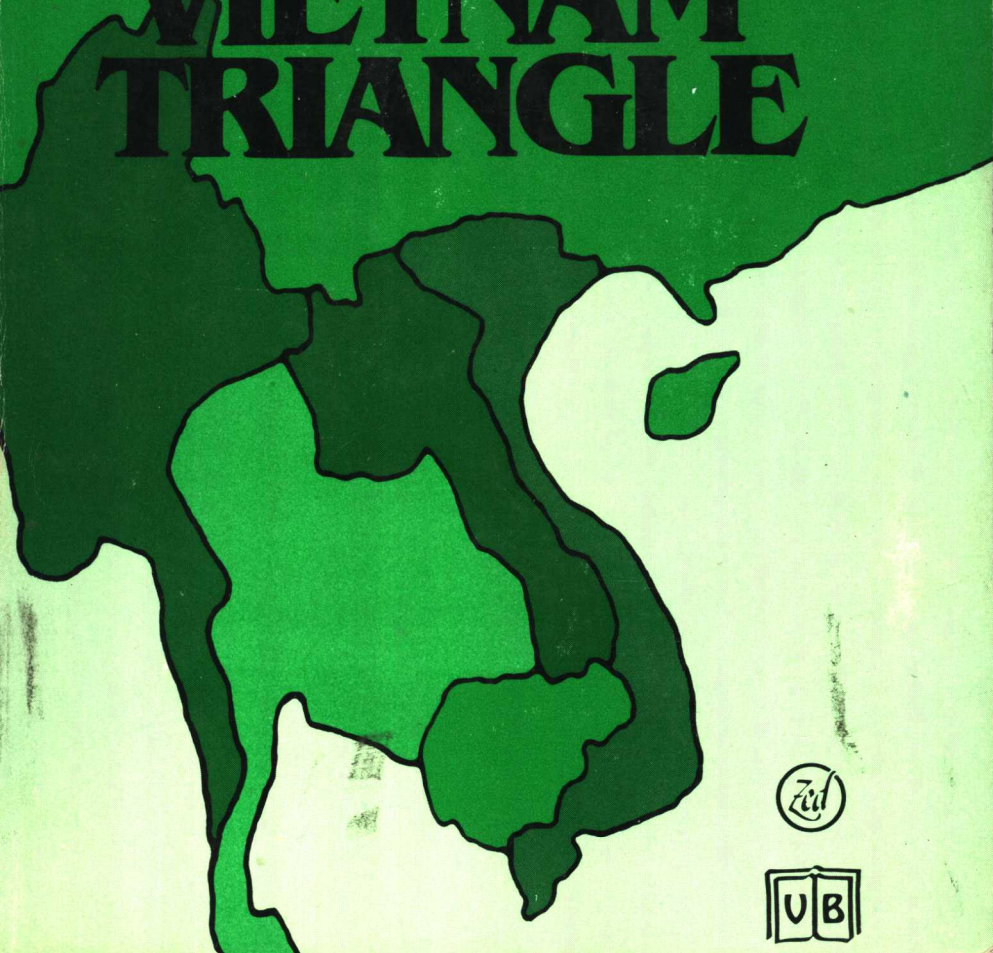


WILFRED BURCHETT

THE CHINA CAMBODIA VIETNAM TRIANGLE



WILFRED BURCHETT

**THE
CHINA
CAMBODIA
VIETNAM
TRIANGLE**

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PREFACE

In the spring of 1975 the overthrow of the U.S.-supported governments in Saigon and Phnom Penh deprived the United States of any direct influence over Vietnam and Cambodia. Thus ended an era in which the people of both countries, alongside the people of Laos, waged a struggle for independence lasting more than fifty years. In fact, independence had to be won twice. After the people of Indochina defeated France, direct colonial rule was replaced by indirect, neocolonial forms of control. The United States became the strongest power in the region, willing and able to topple governments and to commit arms, ammunition, military advisers, and even the lives of hundreds of thousands of its finest young people to the struggle to ensure that the natural, human, and strategic resources of the region remained under its control.

Since its ignominious retreat from Indochina, the United States has done everything it could to de-stabilize the area and to exacerbate any and all factors that could lead to the downfall of the present government of Vietnam. During this period the United States and China finally found the basis for cooperation in foreign affairs. China's interest in keeping her southern neighbors weakened and embattled has led her directly into collusion with her former archenemy, the United States. As a consequence, these two great powers — one socialist, one capitalist — have joined forces to support and defend the Khmer Rouge, a gang of terrorists whose crimes are at least as great as those of Hitler's Nazis.

It is now almost two years since the Khmer Rouge were driven from power. Still the United States and China continue to defend their right to Cambodia's seat at the United Nations and plot to set

PREFACE

the conditions for their return to power in Phnom Penh. In championing their cause, the United States and China have distorted the true nature of the Khmer Rouge regime and hidden the fact that the threat to peace and progress in Indochina today comes not from the governments presently in power there but rather from exactly the forces which the United States and China endorse and actively support.

In the work which follows, Wilfred Burchett presents a picture of life under the Khmer Rouge as it was described to him by those who endured and survived. Recognizing that it is impossible to understand events in Cambodia apart from the world process with which they are intertwined, he has focused especially on the consequences of the relationships among the countries of "The China-Cambodia-Vietnam Triangle."

This is not a book specifically about the role of the United States in Southeast Asia. It is a book which shows that the isolation of Cambodia and Vietnam and the defeat of their revolutions — goals being actively pursued by the U.S. government today — are not in the interest of the peoples of the world. And, most importantly, "The China-Cambodia-Vietnam Triangle" provides its readers with the understanding necessary to determine what they must demand of their own governments in the interest of peace and progress in Southeast Asia and throughout the world.

*Arlee Frantz
Chicago
September 1981*

INTRODUCTION

The full dimensions of the horrors inflicted on the people of Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge will never be known. In the mass graves and death pits there are millions of anonymous skulls and skeletons that can never be counted or classified. Enough documentation does exist to confirm that crimes almost without parallel in history were committed against their own people by the Khmer Rouge leadership between 17 April 1975, when the Lon Nol forces capitulated and the Khmer Rouge took over, and 7 January 1979 when they in turn were overthrown, mainly by Vietnamese forces.

During the 1960's my family and I resided in Cambodia for four years. My wife taught history of art at Phnom Penh's University of Fine Arts and our three children studied at the Lycée Descartes. It was natural that our friends were intellectuals, writers, journalists, teachers, university professors, diplomats, and political personalities. Such were among the earliest targets of the torture and extermination squads. The first victims were those who had studied abroad or spoke foreign languages; gradually the criteria for extermination were broadened to include anyone who wore spectacles or could read and write. With the exception of the half-a-dozen who threw their lot in with the Khmer Rouge leaders, all the people I had known during a quarter of a century of regular contact with Cambodia have been killed. Many died only after barbarous torture.

All of the crimes committed by the Nazis have been committed by the Khmer Rouge, who also invented many more. Hitler, Goering, Goebbels, and the rest of the Nazi gang were monsters, the incarnation of what has been considered the ultimate in evil in our times. Yet even their crimes pale by comparison with those of the

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Khmer Rouge under the leadership of Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and Khieu Samphan. Hitler tried to exterminate Jews, Slavs, Gypsies, and other “non-Aryan” groups. Pol Pot set about exterminating not only Vietnamese, Chinese, Islamic Chams, and other ethnic groups but also those of his own Khmer race. Hitler brought in slave labor from France, Poland, and other countries and worked them to death in labor camps. The Khmer Rouge leadership transformed their entire country into one great concentration camp. Hitler burned and desecrated the synagogues and persecuted various religious groups. The Khmer Rouge suppressed every form of religious worship. They turned Buddhist pagodas, Muslim mosques, and Catholic churches into torture centers, pigsties, and warehouses, or else simply destroyed them. Hitler burned books by anti-fascist writers. Pol Pot and his gang destroyed all books and libraries, trampling on every vestige of Cambodian culture and tradition. Hitler tried to relegate German women to the notorious “kitchen, church and children” role; the Khmer Rouge separated wives from their husbands and parents from their children and totally suppressed family life.

Some leftist, armchair intellectuals in the West prefer not to believe all of this. They defend the Khmer Rouge regime as a justifiable “social experiment.” Their disclaimers are nullified by the overwhelming testimony of those who have actually been to Cambodia, including representatives of international relief agencies who have to deal with that part of Cambodian society which has survived.

The horrors of what happened in Cambodia are becoming better known. The facts are clear, brought into sharper focus by the very magnitude of the international effort required to repair the damage to every facet of Cambodian society. Virtually every Khmer citizen is both victim and witness. No on-the-spot investigator can have any doubts as to what occurred. But how and why it happened are far from clear. The importance of finding out is obviously crucial. Scholars, writers, journalists, and filmmakers are at work. Between us we might be able to shed some light on how and why one of the darkest events of our age could have happened. The chapters which follow represent my contribution to this light-shedding process.

Wilfred Burchett
Paris
July 1981

THE REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE FOR NATIONAL LIBERATION

1. THE INDOCHINA COMMUNIST PARTY

During her relatively leisurely digestion of the components of what later became known as the Associated States of Indochina, France first acquired the three eastern provinces of Cochin-Chine in 1862. Five years later she also acquired the three western provinces, thus securing her sovereignty over the rich rice-growing areas of the Mekong Delta. On 18 February 1859 a French-Spanish expedition had occupied Saigon and thus had given France her first foothold in that area. It was just thirty years later that she put the three territories of Vietnam — Cochin-Chine in the south, Annam in the center, Tonkin in the north — together with the separate entities of Cambodia and Laos to the west to form a single administrative unit of Indochina. That the cultures, languages, and nuances of religion in Cambodia and Laos were different from each other, and those of both even more distinct from those of Vietnam, was the least of French worries in those days. The worries didn't really start until 1930 when Ho Chi Minh, then known as Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot), threw down the gauntlet. He challenged the single French administrative unit of Indochina by forming a single Indochina Communist Party. From that moment on, French colonial rule was doomed.

Ho Chi Minh was a man of many parts and of great — mainly self-acquired — culture. On the question of ending colonial rule in Indochina, he was absolutely single-minded.

He fired his first shots from afar. In June 1919 he bravely presented a petition to the victorious powers at the Versailles Conference. It was a document simple and to the point — all eight of them set out on a single piece of paper — as was the testament he

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wrote just half a century later when he knew his days were numbered. The essence of the eight points was his demand for basic human rights for the peoples of Indochina, including the substitution "of the rule of law instead of government by decree." Predictably, his petition made no impression on the French or any of the other Versailles delegations. But it created a sensation within the large Vietnamese community in France — mainly "coolies" conscripted to dig trenches on the French battlefields — and moderate interest in left-wing political circles.

As a result Nguyen Ai Quoc found himself a full-fledged delegate to the famous Tours Congress (25-30 December 1920) at which the French Socialist Party split over whether it should adhere to the Second (Social Democrat) or Third (Communist) International. When the crucial vote came, Nguyen Ai Quoc voted for the Third International because the delegates favoring it were more inclined to support independence for France's colonies. After the split Leon Blum and Paul Faure continued to lead the minority French Socialist Party. Marcel Cachin and Paul Vaillant-Couturier became leaders of the newborn Communist Party, the creation of which was supported by the majority of delegates.

Thus Nguyen Ai Quoc became — to his great astonishment — a founder-member of the French Communist Party and consequently the first Vietnamese communist. He was not the only one to be astonished. After his first speech in favor of independence for Indochina — as the lone delegate from the French colonies — his photograph appeared in the press. The police came to arrest him the next day. But the tough delegates fought them off and Nguyen the Patriot continued to take part in the debate, stubbornly supporting his favorite theme!

Nguyen Ai Quoc's intention was to return home and form a party, similar to the new French Communist Party, which would have at least some international backing. After extensive travel in Europe (mostly by hitch-hiking, although that name for it did not yet exist), he set out for the Soviet Union, hoping to gain the ear — and support — of Lenin. He arrived in Leningrad toward the end of January 1924, shivering from the cold of a Russian winter despite the fur-lined clothes pressed on him by sailors of the Soviet ship on which he travelled. Two days before he arrived

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unknown and unannounced, Lenin had died. But Cachin and Vaillant-Couturier were in Moscow for Lenin's funeral and Nguyen the Patriot managed to contact them. They were able to introduce him to those who could be of the most help. The result was a brief period of study in revolutionary strategies and tactics. He then turned up — a little more than a year after his arrival in Leningrad — in China's Canton. Officially he was adviser on Asian problems to Mikhail Borodin, the Soviet Comintern envoy to the revolutionary government of Sun Yat-sen, founder-leader of the Kuomintang (National People's Party).¹

Within a few months after "setting up shop" in Canton, Nguyen Ai Quoc had teleguided the formation of a Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League. This in turn gave birth to the country's first trade unions. In Paris he not only had agitated for the right to freedom of his own people but also had organized the "League of Colonial Countries," which brought together nationals of all other colonies living in France. And he edited his paper "La Paria," secretly distributed throughout the French Empire. So too in Canton. Here the future Ho Chi Minh, internationalist *par excellence*, founded the "League of Oppressed Peoples of Asia." Its members were not only Vietnamese but also Koreans, Indonesians, Burmese, Thais, and other Asiatics. After Chiang Kai-shek broke the Kuomintang alliance with the Chinese Communists and Borodin and the other Comintern advisers managed to escape Chiang's assassination squads and make their way back to the Soviet Union, Nguyen Ai Quoc moved his base into Siam (now known as Thailand) where there was a large Vietnamese minority.

Always with agents of the French police at his heels, he moved from place to place in different disguises, organizing, awakening the consciousness of his compatriots, training them, and always maintaining contact with the revolutionary groups and independence movement inside his homeland. He earned his living as well as he could, his varied professions being his best disguises. At times he was an agricultural laborer; thanks to his peasant background he could plough and do general agricultural work. Sometimes he was a Buddhist monk with a shaven head and begging bowl or a street-corner merchant selling cigarettes. But wherever he was and however he was earning a living, he organized, agitated, and

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taught. In Siam he founded the "Vietnam Association for Mutual Assistance" and put out a weekly paper, "L'Humanité," which was infiltrated across the frontier into Cambodia and from there to Vietnam.

Did Nguyen the Patriot occasionally slip across the frontier himself to check on how the seeds he had planted were germinating? There is a fascinating reference in the book by Ben Kieran and Chanthou Boua² on Cambodia's first known communist agitators — a certain Ben Kraham, who worked as a "coolie" at the Phnom Penh electricity works, and his wife. Arrested for distributing Vietnamese-language leaflets advocating "proletarian struggle against imperialism" and for hanging "red banners with Soviet emblems" from trees, the couple said they had been given some of the leaflets by a fellow-worker at the electricity plant and the others "by a travelling hairdresser." This was one of Nguyen Ai Quoc's favorite disguises. If it were not the itinerant revolutionary leader himself, it was certainly a proselyte trained in his image!

That Nguyen Ai Quoc's seeds were falling on fertile soil is clear from the fact that in June 1929 an "Indochina Communist Party" was set up in the northern-most Vietnamese province of Tonkin. A few months later "Red Trade Unions" were activated in the same area. And by late 1929 there were three Communist parties in Vietnam, bearing different names according to the whims of their leadership.

Near the end of 1929 Nguyen Ai Quoc returned to China from Siam for a conference in Kweilin — then capital of China's Kwangsi province which bordered northern Vietnam — with delegates from the three revolutionary parties. Each wanted to be recognized as the sole Communist Party. As usual, Nguyen Ai Quoc's words were few but to the point.

In the Soviet Union, England, France and China, and in colonial countries such as India, Indonesia and others, there is only one Communist Party. Vietnam cannot afford three. We must unite the entire people to fight for national independence and to achieve this there must be unity of organization. This organization could keep its old name of "Revolutionary Youth League" or adopt that of "Communist Party," but its political programme must be: National Independence, Freedom to the People, Forward to Socialism.³