

Obituary

Jean-Michel Krivine (1932-2013): a militant surgeon and an internationalist

Monday 30 December 2013, by [ROUSSET Pierre](#) (Date first published: 23 May 2013).

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Jean-Michel [1] had a sense of humour, and his passion was to play the violin. From 1948, when he joined the French Communist Party (PCF), he conducted revolutionary choirs and continued to do so unceasingly, including during the summer universities of the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR). Sometimes he lost some of his humour when singers suggested modernizing the repertoire; he remained very much attached to the traditions of the labour movement. He had courage, as evidenced by the periods he spent in the maquis in Vietnam and Thailand. He participated in major events such as the Russell Tribunal against war crimes in Vietnam. He did not grudge taking on the most obscure militant tasks: right to the end, he devoted his attention to correcting the articles published in the magazine *Inprecor*.

Jean-Michel preferred truth, even if it was sadly commonplace, to legend, even if it was politically correct. Leon Trotsky's son, Leon Sedov, died in 1938 after an operation for appendicitis. This death is often attributed to the Stalinist secret services. Jean-Michel studied the medical report on the operation and concluded that Sedov had been a victim of errors made by the surgeon in charge of the operation. The subject is still controversial.

A militant surgeon

Jean-Michel was himself a surgeon, a profession that marked his commitment to the liberation struggles and uprisings of the "Third World" - what we then called the "Colonial Revolution". In 1962, following the independence of Algeria, he went to Kabylia, with other volunteers, to operate in a hospital; he subsequently took over responsibility for the medical commission of the Association for Franco-Algerian Friendship and Solidarity (AASFA). In the same way, he initiated the Health Commission of the associations in solidarity with Nicaragua, where he went in 1979.

Contacted by members of the Curiel network, he went in 1965 and 1966 to Santo Domingo to provide medical care for 24 people who had suffered serious injuries during the April Uprising

(especially amputees). Three of them were treated in France, the others in Bulgaria, but at the cost of a real showdown with the French government and the Red Cross. Similarly, when he went to the maquis of southern Thailand in 1978, it was to assess the medical and surgical needs of the communist guerrilla movement.

In France, in 1970 he became head of the department of surgery at Eaubonne hospital. He set up a department carrying out abortions with volunteer staff. In 1974, 77 of them took a public stand in the battle for the legalization of abortion (the Veil Law): "We have performed abortions in our department and we will continue to do so." In 1980-1981, he participated in the launch of a Defence Committee for the hospital.

Surgery was for Jean-Michel a political and not just a medical responsibility.

Vietnam

The most important political and practical commitment of Jean-Michel concerned Vietnam. He devoted himself fully to the Franco-Vietnamese Medical Association (AMFV), founded in 1967, and to the Secretariat for the Coordination of European Associations for Aid to Vietnam. He also participated in the fact-finding commissions of the Russell Tribunal. It was for this reason that in 1967 he went first to North Vietnam and a few months later, to zones controlled by the National Liberation Front (NLF) in the South. These journeys were dangerous: there was heavy bombardment by the US forces.

Jean-Michel had to assess the devastation caused by the military escalation led by Washington and to collect data on the use of cluster bombs and napalm. In the North, he had the "incredible opportunity" (to use his own words) to go as far as the 17th parallel - the dividing line between North and South. Very few foreigners had such an opportunity and when he met Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese leader said, "Oh, so you are Krivine! You are luckier than me! They won't let me go down to the South ..." Jean-Michel visited all the provincial hospitals and some district hospitals - prime targets for bombing. At the time, he was still a member of the French Communist Party (PCF) and if the Vietnamese welcomed him as such, it was particularly because they found that the PCF was doing too little in solidarity with them and hoped (correctly) that our comrade would help to strengthen it.

It was with Marcel-Francis Kahn and Roger Pic that he went to the South, passing through Cambodia, living in the forest, dressed like a "Vietcong" - but his great height did not help to hide his presence! He was able, in the NLF areas, to interview a number of witnesses.

On the occasion of these visits, Jean-Michel met Pham Van Dong, the Prime Minister, and Pham Ngoc Thach, the Minister of Health. The latter became for him a friend, as did Professor Ton That Tung. These links were maintained after the liberation of Vietnam, Jean-Michel organizing the visit to France of young Vietnamese surgeons to complete their training in French hospitals. He himself returned to Vietnam in 1975, 1982 and 1986. His commitment to solidarity has not been forgotten, as is witnessed by the message of condolences sent from Hanoi, after his death, by Dr. Do Duc Van (see below) and by the presence of a representative of the Embassy of Vietnam at his funeral.

This commitment was for Jean-Michel daily and practical. His PCF cell in the Eaubonne hospital included nurses, nursing assistants, porters and administrative staff. At his suggestion, the cell decided to call itself "Nguyen Van Troi," after a young NLF fighter who, after being captured, had harangued the firing squad. During the festival of the PCF newspaper *L'Humanité*, his cell asked participants to "take their blood pressure for Vietnam", handing out a political leaflet with the level

of their blood pressure and thereby collecting funds for solidarity.

Jean-Michel was also the only “French” member of the Vietnamese Trotskyist group in France, affiliated to the LCR. He took part in the editing of the magazine *Chroniques vietnamiennes*, in which he wrote several articles under the pen name Bui Thien Chi. It was again on the question of Vietnam that he participated in the major debates in the Fourth International, accusing the majority (and especially me) of encouraging too many “illusions” about the possibilities of anti-bureaucratic reforms by the Vietnamese Communist Party - and the international minority of denying the major role played by the party in the national resistance and the social struggle of the Vietnamese people. He felt that history had vindicated the position of himself and the Vietnamese Trotskyist group. He obviously had good reasons to think so.

I feel that these discussions touched as much on the range of questions that everyone was (or was not) asking as on the answers (often more nuanced than it seems) that were given at that time. Admittedly, to some extent, these debates are of no interest today, except to retrace the history of the Fourth International and its factional struggles. But on the other hand, they seem to me to have been rich. Having their usual share of misunderstandings, they deserve to be revisited with hindsight.

The tumult of these debates did not prevent us from acting together in solidarity and from remaining friends. So it was I who introduced Jean-Michel to cadres of the Thai Communist Party; contacts that led him to go into the maquis of southern Thailand. This trip in particular enabled the Committee in Solidarity with the People of Thailand (CSPT) to raise funds for sending surgical kits.

Stalinism

To some extent, Stalinism was for Jean-Michel a (re)discovery and not something that went without saying, unlike for many activists of the generation that created the LCR. He was certainly influenced by Trotskyism very early on, when he joined the Young Socialists in 1946 (he was then 14 years old), and when he participated in the creation, in 1948, of the Revolutionary Democratic Rally (Rassemblement démocratique et révolutionnaire, RDR) initiated by David Rousset, Gérard Rosenthal and Jean-Paul Sartre. But after the failure of these experiences, at the height of the Cold War, he turned to the PCF for the defence of the USSR, albeit “bureaucratically degenerated.” Bombarded with responsibilities, he became a good party activist and took part in the world youth festivals in Budapest (1949) and Berlin (1951). Around the newspaper *Clarté*, he frequented Annie Besse (later Annie Kriegel), Suzanne de Brunhoff, François Furet, Emmanuel Leroy-Ladurie...

According to his recollections, his “old Trotskyist ideas” began to “give fresh signs of life” in 1954, but he still refused to give in to “this temptation” ... until 1956, the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Soviet intervention in Hungary. He was then put in touch with Pierre Frank and he joined the Fourth International - while remaining in the PCF pending the Third World War, which did not come. It was only in 1970 that he resigned from the Communist Party and set up a cell of the LCR in his hospital in Eaubonne.

Jean-Michel had acquired an understanding of the two worlds, as seen by the Stalinist and Trotskyist movements. This allowed him to identify and expose Stalinist lies by publishing a book on the “major affairs” of the French Communist Party (under the name of Louis Couturier) and articles on the German-Soviet Pact (1939) and other issues that were swept under the carpet in the official historiography of the PCF.

Jean-Michel was not keen on theory and rather distrusted innovations. He did not write academic

studies. However, he attached great importance to the educational courses that that he gave at the summer universities of the LCR and the NPA.

Jean-Michel devoted himself to the “basic” education that he provided “in the old style” with distribution of photocopies and the obligation to read them. He conceived it as the transmission of basic knowledge, starting from which critical reflection could later be deployed.

An internationalist

Jean-Michel was above all an internationalist. That commitment was at the heart of the choices that marked his political trajectory from the aftermath of the Second World War onwards.

His membership in the Communist Party, coupled with his radical commitment to liberation struggles, facilitated many contacts for him in his activities of international solidarity. If these links were for the most part maintained after his departure from the PCF, when he made public his membership in the Fourth International, it was because there could be no doubt about his sincerity and commitment. He helped and he put his heart and soul into it.

He could make critical and sharp political judgments on the organizations that led the liberation struggles, but it did not affect what he considered to be a duty of solidarity towards those who were fighting: Algeria, Santo Domingo, Nicaragua and above all, Vietnam, the U.S. military escalation – the “focal point” of the world situation in the years 1965-1975.

Internationalism was not for Jean-Michel a posture. It is this conception of solidarity that is the legacy he leaves us. ■

Pierre Rousset, Montreuil, May 23, 2013

Biography

Jean-Michel Krivine was born on August 5, 1932 and died on 14 May 2013 in Paris. He had four brothers: Gerard, Roland, Hubert and Alain.

In 1953 he married Irene Borten, then, in 1972, Jacqueline Terrioux.

From his first marriage he had two children, Anne and Frédéric, and from his second a daughter, Juliette.

His pseudonyms in the Fourth International were Arnold, then Nikita.

His pen names were Louis Couturier and Bui Thien Chi.

Bibliography

Under the pen name of Louis Couturier, *Les “grandes affaires” du Parti communiste français*,

Collection Livres rouge, Maspero, Paris 1972.

Jean-Michel constantly took notes during his travels, which led to two very informative publications:

Jean-Michel Krivine, *Carnets de missions au Vietnam (1967-1987)*, Les Indes savantes, Paris, 2005.

Jean-Michel Krivine, *Carnets de missions dans le maquis thaïlandais (1978)*, preface by Pierre Rousset, Les Indes savantes, Paris, 2011.

Recent articles by Jean-Michel Krivine can be found on the sites of Inprecor and the ESSF.

Message of condolences from Dr. Do Duc Van

Dear Frédéric, Anne, Juliette and the whole family,

We have learned with very great sadness of the death of Dr Jean-Michel Krivine, a great friend of the Vietnamese people in general and of medical colleagues in Vietnam in particular. He stayed in Hanoi in February and March 1967 as part of the Russell Tribunal, with the responsibility of investigating the war crimes of the U.S. Army in Vietnam. He was particularly interested in the damage caused by napalm and cluster bombs. It was at this time that he met President Ho Chi Minh, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong and Professor Ton That Tung, a great surgeon, a specialist of liver surgery in our country. He returned to Vietnam in September 1967, this time south of the 17th parallel. He subsequently came back to Vietnam in 1975, 1982 and 1986 to establish a post-graduate programme for young Vietnamese doctors, perfecting their professional training. This programme continues to this day.

With everything he that he did for Vietnam, we will never forget he who has just departed from us. Keeping his memory in our heart, he will always be with us.

With our sincere condolences, our thoughts are with you in this grief that strikes you!

Dr. Do Duc Van

Viet Duc University Hospital, Hanoi, Vietnam

Footnotes

[1] In writing this I have been very much helped by the answers given by Jean-Michel Krivine to a questionnaire from Maitron, the dictionary of activists in the workers' movement.