

## Boudarel, a noted scholar on Vietnam

Georges Boudarel is discussed again in Vietnam...

Thursday 5 April 2007, by [HUU Ngoc](#), [KRIVINE Jean-Michel](#) (Date first published: 18 September 2000).

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*"It's comforting to discover a current Vietnamese text which pays tribute to Georges Boudarel. His story began in February 1991 when Jean-Jacques Beucler, a former deputy in the French parliament and a prisoner of the VietMinh from 1950 to 1954, accused Boudarel of having directed a camp for French POWs and of having blood on his hands.*

L’Affaire Boudarel“began and ran for several years. The charge against him of”crimes against humanity“was finally ruled to be”unfounded“ by the French courts.

It might have been expected that he would receive energetic support from the Vietnamese authorities and his former comrades. Instead there was silence. Why?

Returning to France in 1967 following the introduction of an amnesty law, Boudarel cast a more critical eye on the doings of the Vietnamese Communists. Now a university teacher at Jussieu in Paris, he wrote a series of books which were critical of the methods of the Vietnamese bureaucracy in muzzling intellectuals. The Vietnamese authorities did not forgive him.

Certainly, this beginning of a “rehabilitation” also requires some commentary and if Boudarel is totally innocent of the accusations made against him, he accepts that, in line with his thinking at the time, he participated in the “reeducation” of prisoners using the “Maoist” techniques he would later criticise but which Huu Ngoc still seems to approve of (does he approve of them in his heart of hearts?).

Georges Boudarel is currently in a rest home. Even if he cannot immediately take up the invitation to return to Hanoi, he at least has the comfort of knowing that his Vietnamese friends have not forgotten him.

Jean-Michel Krivine

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It happened during the first Indochina war in the heart of the military zone of Viet Bac, where the headquarters of the Department of Political Work Among Enemy Troops was established. In 1951 to

1952, while trotting among huts hidden beneath giant bamboo groves in the jungle, I came across a young Frenchman of about 24 or 25 years of age. He was a big, gawky man wearing a pair of shorts and a boy scout hat with an emaciated face and thoughtful eyes. He spoke loquaciously, desirous of knowing all and learning all about the Vietnamese resistance. He had just made a trek of six months covering some two thousand kilometres along the future Ho Chi Minh Trail. He was Georges Boudarel, a professor of philosophy, who had just deserted a French high school in the occupied zone and crossed over to the Vietnamese side. After our first meeting, I came across him often in my capacity as a cadre of the Bureau of Re-education of European and African prisoners of war. More than a year later Boudarel would become deputy head of the POW camp 113. Following Dien Bien Phu he went to Ha Noi, married a Vietnamese and worked as a sub-editor on the French bulletin of the Voice of Vietnam Radio and also at the Foreign Languages Publishing House.

In the early sixties, with a heavy heart, he returned to France where his death sentence for high treason had been abolished. He taught the history of Vietnam for two decades at the Paris VII University until the beginning of the 90's when his quiet life was disrupted by a thunderclap. J.J. Beucler, a former POW of Vietnam and former French Minister of Ex-combatants, denounced Boudarel to public prosecution without warning, accusing him of crimes against humanity. Beucler called the professor a "butcher" and accused him of causing a massive number of prisoners' deaths at Viet Minh POW camp 113.

The trial lasted many years and was regarded as a mini Dreyfus affair. If offered to right-wing politicians still nostalgic of colonialism and to the "orthodox party" a good occasion to exalt jingoistic patriotism. In spite of the counter-offensive of the Committee in Defence of Boudarel set up by his colleagues, friends and well-informed intellectuals, the accused was subjected to a rabid and concerted campaign of denigration. They invaded his private life, threatened to murder him and used a thousand and one means to defame him, they even "forgot" to pay him his salary. But justice prevailed. He came out of the court completely exonerated from the trumped up charges, but demolished physically and broken down morally.

No, he had not betrayed his country by protesting against colonial conquest, he had not committed any crime against humanity by seeking to enlighten the prisoners about the nature of the war in Vietnam. On the contrary, he had done honour to the French democratic tradition; he did not want that his country repeating in Vietnam the crimes committed by the Nazis on French soil.

Colonel Pierre Thomas, who rallied to Boudarel's defence only after a laborious enquiry, has given a judicious explanation of the high percentage of deaths in POW camps in Vietnam: the murderous tropical climate, the lack of medicine, insufficient food (caused by the French encirclement itself) and the low morale of the internees. No beating, no torture, no maltreatment of any kind. As for the moral torture and the brainwashing, there were no such things. Nevertheless, even a serious work such as the *Dictionary of Philosophy* (Larousse - 1975) echoed this prejudice in its entry. It stated "Methods of psychological conditioning were used by armies of the Viet Minh during the Indochina War". The political and psychological work conducted in the POW camps tried to give the detainees an understanding of the unjust character of the Indochina war and the legitimacy of our resistance. They were asked simply to demand peace and their repatriation, not to turn their arms against the French troops

There was no physical or moral constraint. According to the testimony by Lieutenant Xavier de Villeneuve in his answer to an interview in *Le Monde* on July 14, 1952, "I have myself signed many declarations (demanding an end to the war in Vietnam) together with my comrades. We have suffered no pressure."

Now let us leave Boudarel, the apprentice politician too naive to succeed, and talk about Boudarel

the Vietnam scholar - no less honest and untiring. His love for Vietnam made him choose this country and its people as the object of his research and his life's work. "This country has held and still holds for all of us a big place in our lives. For some of us it is the native country, where nostalgia will never fade away. For others, it is a country which is both very far off and very near. We wish that it will again be the hope of tomorrow." This collective profession of faith from a generation captivated by Vietnam has the stamp of the heart and the pen of Boudarel in it. Cartesian to the roots of his hair, Georges does not want a blind love. He has not hesitated to make some critical opinions, which have been misinterpreted.

He made conscientious preparations before undertaking studies of Vietnam: during his sojourn in Vietnam he lived the life of the people, learned the language, translated contemporary novels and followed courses of literature and history at the Ha Noi University. He built up a rich library on Vietnam at his home in Romainville, including a unique collection of postcards on Indochina.

Together with Chesneaux, Brocheux, Hemery, Fourniau, Devillers and Feray - Boudarel belongs to the generation of French Vietnam researchers marked by the 1945 to 1954 war. His main works are: *Private Property and Collective Property in Ancient Viet Nam* (translation and commentaries on works by Nguyen Kim Chung and Nguyen Nuc Nghinh - in collaboration), *Tradition and Revolution in Viet Nam* (in collaboration); *Memoirs of Phan Boi Chau: Phan Boi Chau and the Vietnamese society of his times*; *Giap, Ho Chi Minh*; *Insertion of the Central Power in the Village Cults in Viet Nam: sketch of questions from the writings by Ngo Tat To*; *The Vietnamese Diaspora* (*Autobiography*) and translations of novels by Ngo Tat To, Nguyen Cong Hoan and Vu Tring Phung.

Georges' last manuscript *Cultural taboos of Viet Nam - Viet-French lexicon* (unfinished) is still in our hands. We hope that he will come to Ha Noi as soon as he can so that his Vietnamese friends could offer him some comfort. He needs it very much because he is now very sick, having been hospitalised for two years following an infection and even more so because of the unjust and unjustified attacks to which he has fallen victim.