

Ngo Van's "In the Crossfire" - Vietnam's Revolution in the Revolution

Saturday 13 November 2010, by [JACOBS Ron](#) (Date first published: 29 October 2010).

When the United States first entered the war in Vietnam in defense of colonial France, the conflict was already decades old. Indeed, it may have been the most protracted anti-colonial struggle of the twentieth century. France's domination of the region they called Indochina had been challenged by a combination of popular resistance and armed force since at least the 1920s. However, very little has been published in English about the period before the military conflict after World War Two.

The publication of the first part of Ngo Van's memoirs *In the Crossfire* by AK Press changes that. Originally published as *Au pays de la Cloche Felée* (The Cracked Bell), *In the Crossfire* is the story of Ngo Van and his compatriots in the earliest days of the Vietnamese revolution. The French title is a nod to the poet Charles Baudelaire's poem of the same name and reflects Van's opinion of the movement he was part of. This is the tale of the popular movement that organized labor strikes and student resistance to the French and their local indigenous government.

In the Crossfire is a tale of secret meetings, arrests and torture, bloody battles and stealthy travels through the Vietnamese countryside. Its narrative includes the stories of peasant cadres influenced by Stalin and his thoughts and working class urbanites that preferred Trotsky. Ngo Van writes about Vietminh compromises with the US secret service (OSS) in their common battle against the Japanese and the subsequent reneging by Washington on promises it made to secure that support. All the while there is an ongoing struggle against the French colonial masters and their puppet governments in Saigon. Revolutionary movements are rarely a monolithic beings. Indeed, it is usually the struggles within those movements that ultimately shape the movement's politics and success. This struggle within is not always an easy one and, as Van makes clear, has its own share of conflicts and disappointments.

There is an international background to this tale: the struggle within the international communist movement over the direction of revolutionary communism. Often referred to in terms that acknowledge the two primary 20th century communist revolutionaries of the period after Lenin—Leon Trotsky and Josef Stalin—this struggle was to erupt into a murderous conflict that forever changed not only the existing revolutionary states and struggles, but the face of communism itself. As Ngo Van tells it, comrades who were once allies in their struggle against imperialism became mortal enemies and slogans that once encouraged internationalism were replaced with nationalist claptrap. Trusted friends were no longer trusted and plans made were no longer dependable. All of this because of different interpretations of the revolutionary doctrine of Lenin. Like so many other narratives from leftists of this period, the battle for the international revolution is couched in terms that often seethe with a hatred that can only occur between former comrades in arms. It is a hatred born of betrayal and inflamed by a threat greater than either of the resulting differences—the threat of imperialist counterrevolution. To Ngo Van's credit, this book focuses on the struggle between the Vietnamese and their colonizers. It does not become bogged down in the battle that history characterizes as the struggle between Stalinism and Trotskyism. By not doing so, it remains a narrative that is accessible to the reader who either doesn't care about that struggle or prefers to remain neutral.

In the Crossfire is a story that is so many things: a tale of personal courage, despair and hope; a piece of political history that is both a document of revolution and betrayal. Like so much of the struggle against colonialism, for every victory there seems to be a defeat. Yet, history moves forward because, as Van makes clear, people make it move forward.

RON JACOBS

P.S.

* From Counterpunch, Weekend Edition, October 29 - 31, 2010:

<http://counterpunch.org/jacobs10292010.html>

* Ron Jacobs is the author of *The Way the Wind Blew: A History of the Weather Underground*. Jacobs' essay on Big Bill Broonzy is featured in CounterPunch's collection on music, art and sex, *Serpents in the Garden*. His first novel, *Short Order Frame Up*, is published by Mainstay Press. His most recent book, titled *Tripping Through the American Night* is published as an ebook. He can be reached at: rjacobs3625@charter.net