A VIETNAMESE INSIDER DISCUSSES THE ORIGINS OF THE 1968 TET OFFENSIVE – WHAT IS HE TRYING TO TELL US?

Preface

Few would surely deny that whilst the Soviet Union existed, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) had profound effects across a range of aspects of world history. It was, for example, possible to think of a ‘Soviet Third World’ within a wider topic of Soviet Third World interests. But as time has passed, the CPSU’s possible legacies are not much studied, especially regarding less-developed countries that were not part of the Soviet Union itself. Yet, in the collegium of country specialists working on countries such as Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, and parties such as East Timor’s FRETELIN (quite apart from North Korea and China), my experience is that affirmative answers are usually returned to the technical question of ‘how important is it to know about the CPSU, Lenin, Stalin and what happened between his death in 1954 and Yeltsin’s decree in November 1991 banning it in the Russian Federation’. This includes, a sense that beyond the need to know this sort of thing for research, teaching also requires that students be introduced to these matters.

As somebody who has worked on Vietnam for many years, my own opinion, for the case of Vietnam, is ‘a lot’. The view that we need to know far more than we do about the legacy of the CPSU in Southeast and North Asia has been confirmed by leading scholars such as Tony Reid (person communication). Asking around, other country specialists tend to confirm this. However, a search of Google Scholar (26th April 2020) on ‘CPSU AND legacy’, whilst returning nearly 7,000 citations, includes around 4,000 for the period since 1992, and the great majority...
of those cited are for either countries that were part of the Soviet Union (including the Soviet Union itself) or part of the Soviet ‘eastern Europe’. This suggests to me that there is a need to explore these legacies in greater detail\(^2\). And it is possible that part of these legacies is a fear of a concentration of power combined with respect for the value of formal and informal ways of avoiding this. The concentration of power around Xi Jinping in China, therefore, would not only be felt to be very dangerous in some other contemporary Communist countries (such as Vietnam), but, drawing upon lessons learnt after the deaths of Stalin and Beria in the Soviet Union, as well as before\(^3\) one would expect values and methods to exist to stop it.

**Introduction**

**Ruling not governing?**

Vietnamese themselves, and those abroad who try to follow events there, know that there is now a history of unrest going back to (and before) the Thai Binh ‘Troubles’ of 1996\(^4\). With the killing of Le Dinh Kinh in January 2020, likely by members of the public security forces, tensions within the Vietnamese political community ramped up another notch, especially as, at the same time and place, three policemen were trapped in a 4 m deep hole and burnt to death with petrol\(^5\). It is unwise to judge whether these events are unprecedented, for we simply do not know. It is interesting to observe the official media response, however, as this might be expected to be thought-through and coherent, but it seems that in the weeks after the events, it was not.

A few weeks afterwards, Nguyen Ngoc commented on his Facebook page\(^6\) that he had not seen and did not know of any information on the official orders involved in the events leading up to these deaths. There was an unusually (it appears) forceful news blackout, with one possible conclusion that internal divisions within the

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\(^4\) Tuong Lai, n/d, Báo cáo sơ bộ về cuộc khảo sát xã hội tại Thái Bình cuối tháng năm 1997 (Provisional Report on the social situation in Thai Binh at the end of June and early July 1997), http://lichsuvn.net/forum n/d

\(^5\) The event was initially widely reported but then in following weeks subject to a strong media blackout. See, for example, https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-51490181 and https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51105808.

\(^6\) https://vi-vn.facebook.com/NguyenNgocTayNguyen 4/2/2020
regime meant that there was inadequate agreement on the public position to take. This is despite the early position taken by the Party General Secretary to deem the dead policemen ‘martyrs’. Whilst of course the situation is unclear, this suggests a striking juxtaposition of an exercise of state violence with a lack of clarity in just where sovereignty lies, if anywhere, for if the Party General Secretary’s view cannot take precedence, what can? After all, monopoly control over the means of violence is often taken as a defining feature of states, but what ‘hand grasps the means to exercise that power’, if any? What blocked the organised deployment in the mass media of the General-Secretary’s clear hard line? We do not know.

The political consequences of the massive levels of corruption in Vietnam must not be underestimated. It is striking that, immediately after the fall of the south in 1975, interviews conducted by the Rand Corporation reported the views of a group of – :

respondents … selected for their knowledge of the events, either as witnesses or participants, or as high-level officials with an overall view of what had transpired … The military people included former Premier and Air Force Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, 13 officers holding the rank of general, and nine colonels. {They reported that} … (t)he most fundamental cause {of the collapse} was the pervasive corruption, which led to the rise of incompetent leaders, destroyed army morale, and created a vast gulf of social injustice and popular antipathy.

This can be put beside the conclusions of Vu Anh Dao:

The existing structure of the Vietnamese government lacks accountability and transparency. This leads to ineffectiveness and corruption in the public sector, and points to another area for future research: How far do the existing structures create corruption opportunities? That is, do the systems and processes of accountability actually facilitate the continuation of corruption, and if so, how?

One might expect a rational regime response to these issues would be to focus power upon anti-corruption agencies and let them loose to ‘clean the Augean stables’, but this would require a high concentration of power, and, in one Party states, with a Soviet legacy, this must be seen as very dangerous. This is a classic political contradiction.

As politics in Vietnam evolves, these tensions are increasingly clear. The killing of Le Dinh Kinh was apparently part of tensions over land (where some policemen had earlier been kidnapped by enraged locals)\(^\text{10}\). In the latter case:

Hanoi mayor Nguyen Duc Chung emerged from two hours of talks with 50 farmers promising a “comprehensive investigation” into the decades-old dispute that would produce a response in 45 days, according to state media and a copy of the written agreement seen by RFA’s Vietnamese Service. He also said that those who took dozens of policemen hostage since April 15 would not be prosecuted and thanked villagers for treating the captives well. Chung then signed an agreement and accepted the handover of the 19 police and officials who made up the last of 38 hostages taken the previous weekend\(^\text{11}\).

This agreement was then, it appears, abandoned in the events involving the killing of Le Dinh Kinh. This points to a lack of coherence within the regime.

It seems obvious that a politics that seeks to avoid dangerous concentration of power, if successful, must combine formal methods with the informal – the latter ‘to make the formal methods actually work’.\(^\text{12}\) Light is thrown upon Vietnamese views by how major historical events are presented, to which I now turn.

**Huy Duc’s ‘The winning side’**

The book ‘The winning side’, by Huy Duc\(^\text{13}\), is revealing in two ways. First, it presents an account of how the historically crucial episode of the 1968 Tet offensive was, as an event seen as caused by decisions in Hanoi (clearly, these are proximate causes, as the historical context is far greater in scope), ‘decided upon’.


\(^{11}\) *Ibidem*.

\(^{12}\) Thus, in the somewhat developed democracy in which I live, Australia, judges are appointed by the government of the day – that is, politically – and protected from political interference to some extent by their terms of employment. But, at the end of the day, their independence relies upon the conventions and values of the Australian political community, as logically it must, for, as was asked long ago ‘Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?’ and so at the end of the day it is up to us (whatever that means).

Second, in that Huy Duc’s account tells us much about his views of how these decisions were taken, and their political milieu, it tells us how he presents his own views and thinking about that milieu.

**Huy Duc and how the Tet Offensive was decided upon**

This was, of course, a crucial historical event in many ways. Arguably, the offensive, amongst other effects (whether intended or not is debatable) destroyed the US will to continue the fight, and so in part ‘won the war’. An officer in the North Vietnamese Army, and then a journalist, Huy Duc is an insider. In *Ben thang cuoc* he reveals important aspects of how he views excessive concentrations of power. It is striking that he underplays any possible value of these to the war effort.

Huy Duc frames his discussion in a Chapter (Chapter 15\(^{14}\)) entitled perhaps surprisingly ‘General Giap’. As we shall see, his account implies that the central historical issue was that the politics of the situation were aimed at mobilising political power to isolate Giap and Ho Chi Minh, a centripetal evolution of the pattern of power in ways that went counter to the Khrushchevian agenda as I understand it. This seems to be because he wants to bring out the nature of political conflict within the VCP and is suggestive of who he thinks is his audience.

General Giap, the ‘founder’ of the Vietnamese armed forces that defeated the French, and their commander at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, was therefore a man of considerable authority and reputation. Yet, as Huy Duc tells it, this position did not translate into significant political power. Huy Duc’s account therefore tells us much about his expressed beliefs about political power in the VCP, the nature of political tactics at the highest level, and his evident dislike of them, at least in this case. What he really thinks, of course, is another matter\(^{15}\).

Huy Duc’s discussion of the politics associated with the decision to launch the Tet Offensive starts with a discussion of the Tonkin Gulf Incident. The USS Maddox was torpedoed 2/8/1964 in an incident that stung the US Administration and Congress, leading to the Tonkin Gulf Resolution that allowed the US President to heavily escalate the US military involvement in the war. US bombing of the North

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\(^{14}\) Though published as 2 volumes, the chapters are numbered sequentially as though the book were a single volume. However, pagination in volume 2 starts with page 1.

\(^{15}\) I do not comment on the veracity of Huy Duc’s account, which is not relevant to my use of it here. All translations are my own. There are many historical records in potential play that Huy Duc does not seem to use, and a large literature that readers may consult.
started 5/8/1964. A week later, 160 North Vietnamese regular officers stopped their training early and started to move south.\(^{16}\)

Huy Duc reports that “according to Colonel Le Trong Nghia”\(^ {17}\), when the Tonkin Gulf Incident took place Giap was absent. The Chinese and Soviets started to make noises and President Ho Chi Minh called a meeting to find out what had happened. When he asked who gave the order for the torpedo to be fired at the USS Maddox, he was told that the man ‘in charge’\(^ {18}\) at the Central Party Navy section was a General Tran Quy Hai, whilst Nghia himself was in charge at the ‘combat’ (tác chiến) committee (ban) responsible for monitoring enemy activities. Hai said that he had reported to the Politburo before issuing the order but refused to say concretely to which member(s). Giap demanded that Hai be disciplined; he was not but according to Nghia “everybody knew who was behind the order”\(^ {19}\). According to Nghia, this meant Party General Secretary Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, Head of the Party Organisation Department. As Huy Duc puts it, the:

> Tonkin Gulf Incident became the reason for many war leaders in both the US and Vietnam to escalate the war. The head of the faction supporting a direct military act on the US, Nguyen Chi Thanh, was sent from the North to the South to act as the Party Secretary of the local Central Department. Other generals were sent with him …\(^ {20}\).

Violence escalated and in March 1965 US troops started to arrive in significant numbers, to which the North responded, leading to US responses in turn, and by 1968 US troop numbers had reached 543,000\(^ {21}\).

The picture Huy Duc paints is thus one where the formal decision-making bodies of the VCP are manipulated by use of elements of their internal structures – the Central Party Navy Section in the story here – to secure intended outcomes. The question, of course, is what those intentions are, and Huy Duc hints clearly that part of the intention was the neutralisation of political opponents, especially General Giap.

An important part of this capacity to attack political opponents, Huy Duc states, went back to 1963. In December of that year, at the 9\(^{th}\) Plenum of the III Congress

\(^{16}\) Huy Duc, s. 149.

\(^{17}\) Ibidem.

\(^{18}\) For those who are unfamiliar, note that in the official VCP system, at each Party or State organ, or Mass Organisation, at any point in time a named official was and is ‘in charge’ (trực). The senior members of the leadership group of any given Party or State organ are those deemed able to do this (thường trực).

\(^{19}\) Huy Duc, s. 150.

\(^{20}\) Ibidem.

\(^{21}\) Ibidem.
First Secretary Le Duan “started a discussion”\(^{22}\) of “international problems and the current struggle against revisionism”, which became part of the Plenum Resolution. This was in the context of ongoing violence in the South as well as tensions created by the economic problems in the North associated with the First Five Year Plan (1961–65). In 1964, due to the Plenum Resolution, about 40 Vietnamese studying or working in the USSR asked for asylum, amongst whom were some senior officials who were close to Giap. However, according to Huy Duc, from then onwards neither China nor the Soviet Union had much influence on Party policy towards the South. But opinions remained divided on the balance between development efforts in the North and military operations in the South, with the centre of gravity somewhere between two extremes\(^{23}\).

Huy Duc has then to explain how, after the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Incident, events transpired to lead to the 1968 Tet Offensive. In 1967 the US opened a channel of communication with North Vietnam, but at the same time, he writes, General Secretary Le Duan already had in his hands plans that eventually became those of the Offensive.

Giap was Minister of Defence, Commander in Chief and the Secretary of the Armed Forces Party Committee. But Huy Duc reports that according to Le Trong Nghia:

> To replace Giap as the decision-maker, Le Duc Tho had the idea of setting up a group of five people to assist the Party Centre direct combat in the South. This was made up of: Le Duan, Vo Nguyen Giap, Nguyen Chi Thanh, Pham Hung and Le Duc Tho. In this group, Giap had only one vote.\(^{24}\)

According to Huy Duc, this group had many intense debates about what became the Tet Offensive. Nghia attended most of them [153]. He reported (according to Huy Duc) that in the Party Committee there appeared two different tendencies: one said that only military means would solve the problem of the southern revolution – this was articulated by Nguyen Chi Thanh and behind him were Le Duan and Le Duc Tho; the others agreed on the need to fight, but fighting should be accompanied by attention to the political situation, and if this turned favourable there should be peace negotiations – this was Giap’s position.

By June 1967, however, in Huy Duc’s account both had agreed on the need to fight, manifest in a strategic idea called the 67–68 Plan\(^{25}\). But, on 5\(^{th}\) July 1967

\(^{22}\) *Ibidem*, s. 147.
\(^{23}\) *Ibidem*, s. 147–148.
\(^{24}\) *Ibidem*, s. 152.
\(^{25}\) *Ibidem*, s. 152–153.
Nguyen Chi Thanh died suddenly, and the day afterwards Giap left for convalescence in Hungary. Shortly afterwards two emissaries from France arrived with suggestions of talks and were met by Ho Chi Minh without his two top Generals – Giap and Thanh. Ho Chi Minh started to talk of negotiations [153]. In August concrete proposals came to the North Vietnamese representatives in Paris from the US government about a bombing halt, but according to Huy Duc:

… nobody knows whether Washington’s proposals were delivered to the highest leader(s) or not. When the North replied Ho Chi Minh was no longer in Hanoi. According to Colonel Le Trong Nghia: “In 5/9/1967 Ho Chi Minh was sent to rest in Beijing. We were told by the Central Party Organisation Department of Le Duc Tho that Uncle (Bac – Ho Chi Minh) was tired and had to go on a winter holiday, and from now on, all who previously worked directly with him will work with Comrade Le Duan”26.

The US proposal was rejected in strong terms.

Huy Duc reports an opinion that Ho Chi Minh’s visit to Beijing and Giap’s to Hungary were a ruse but rejects this. Arrests started 20 days after Thanh’s death, under the umbrella of an attack on a so-called ‘Anti Party’ movement and were guided by the Head of the Party Organisation Department, Le Duc Tho, and Tran Quoc Hoan, Minister of Public Security. Arrests included Ho Chi Minh’s closest Secretary, Vu Dinh Huynh27. The scope of the planned military activities for 1968 then started to expand into the general rising that was the Tet Offensive. Ho Chi Minh returned to Hanoi in December 1967, but Giap stayed in Hungary.

On 28/12/1967, Huy Duc reports, the Politburo met. He cites Vu Ky describing how whilst Ho Chi Minh presided, the proceedings were led by Le Duan and the Politburo decided upon the need for a general uprising to strike a decisive blow28. Further arrests occurred, including very senior military personnel in the central command organs in Hanoi:

Before the start of gunfire, most of the authors of the Plan for the Tet Offensive, including its main author Do Duc Kien, Head of the Combat Department, were removed …29.

Four days after the start of the Tet Offensive, a very senior General, Nguyen van Vinh, was neutralised. A standing member (thượng trực) of the Armed Forces Party

26 Ibidem, s. 154.
27 Ibidem, s. 155.
28 Ibidem, s. 156–157.
29 Ibidem, a. 158.
Committee, he was invited to Le Duc Tho’s house five days after the Offensive started and then sacked from all his positions, including Deputy Minister of Defence. In all, about 30 high level officials were arrested, most of them close to Giap. No charges were ever placed directly against them. The bureaucratic justification for this referred to the ‘Anti-Revisionist’ issue of the 9th Plenum:

The documents signed by Le Duc Tho all referred to Resolution 9 and the Revisionist point of view … {But} in reality, Resolution 9 had been passed in 1964. The source of Revisionism, Khrushchev, had been criticised and replaced by Brezhnev … Those arrested, despite the inclusion of Hoang Minh Chinh, were almost all Secretaries of Ho Chi Minh or Giap’s special assistants.

Conclusions

This account is in my view outstanding in its willingness to go into details and matters of motivation that are central to making judgements of the morality and humanity of participants. It discusses the effects of the context within which they are operating – the VCP, its institutions and its culture – as much as the events. It shows the powerful centripetal forces in play, as Tho and Duan used the Party’s institutions to concentrate their power: which Huy Duc clearly dislikes, showing the presence of (but in this context relatively weak) centrifugal forces. They needed to go beyond the formal powers of their positions to secure more power.

In terms of contemporary Vietnamese history, it suggests that one aspect of the Tet Offensive was the way in which the political process around the decision increased the power of Le Duan and Le Duc Tho by allowing them to eliminate political opponents. The implication is that this must have influenced what happened after reunification in 1975–76, about which Huy Duc has much to say elsewhere in his book.

Furthermore, and this is my central point here, Huy Duc, apart from wanting to give a historical account, clearly also wants to alert the reader to the dangerous presence of powerful and potentially lethal forces in play, embodied in named individuals and their supporters. Were these to attain dominance over the entire system, then his view clearly is that there is the lurking threat of a Stalin. Huy

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30 Ibidem, s. 159.
31 Ibidem, s. 160.
32 It is perhaps worth commenting that Huy Duc, a journalist rather than a professional historian, tends to avoid overt thematic ways of structuring his accounts. Which is not to say that his text does not contain implicit themes, which, as I argue here, I think it does.
33 A. Fforde, s. 21.
Duc’s account, moreover, suggests that it was not the formal institutions (which he often blames for creating opportunities for skulduggery) but the realities of political competition, and the political culture itself, that stopped this extreme result from happening. Amongst the centrifugal forces, informal ‘cultural’ aspects were more important than formal institutions. In turn this suggests that, whilst he does not mention the formal institutions of checks and balances, perhaps for him they are as natural and unquestioned as the US Constitution is for many Americans, or the Monarchy for many English: the underlying issues of the nature of power are often ignored. After all, the VCP has had state power since at least 1954.

Therefore, his framing – ‘his history’ – suggests that these informal aspects of VCP political culture may be the most important. These informal aspects are, arguably, needed to make this aspect of the formal system work in practice, avoiding a shift that gives too much to the centripetal forces in the system, and his case study of the Tet Offensive shows that they were then insufficient. The formal institutions alone are inadequate to prevent ‘a Stalin’. Though this did not happen, Huy Duc in my reading is highlighting the risks.

To govern an increasingly active and self-organising society, if the Party is to remain as the political vessel of powerful interests, the political question then arises, as Khrushchev’s Secret Speech (and the experienced reality of millions of Soviet citizens) showed, how can the Party stay in power without a risk that concentration of power would be misused? To repeat, Huy Duc’s mindset and beliefs show us clearly that he is, as a Party member, extremely aware of this issue. This suggests that a retreat to a more limited pluralism, capable of imposing developmental solutions through a focussed concentration of state power, would be problematic in terms of securing insider support. This suggests in turn that sensible Vietnamese opinion would view the concentration of power upon Xi Jinping as deeply destabilising: as is said ‘a week is a long time in politics’, and to quote the film The Conversation (1974), a character (Mark) justifying a (defensive) murder says “He’d kill us if he got the chance”.

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34 To put this in stark terms, had there been a Vietnamese Stalin, many of the southerners sent to re-education camps after 1975 would have instead been executed summarily, as would those in the later years of the decade who participated in, or supported, ‘fence-breaking’, or the obstruction of the collectivization of the Mekong.

35 This also of course resonates with American concerns about the ‘tyranny of the majority’, expressed in their Constitution through their division of powers, and in other countries, more of less by some realization that if there are to be elections then winning one, and treating this as conferring a right to do what one likes, may well lead to consequences when one’s political opponents themselves win the next one.

Bibliography