was now taking the full measure of its basic *insecurity* in a world and a consciousness that had evolved in a direction far from the utopian dream of Marxist-Leninists. Vien's "conceptual framework," like that of so many other well-meaning radicals of his generation, was proving to be inadequate. His statement in his open letter that:

a poor backward country, damaged by war, battered by the elements, and threatened by the imperialists, cannot launch the slogan 'fast progress, strong progress.' It should just stick to steady 'progress.'

was an implicit admission of the reckless error he made, in 1977, in estimating a 20-year period for Vietnam to catch up with the West's technological advance.

The turmoil which Gorbachevism stirred up in the Soviet Union, and its consequences in the rest of the socialist world, proved to be prejudicial to Vien's intentions. For one thing, Mikhail Gorbachev's public confession of regret over the Soviets' ideological divergences in the past with the Chinese, and his desire for the USSR to reestablish friendly relations with China<sup>47</sup> weakened Vien's position of intransigence vis-a-vis the latter. For another, Gorbachev's reforms had the long-term effect of weakening official Soviet resolve to maintain moral and material support to the USSR's old allies like Vietnam and Cuba. While Vien's criticism of the CPV leadership remained on the agenda, the party itself was being forced to a tight corner by events beyond its control. As an observer noted with regard to the broadening of democracy in Vietnam, "the thinking of the Vietnamese Party is clearly more in line with that of the Chinese Communist Party [!] leadership than with the pluralist tendencies in Eastern Europe."<sup>48</sup>

Encouraged by developments in the USSR, dissident voices began clamoring for democratic space in Vietnam, or in any case more space than the CPV leadership was willing to concede. Vien's previous



objections to pluralist democracy were becoming less and less easy to defend. The least that could be said about Vien's predicament, in the time of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, was that his deeply-held convictions were being put to a severe test, and that his fidelity to the Soviet ideal no longer produced any rewards. Moreover, his old age and retirement from public life deprived him of the audience which he would certainly have had in an earlier, less troubled time.

### Vien's Last Hurrah

In 1991, Vien found himself in the center of still another ideological controversy: he refused to participate in a Fatherland Front meeting convened to discuss preparatory texts for the Seventh Party Congress to be held later that year. But he explained his absence in a letter to the Front president, Nguyen Huu Tho, dated 7 January 1991: "There are other, more urgent things to be done." Notably, Vien demanded the following: a formal separation of party powers from State powers; and the voluntary resignation from their respective positions, of Central Committee members holding leadership positions of Central Committee organs.

In addition, Vien proposed the unusual idea of creating, "from below," a people's democratic front to counteract the allegedly evil consequences of Vietnam's otherwise unavoidable orientation towards the market economy — what he called "a tendency which cannot be resisted and which will make possible progress in science and technology as well as the development, by a certain number of persons, of their capabilities."<sup>49</sup> Why such a forward-looking development should be opposed by a "united front," with the wartime connotations it carried, Vien did not say. This proposed front, as he envisioned, would fight for democratic freedoms, social justice (e.g. guarantee correct wages for workers; avoid huge gaps in social status; provide for education and health care), defense of the environment and peace.

At the same time, Vien could not resist pointing out (as he had done ten years earlier) that this inevitable evolution towards a market



economy would entail an undesirable situation where “profit is king, and there is no humanity to speak of.” Moreover, this market economy would allegedly create a Vietnamese managerial caste with divided loyalties (i.e. as he said, both to Vietnam and to the multinationals Mitsubishi, Toyota, Philips, etc.). Signs of the changing times: Vien’s diatribe was played up in full by the Trotskyist publication *Inprecor*, ever on the alert for dissensions in the ranks of the old “Stalinist” enemies.

Vien’s suggestion for a “people’s democratic front” revealed an excessively naive (or desperate?) mindset which, again like Gorbachevism, flew in the face of Marxist-Leninist praxis. His anachronistic rhetoric against what he himself termed the unavoidable movement toward the laws of the market may have sounded reassuring to the ears of the conservatives of the ruling party, but it certainly failed to impress the dynamic sectors of Vietnamese society. Like Gorbachev who, at the beginning of his term, also unleashed the usual tirades against capitalism, yet eventually gave in to the pressure to open the Soviet Union to all sorts of liberal democratic institutions and practices, Vien was placed by 1991 in the untenable position of an increasingly marginalized, last-minute reformist bound to the syllogisms of the old ideology, but forced, by objective circumstances, to violate the premises of that ideology.

Either way, Vien would “emerge” a loser. Indeed, if his projected people’s democratic front against the tolerated — in fact, officially encouraged — free enterprise system was to materialize, its first and most unconditional partisans would be the abhorred Stalinists. As in the ex-USSR, they would be the most likely elements to profit from precisely this kind of opportunity to reimpose a totalitarian order in the name of the sacred dictatorship of the proletariat. On the other hand, if the front failed to get organized (as it indeed failed, more than two years later), Vien would have had to admit that, as countless reformists in the ex-USSR have time and again demonstrated, one cannot both liberalize a totalitarian society like Vietnam and survive to give edifying lessons about it.

Vien's unshakable loyalty to the Soviet ideal certainly shielded him from the temptation to denounce, in the name of a higher ideological principle, the so-called Stalinist distortions which irrevocably compromised the Marxist vision. But to people who enjoyed his confidence, Vien could assert that each time Vietnam demonstrated its independence from its Marxist-Leninist patrons, or showed a critical stance, "we ha[d] to tighten our belts."<sup>50</sup> Yet did the Vietnamese really have a choice, in a socialist world they knew very well to be imperfect, except to sacrifice their national and even ideological interests? Otherwise, Vien never betrayed his intimate feelings: to the very end he remained, in the eyes of the world, a partisan of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine as it was once incarnated by the "motherland of socialism." But that mythical motherland had already given up the struggle, a victim of the same longings for the democratic space which he rather belatedly claimed to cherish for his own country.

Ironically enough, Vien who never received the USSR's Lenin Prize was honored in the twilight of his life by the very bourgeois *Academie Francaise*, which in late 1992 conferred on him the Francophonie award (worth 400,000 francs) for his contributions to the propagation of French language and culture. News of the award provoked a group of French and Vietnamese intellectuals, a number of whom are ex-Marxists, to denounce the recipient whom they described as an apologist for Vietnam's Stalinist regime. The moment must have been bittersweet, to say the least, for Vien.

Vien's tragedy, as of many of his socialist contemporaries, was that the orthodoxy which he idealized turned out to be incapable of explaining, much less of changing, the *real world*. ☹

## Notes

1. Nguyen Khac Vien, "The Path I Followed," *Vietnam Courier*, March 1982.
2. "D'un delta à l'autre," in *Sud-Vietnam, au fil des années* (Hanoi, 1984), p. 239.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 331-332.
4. *Inprecor*, no. 327, 29 March 1991, p. 22.
5. The leftwing French government (but without PCF participation) which was in power for 11 months in 1936-37. This period was marked by several material gains for the working class.
6. The PCF played a major role in the underground resistance movement during World War II. After the Liberation (1945-46) the party, with some 1 million members, won 28.6 percent of the votes in the legislative elections.
7. In 1947, the Kominform succeeded the Komintern (dissolved in 1943) as the international organization linking all communist parties loyal to Moscow. During Marxism-Leninism's hegemonic period, "revisionist" was the pejorative term used by orthodox communists to characterize their comrades who favored a more liberal interpretation of Marxist-Leninist doctrine, specially with regard to class struggle and revolutionary violence.
8. After the war, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus publicly quarreled on the question of praxis, with Camus taking a less "doctrinaire" position than the Marxist-leaning Sartre. Neither man was a communist party member, however, and Sartre would later admit his disappointment with the Soviet bloc.
9. In October 1956, Soviet troops crushed an anti-communist uprising in Budapest led by intellectuals and liberals. Earlier that same year, a similar incident had erupted in Soviet-dominated Poland.
10. "Reform the method of work" as used by the Chinese; "teaching-reform" in the Vietnamese version. See Georges Boudarel, "Marxisme et Confucianisme," in *Les aventures du marxisme*, ed. R. Gallissot (1984), pp. 332-342 in particular.
11. Le Duan, *On the Socialist Revolution in Vietnam*, Vol. I, Hanoi (1965), pp. 63, 80; 81n, 75n.
12. Truong Chinh, *Selected Writings*, Hanoi (1977), p. 350.
13. See Nhu Phong, "Intellectuals, Writers and Artists" in P.J. Honey, ed. *North Vietnam Today* (Praeger, 1962); and G. Porter, "The Politics of 'Renovation' in Vietnam," in *Problems of Communism*, May-June 1990.
14. Nguyen Khac Vien, *Vietnam: The Long Resistance (1858-1975)*, Hanoi (1975), p. 97; *Vietnam: Une Longue Histoire*, Hanoi (1978),



- pp. 279-280; see also *An Outline History of the Vietnam Workers Party*, 2nd ed., Hanoi (1978), pp. 17, 24, 26, 33, 171.
15. *La Pensée*, October 1962, reprinted in *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam*, Berkeley (1974).
16. This insight was thereafter adopted by several Western authors, including Jean Lacouture in his 1967 biography of Ho Chi Minh.
17. As per translation in G. Chaliand, *Revolution in the Third World* (Penguin, 1976), p. 19.
18. As per translation in D. Hemery, "L'investissement du marxisme dans la pensée nationaliste," in *Aventures ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 291.
19. It would take the Chinese Cultural Revolution, starting in 1966, for Confucianism to become a major target of the Maoist "purists."
20. See his various interviews with P. Limqueco, in *Journal of Contemporary Asia* (vol. 3, no. 4, 1973; vol. 7, no. 2, 1977; vol. 8, no. 4, 1978) and "Nguyen Khac Vien Miscellany," in *Vietnamese Studies* no. 70. Compare with the stilted and stereotyped language of Susan Sontag's North Vietnamese interlocutors (not Vien) which Sontag, in her *Trip to Hanoi* (1968) criticized.
21. As told to J. Lacouture, *Vietnam: Voyage a Travers une Victoire* (1976), p. 72.
22. Originating in the village of Tay Son, this popular rebellion (1772-1802) against the repressive Nguyen dynasty had the effect of uniting the Vietnamese nation and laying the basis for reunification of the country under one rule in 1802.
23. "Saigon-Ho Chi Minh City," *Vietnam Courier* no. 59 (April 1977), p. 32.
24. See 1973 and 1977 interviews with Limqueco, *JCA*, pp. 475 and 214 respectively.
25. "Saigon - Ho Chi Minh City," *op. cit.*, p. 4.
26. He was one of the 33 Vietnamese intellectuals who participated in a party-sponsored conference to condemn the US aggression and to enlist international support for an end to the war, in Hanoi, 4-6 January 1966.
27. Pages 22-23 of this essay, published by *Vietnam Courier* in its September 1973 issue, which took to task American journalist Frances Fitzgerald's misconceptions about Vietnamese society and culture.



28. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
29. See Nguyen Minh Kien, *Understanding China*, Hanoi (1981).
30. "Writing About Vietnam," *Vietnam Courier*, no. 51 (August 1976).
31. In "Myths and Truths" (see endnote no. 27 above).
32. "Writing About Vietnam," p. 9.
33. At its very basic level of meaning, the "Third Force" was the commonly used term to designate those political elements in South Vietnam which, between the late 1960s and 1975, asserted their independence both from the US-supported Saigon regime, then on the decline, and from the communists on the ascendant.
34. "Writing About Vietnam," p. 28.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
37. This was disingenuous to say the least, for the PCF, never commanding more than 28 percent of the national vote, did not have to be accommodated by the Right or the Center in elections between 1946 and 1976, which were decisively won by the latter.
38. "Writing About Vietnam," p. 28.
39. Vien estimated a technological gap of at "least two centuries" separating Vietnam from the US and Europe, but added, perhaps with little regard for the Stalinist overtones of his prediction, that "we give ourselves a time span of about 20 years to close the gap." 1977 *JCA* interview with Limqueco, *op. cit.*, p. 215.
40. A concept which Vien himself had rather simplistically defined as "the abolition of private ownership of the means of production," in "Writing About Vietnam," *op. cit.*, p. 28.
41. "Sous le signe du blocage" in *Sud Vietnam au fil des années*, *op. cit.*, p. 183.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 184, 189.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
44. His dilemma: attack the party and thus weaken it; or keep silent and contribute to its continued dry rot, is reminiscent of Nikolai Bukharin's desperate situation against Stalin in the 1930s. Moreover, Vien did not — or perhaps could not — identify his real targets by name: party leaders Le Duc Tho and Le Duan. See introduction to Vien's

- letter in *La bureaucratie au Vietnam* (Vietnam-Asie Debat # 1), L'Harmattan 1983, p. 114.
45. Paul Quinn-Judge, "A Vietnamese Cassandra," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 26 February 1982, pp. 14-16.
  46. Vien's suggested remedy, surprisingly enough, was for government to pay attention to the social sciences.
  47. See his *Perestroika* (Harper and Row, 1987), in particular Chapter IV: "Restructuring in the USSR and in the Socialist World."
  48. G. Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
  49. *Inprecor*, 29 March 1991, p. 23.
  50. Quoted in Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy* (Collier Books, 1986), p. 180. P. Limqueco was Vien's confidant.