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# The Third World and the Communist Triumph in Vietnam

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On the surface, 1975 appeared as a triumphal year in the decades-long history of postcolonial revolution. The year began in high spirits as progressive revolutionaries around the world continued to celebrate the fall of the Portuguese Empire in southern Africa and the rise of Angola and Mozambique as independent states. Rhodesia and the apartheid regime in South Africa now appeared as the key battlegrounds in the war against colonialism in Africa. Perhaps equally encouraging was the news that Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), had delivered a hugely successful address on the floor of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in late November 1974. Arafat and his comrades had worked hard to identify their struggle with a broad alliance of revolutionary forces across the world that included Cuba, China, Algeria, and North Vietnam. Palestinian fighters cast themselves as Arab Che Guevaras – part of a rising generation of liberation warriors waging a struggle against oppression that reached from the rice paddies of Southeast Asia, to the rocky hillsides of South Lebanon, south to the plains of southern Africa, and across the Atlantic in the rainforests of Central America. News of the PLO's success was only the beginning. Revolutionary armies in South Vietnam and Cambodia continued to make gains through the early months of 1975 that, by April, brought them to the gates of Saigon and Phnom Penh. The decades-long battle for liberation in Southeast Asia seemed as if it was drawing to a triumphal close. The implication of these events could not have been less than heartening for progressive revolutionaries across the wider world.

Despite appearances, this Third World secular-revolutionary triumph would be short-lived. Although many contemporaries saw the victory of the Vietnamese Revolution as a transformative moment in the Cold War, subsequent events around the world suggested that a very different set of changes were underway. Even as peoples around the world celebrated the victories

of 1974 and 1975, the unraveling of the progressive revolutionary project in the developing world was well underway. Changes taking place in the wider international system would transform the revolutionary playing field during the 1970s and 1980s. This chapter locates the communist victory in Vietnam in a regional and global context – that of what Odd Arne Westad has aptly termed the Global Cold War. It first situates the Vietnamese Revolution as part of a broader wave of communist revolutions in East Asia before turning to examine the impact of the Sino-Soviet split in Hanoi and around the wider postcolonial world. From there, the chapter identifies the mid-1970s as a key moment in the unraveling of the Third World secular-revolutionary project. It then concludes by looking at the 1980s and the rise of competing forms of postcolonial revolution.[1]

Conventional interpretations of the 1970s tended to treat the post-Vietnam period as the nadir of US power and influence in world affairs – a view shared by many contemporaries and given voice by Ronald Reagan's "Let's Make America Great Again" presidential campaign in 1980. Recent histories of the 1970s by US historians have challenged this understanding, suggesting instead that the decade witnessed a series of cultural, political, and economic revolutions that paved the way for a resurgence in the 1980s and 1990s.[2] A similar shift has taken place in the field of international history as scholars reexamine these transformations in the global sphere. The slow pace of declassification in Western countries, combined with the significant obstacles to archival access in many Third World states, has played a large role in this dearth of studies. Nevertheless, several general works[3] together with more specific studies[4] have begun to throw new light on this period. With the passage of time, and the end of the Cold War, the 1970s appear not as a triumph for the forces of Third World communism but rather as a tipping point in the story of their unraveling.

1 This argument appears in a somewhat different and significantly expanded version in Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Cold War's Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace* (New York, 2018).

2 See, for instance, Thomas Borstelmann, *The Seventies* (Princeton, 2012).

3 Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge, 2005); Vijay Prashad, *Darker Nations* (New York, 2007); Chamberlin, *The Cold War's Killing Fields*.

4 Bradley Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and US–Indonesia Relations, 1960–1968* (Stanford, 2008); Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (Oxford, 2012); Jeffrey Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution* (Oxford, 2016); Jeremy S. Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015); Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015).

Viewed in the longer term, Hanoi's victories in 1973 and 1975 appear as the final triumphs in a string of East Asian communist conquests stretching back to the late 1940s. The resumption of the Chinese civil war between Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Jiang Jieshi's Guomindang government in 1946 marked the beginning of a communist strategic offensive that would span the next three decades. The Chinese civil war, the French Indochina War, the Vietnam War, the Korean War, the Massacre of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), and the Cambodian civil war each occurred as part of this offensive that would serve to transform the region. To observers in Western capitalist countries, it appeared as if the East was indeed turning Red. Although officials in the Eisenhower administration would first articulate the domino theory, fears of communist contagion and the spreading influence of both Moscow and Beijing dated back to the 1940s.

Furthermore, there was no reason to expect that such upheavals would be limited to East Asia. The entire postcolonial world – and developing countries in Latin America – appeared vulnerable to communist influence. In particular, Mao Zedong's doctrine of People's War seemed tailor-made for what was to become the Third World. While Karl Marx had seen an industrial proletariat as the engine of communist revolution and V. I. Lenin had looked to a hardened vanguard of revolutionaries, Mao identified the people – and in China's case the peasantry – as the source of revolutionary energy. In Mao's formulation, agrarian societies could leapfrog the stage of industrial-capitalist development and move directly into a communist revolution. Likewise, the People's War promised to serve as a blueprint for guerrilla armies hoping to defeat better-armed conventional forces backed by wealthy states. Mao and the CCP's success served as a tremendous source of inspiration for revolutionaries around the world. Third World fighters – using a highly modified version of Mao's playbook – won a string of victories in the Korean War, the French Indochina War, and the Algerian War that appeared to validate these Maoist ideas. Indeed, by the late 1960s, it appeared as if Third World guerrilla forces might be unstoppable.

## The Unraveling World Revolution

However, these triumphs masked a deeper set of problems. While prevailing opinion in the West tended to see international communism as a monolithic force in the Cold War, deep fissures existed between the two most influential communist powers, the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union. Tensions between Chinese and Soviet communists stretched back to the

Chinese civil war. Mao would never forget Stalin's reluctant and partial support during the darkest days of the Chinese Revolution. And Stalin's death in 1953 only served to make matters worse. With Stalin gone, Mao had good reason to see himself as the reigning patriarch of the international communist movement. But Soviet leaders had no inclination to surrender their claims to leadership of the world revolution to the CCP. Nikita Khrushchev's rise to power and his 1956 "Secret Speech" further strained relations between Moscow and Beijing. Mao and his comrades viewed Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and his repudiation of his predecessor's cult of personality as an attack on key tenets of the CCP's authority. The Soviet military intervention in Hungary that same year also worried Beijing – how long would it be before Moscow chose to send its forces against China in order to keep the CCP in line? Conversely, Khrushchev's willingness to engage in "peaceful coexistence" with the Western powers seemed to signal that the Kremlin intended to abandon the cause of world revolution – a cause that still appeared urgent to Beijing. The Soviet Union's refusal to back China in its 1962 war with India marked yet another slap in Mao's face. Under the weight of these indignities, Mao and his comrades were only too happy to needle the Kremlin following its diplomatic defeat in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Beijing was quick to denounce Moscow's failure to live up to its commitments in the postcolonial world, as well as the Kremlin's Marxist "revisionism." It was in response to Beijing's attacks – more than in an attempt to challenge US power – that Khrushchev had announced Moscow's support for "wars of national liberation" in the Third World in early 1961. By the early 1960s, the Sino-Soviet split was tearing the Third World's global revolution apart.[5]

Indochina would emerge as a key battleground in the nascent struggle between Moscow and Beijing. Whereas both communist powers had cooperated to restrain the more militant factions of Hanoi's leadership during the 1954 Geneva Conference, the Sino-Soviet split created new opportunities for North Vietnamese leaders such as Lê Duẩn to pursue the military reunification of North and South Vietnam. With both Moscow and Beijing looking to burnish their Third World revolutionary credentials, Vietnam became a proving ground for both powers. Beijing would support Hanoi as its East Asian protégé while Moscow used North Vietnam to prove its continued commitment to wars of national liberation. In this way, Lê Duẩn and his comrades were able to gain military, political, and economic support from

5 See Friedman, *Shadow Cold War* and Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, 2008).

both communist powers. In the short run, then, the Sino-Soviet split opened doors for revolutionaries in such places as Hanoi. However, in the longer term, the increasing acrimony between China and the Soviet Union boded ill for the cause of postcolonial revolution.[6]

A clear example of the fallout from the Sino-Soviet split came with the 1965 annihilation of the PKI – the largest nongoverning communist party in the world. Like North Vietnam, Indonesia had become a battlefield in the contest between Moscow and Beijing. However, unlike North Vietnam, Indonesia had a third contender for influence – the United States. While China and the Soviet Union struggled over the PKI and Indonesia's left-leaning, charismatic President Sukarno, Washington built influence in the Indonesian Army. Many of the details of what happened in the summer and fall of 1965 have been erased, destroyed, or hidden, but scholars have offered a likely reconstruction of what followed. Spurred on by the Sino-Soviet competition – and possibly by US CIA machinations – the PKI appears to have staged a preemptive attack on September 30, 1965 on top leaders in the Indonesian Army, which the PKI suspected of planning a coup against Sukarno. While six high-ranking commanders were murdered in the attack, key officers – most notably Major General Suharto – survived. The army responded by launching a nationwide crackdown against the PKI that quickly escalated to a quasi-genocidal massacre. In the coming months, army forces, Islamic youth movements, and ordinary Indonesians slaughtered hundreds of thousands of PKI members and associates. US officials recognized that purge as a victory for American interests in Southeast Asia's most populous nation. *Time* magazine summed up the mood in July 1966 when it described the annihilation of Indonesia's communists as the "West's best news for years in Asia."[7]

In retrospect, the massacre of the PKI was as representative – and as strategically significant – as Hanoi's victory over the Saigon regime. The Sino-Soviet split had divided Indonesia's communists and created a situation in the autumn of 1965 in which they either overplayed their hand or fell into a trap set by US-backed military officers. Through the second half of 1965 and 1966, Suharto consolidated control over the Indonesian government and established a pro-US military regime in Jakarta. For all intents and purposes, Indonesia was now firmly in the Western

6 On the Sino-Soviet split and Hanoi's war options, see Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War* (Berkeley, 2013); and Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012).

7 For more on Indonesia, see Simpson, *Economists with Guns*.

camp – Washington's darkest fears of falling dominoes would not come to pass. Even if Vietnam and the rest of Indochina fell to the communists, the region's largest and most strategically important nation was in the hands of a strong, reliably pro-Western military regime. As US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara later explained, the destruction of the PKI "significantly altered the regional balance of power [in Asia] and substantially reduced America's real stake in Vietnam." But the geostrategic implications of Suharto's rise were mostly drowned out by the fury of America's escalating war in Indochina.[8]

Even as the Vietnam War intensified, the global communist movement was coming undone. The same forces that allowed Hanoi to play Moscow and Beijing off one another also set the stage for the slaughter of the PKI. But the drama of America's war in Vietnam overshadowed these dynamics. So, too, did the successful efforts of Hanoi and the National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam (NLF, or Viet Cong) to reach out to the broader revolutionary world. Much like the Algerians before them, the Vietnamese recognized that the international landscape of the middle Cold War offered fertile ground for their diplomacy.[9] The global process of decolonization had transformed the international arena in the years since 1945. The UN General Assembly would grow a membership of several dozen states to nearly 200 during these decades. As a result, the Western powers would find themselves increasingly outnumbered in key international forums by new, postcolonial nations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Many of these new states held deep sympathies with fellow peoples struggling for national liberation. Furthermore, the emergence of the nonaligned movement in the 1950s created new international networks linking postcolonial states, national liberation fighters, and progressive forces. By the early 1960s, aspiring revolutionaries such as those in Vietnam found an array of eager supporters in the so-called Third World.

Vietnamese communist leaders embraced this notion of "guerrilla diplomacy" by reaching out to groups around the radical world. In the United States and Western Europe, millions of leftwing students, civil rights activists, and progressives came to celebrate the cause of the Vietnamese liberation fighters and denounce the "imperialism" of the United States and South Vietnam. Revolutionary states in the postcolonial world also made

8 Robert McNamara, with Brian Van De Mark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, 1996), 214–15.

9 On Algeria, see Jeffrey Byrne and Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution* (Oxford, 2002).

shows of support – even though their aid was vastly outweighed by that coming from Beijing and Moscow.[10]

The Vietnamese communists – along with the Algerian and Cuban Revolutions – became a central driver in the formation and proliferation of what has been called the myth of the heroic guerrilla that arose during the 1960s.[11] For a time, Third World liberation fighters seemed nearly invincible. From Mao and Ahmed Ben Bella to Hồ Chí Minh and Che Guevara, these national liberation fighters came to appear as the leaders of an unstoppable force in international affairs. Had Sukarno and the PKI's demise received more attention, observers of international affairs might have drawn a different conclusion. But the high drama of the Vietnam War proved too mesmerizing. While Hanoi's victories troubled Washington, they electrified revolutionary groups in the postcolonial world.

Among those transfixed by the war in Vietnam were Palestinian revolutionaries. Leila Khaled – who gained international fame as a strikingly attractive female aircraft hijacker – would write that the Palestinians "must learn the secrets of the Vietnamese." The largest Palestinian guerrilla group, Fatah, published translations of Võ Nguyên Giáp's writings in its series "Revolutionary Studies and Experiences" alongside studies of the Chinese, Algerian, and Cuban Revolutions. In March 1970, Hanoi would host a delegation of Palestinian liberation fighters, including Yasser Arafat. The Palestinians toured government and military facilities and met with such leaders as Giáp. "The Vietnamese and Palestinian peoples have much in common," he told the Arab visitors, "just like two people suffering from the same disease." Throughout their struggle, Palestinian fighters would seek to identify themselves with the Vietnamese. The Jordanian capital of Amman would be an "Arab Hanoi." Fatah's moral victory in the 1968 battle of al-Karamah would earn comparisons with the concurrent Tet Offensive in South Vietnam. The fact that both South Vietnam and Israel were key recipients of US aid reinforced these associations, as did revelations that Israeli military officials had visited Saigon to observe US counterinsurgency operations in Southeast Asia. By the late 1960s, many – though certainly not

10 On Hanoi and the NLF's efforts at diplomacy in the revolutionary world, see Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca, 1999); Jessica M. Frazier, *Women's Anti-War Diplomacy during the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017); Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Viet Nam Era* (Ithaca, 2013); Chamberlin, *Global Offensive*; Asselin, *Hanoi's Road*.

11 See J. Boyer Bell, *The Myth of the Guerrilla* (New York, 1971).

all – leftwing political activists in Western Europe and North America would place Arafat alongside Che Guevara and Hồ Chí Minh as icons of a globalized struggle against colonialism in all its forms.[12]

No single episode of the war had greater global resonance than the 1968 Tet Offensive. Although the offensive itself proved to be a military failure, the political impact reverberated around the world. In the United States, Tết proved to be a tipping point in convincing a majority of Americans that the war was not being won. As the public began to turn against the conflict, the antiwar movement gained momentum. On campuses and the streets of cities across America, students and political activists rose up against the established order. Moreover, these movements were not confined to the United States. Large protests broke out in multiple countries in what historians have identified as a global moment. These uprisings owed much to the communist triumphs in Vietnam and the Tet Offensive in particular. Anti-war sentiment proved to be a key rallying point for various groups of activists protesting. African Americans fighting for civil rights, disgruntled students protesting conditions in major American and European universities, environmentalists, women fighting for equal rights, and others found common cause in their opposition to the American war in Vietnam.[13]

Once again, however, appearances proved deceiving. Even as the Tet Offensive and the global uprisings of 1968 appeared as sweeping victories for the international forces of revolution, the Sino-Soviet split continued to widen. In the summer of 1969, clashes along the Soviet–Chinese border escalated to a low-level border war between the two communist powers. Although the death toll only reached into triple digits, the potential for a wider conflict remained. Indeed, in September 1969 Soviet diplomats communicating with US officials quietly floated the prospect of staging a preemptive strike against Chinese nuclear facilities – a move that would very likely have sparked a wider conflict between Moscow and Beijing. Although the Kremlin chose not to launch such an attack, it was clear to all that Sino-Soviet relations were not what they had once been. To many Chinese leaders, the Soviet Union – and not the United States – appeared as the greatest foreign threat. Thus, even as the communist triumphs in Vietnam seized the world's attention, the seeds took root for a massive geostrategic realignment between Beijing, Moscow, and Washington.

12 Chamberlin, *Global Offensive*, 1, 101.

13 On the global protests of 1968, see Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

## The Tipping Point

These two threads – the revolutionary and geostrategic – would converge in East Pakistan in 1971 in a war that created the state of Bangladesh. Having suffered a brutal crackdown at the hands of Pakistani military forces in the wake of the Awami League's electoral victory, East Pakistani separatists launched an armed insurgency to achieve full independence for Bangladesh. Western journalists touring the battlefields noted the striking similarity between the wars in Bangladesh and Vietnam. Meanwhile, Bangladesh liberation fighters – Mukti Bahini – identified their common cause with Vietnamese revolutionaries. Both were fighting foreign occupations backed by the United States; both would use guerrilla tactics to achieve victory. But the liberation of Bangladesh would also contain a more ominous dimension for the forces of progressive revolution. In the latter stages of the conflict, as India and Pakistan went to war against one another, the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) moved into alignment. Both Washington and Beijing feared Moscow's ambitions in South Asia, and both supported Pakistan as a counterweight to India. Moreover, US President Richard Nixon was using Pakistan as a backchannel in his bid to "open" China. During the darkest days of the India–Pakistan conflict, Nixon would reach out to Beijing to request the mobilization of Chinese military forces along the border with India. Though Beijing balked at Nixon's suggestion, the larger implications were clear: the Sino-Soviet split had transformed the relationship between the world's three greatest powers.[14]

The following February – 1972 – Nixon shocked the world by visiting China. Nixon's trip capped a long series of negotiations that brought about a rapprochement between Washington and Beijing. This realignment transformed the triangular relationship between the United States, the Soviet Union, and China, and helped to ensure that the Sino-Soviet split was irreparable. Henceforth, Washington and Beijing would partner on various projects designed to thwart Soviet foreign policies and diminish the Kremlin's standing in the world. In the wake of this opening to China, Washington's stakes in the Vietnam War dropped even lower. Accordingly, Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, redoubled their efforts to bring the war in Vietnam to a close, now with the intermittent support of China. Leaders in Beijing also recognized that their best interests lay in aiding an American withdrawal from China. Although the Nixon administration staged

14 See Gary Bass, *The Blood Telegram* (New York, 2013); Srinath Raghavan, *1971* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).

a furious and ultimately futile series of campaigns to secure the survival of Saigon, the decision to pull out of South Vietnam had effectively been made. And while the Saigon regime struggled to hold on – bolstered by substantial infusions of US aid – Hanoi prepared for a final offensive to secure complete control of Vietnam. In March 1975, North Vietnamese forces launched their last campaign against South Vietnamese troops. Communist units stormed south, reaching the gates of Saigon in early April. Washington evacuated its remaining personnel while tens of thousands of Vietnamese fled on boats.[15]

From the perspective of the Global Cold War, then, the North Vietnamese victories in 1973 and 1975 proved decidedly pyrrhic. Hanoi had reunified Vietnam under communist rule, the Saigon regime had been destroyed, and Washington's South Vietnamese modernization project had been defeated. But while the drama in Vietnam held center stage, the Sino-Soviet split, the massacre of the PKI, and Nixon's opening to China transformed the structure of power in the wider postcolonial world. Over this same period, the Nixon administration also established a new approach to fighting the Cold War in the Third World under the auspices of the Nixon Doctrine. The roots of this approach stretch back at least to the 1950s and the publication of Henry Kissinger's first major foreign policy article, "Military Policy and Defense of the 'Grey Areas'" in 1955. In the article, Kissinger argued that Cold War nuclear strategy and Dwight Eisenhower's policy of mutually assured destruction effectively guaranteed that a superpower clash over core areas such as Central Europe or Japan would set off a full-scale nuclear war. However, nuclear retaliation was less effective for so-called "grey areas" – peripheral regions of secondary geostrategic importance. He wondered, was the United States prepared to risk a Soviet counterstrike against New York or Chicago in order to defend US interests in Indochina, Burma, or Afghanistan? Kissinger argued that the United States must maintain the ability to intervene in such areas if it hoped to defend its position in the Third World.[16] In less than a decade, American troops would be engaged in just such a venture in South Vietnam. But as Kissinger and other US officials discovered, the American public remained unconvinced of the need to sacrifice tens of thousands of American lives to maintain such commitments. The Nixon Doctrine would ultimately emerge as an attempt to defend American interests in peripheral

15 Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York, 2002).

16 Henry Kissinger, "Military Policy and Defense of the 'Grey Areas,'" *Foreign Affairs* 33 (3) (April 1955).

areas without sacrificing large numbers of American lives. Perhaps indigenous forces – armed, trained, and funded by the United States – could serve as local police powers in the Third World.

Although Nixon's failed "Vietnamization" scheme is the best-known example of the Nixon Doctrine, the idea was applicable to much of the Third World. A key inspiration for these ideas arrived in the months leading up to the Tet Offensive at the far western corner of southern Asia. In June 1967, the State of Israel launched a spectacular preemptive strike against the Egyptian and Syrian Air Forces. In less than a week, the Israeli military soundly defeated its Arab neighbors and occupied the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Sinai peninsula. Because Israel was a pro-Western nation and Egypt and Syria were aligned with the Soviet Union, the 1967 Arab–Israeli War also appeared as a stand-in for a hypothetical clash between North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Warsaw Pact military forces. To many Americans, Israel appeared to have succeeded while US troops in Vietnam continued to struggle. If Washington could find more allies like Israel, the United States might gain the upper hand in the Cold War battle for the Third World. The 1968 Tet Offensive and the slow, painful failure of US policy in South Vietnam ultimately reinforced this lesson: rather than rolling back the Kremlin's influence, it might be enough to raise the cost of any future communist gains by pouring resources into pro-Western allies in the Third World. Americans could afford to pay the bills as long as no US soldiers were coming home in body bags.[17]

By the early 1970s, Nixon Doctrine aid had begun pouring into Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Brazil. America's heavily armed Third World allies might not be able to reverse the tide of leftwing revolutions in the postcolonial world, but they could make any communist gains tremendously bloody – and they could do so without sacrificing significant numbers of American lives. As was the case in 1967, Israel again provided a key model for fighting Third World revolutionaries. In the years following 1968, the PLO had tried to emulate the Algerian and Vietnamese models by coordinating armed operations on the ground with a global diplomatic campaign in the international arena. PLO leaders reached out to revolutionary groups and leftwing regimes around the world, securing the political support of the majority of the world's community by 1974. As Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish mused, "In the conscience of the people of the world, the torch has been passed from Vietnam to us." At the end of that year, the UN General Assembly voted to recognize the PLO as the sole legitimate representative

17 For a more complete version of this argument, see Chamberlin, *Global Offensive*.

of the Palestinian people and granted the organization permanent observer status – a significant victory for a liberation movement that controlled no official territory. But in contrast to Algerian and Vietnamese revolutionaries before them, Palestinian leaders were unable to translate these diplomatic victories into progress on the ground. With the firm backing of the United States, a massive influx of arms, and the cover provided by a US veto in the UN Security Council, Israeli leaders scorned UN resolutions and dug in their heels in opposition to the PLO. The following year, 1975, the PLO found itself embraced at the UN but locked out of Palestine and embroiled in a vicious civil war in Lebanon.[18]

On the other side of the continent, in Southeast Asia, the forces of post-colonial revolution still appeared energized. The spring of 1975 brought two triumphs that electrified the millions of people around the world who had cheered the Vietnamese Revolution: on April 17, Khmer Rouge forces seized Phnom Penh; thirteen days later, Saigon fell to the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the NLF. April 1975 thus brought not one but two victories for the Third World forces of revolution. But those celebrating these triumphs had reason to pause. After capturing the capital of Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge forced tens of thousands of Cambodians out of Phnom Penh, compelling those that survived grueling marches along the roads to settle in the countryside. Next door, Hanoi prepared to send thousands of Vietnamese citizens who had worked with the Saigon regime to reeducation camps.[19]

Furthermore, despite their shared communist ideology, deep animosities existed between Phnom Penh and Hanoi. During much of the American war in Vietnam, Vietnamese forces had used Cambodian territory as a rear base – the notorious Hồ Chí Minh Trail ran through Cambodia's remote eastern regions. This reality brought Vietnamese and Cambodian fighters into close proximity. Khmer Rouge forces benefited immensely from the Vietnamese presence inside Cambodia, gaining shelter, a limited supply of weapons, and training at the hands of more experienced Vietnamese guerrillas. But these experiences also bred resentment. Vietnamese commanders often treated the Khmer Rouge as subordinates in their own country, and the Vietnamese always placed priority on their own revolution over that of the Cambodians. Moreover, the Vietnamese presence inside Cambodia invited ferocious US reprisals. American B-52s carpet-bombed the Cambodian rainforests while commandos staged limited raids into the country in search of the elusive

18 Ibid.
19 Francois Ponchaud, *Cambodia: Year Zero* (London, 1978).

Vietnamese communist headquarters. Nixon's invasion of Cambodia in the spring and summer of 1970 unleashed widespread devastation across the eastern reaches of the country.[20]

These festering resentments would rise to the surface after the Khmer Rouge victory in 1975, creating a Cambodian–Vietnamese split to match the Sino-Soviet one. Cambodian leaders began by marginalizing – and eventually executing – their comrades who had spent large amounts of time in Hanoi. At the same time, the party put forward a highly chauvinistic and xenophobic program that aimed to expel all foreign influence from Cambodia and seal the country off from future outside meddling. While these policies expelled Westerners, they also targeted Vietnamese – officials and civilians alike. As the Khmer Rouge transformed Cambodia into a massive forced labor camp, they laid plans to exact revenge on their Vietnamese neighbors. Beginning in 1977, Khmer Rouge forces staged a series of border raids into Vietnam. Hanoi initially responded to these attacks on a tit-for-tat basis, but as the violence escalated to several full-scale massacres, Vietnamese leaders determined that more drastic action had to be taken. In 1978, Hanoi assembled a government-in-exile composed of Cambodians who had fled the Khmer Rouge and began preparing for a full-scale invasion of Democratic Kampuchea.[21]

On December 25, 1978, Vietnamese forces launched their attack. Some 150,000 soldiers supported by heavy armor crashed across the border and quickly forced Khmer Rouge units to retreat. In a matter of days, Vietnamese troops had reached Phnom Penh, and the Khmer Rouge leadership had abandoned the capital. Inside the city and across the countryside, Vietnamese soldiers found grisly evidence of the Khmer Rouge's short and brutal time in power. After emptying the cities, the Khmer Rouge had forced hundreds of thousands of Cambodians into grueling agricultural labor. In an effort to stage a total revolution that would effectively turn the clock back to year zero, the regime tried to completely overturn the foundations of Cambodian society. After resettling the population, the Khmer Rouge separated children from parents, instituted an extensive regime of surveillance, and tried to transform the nation into an agricultural powerhouse. While the Khmer Rouge massacred thousands, its disastrous agricultural programs unleashed

20 See Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79* (New Haven, 1996).

21 Ibid., and Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War: A History of Indochina since the Fall of Saigon* (New York, 1986).

man-made famines across Cambodia that increased the death toll exponentially. In all, nearly 25 percent of Cambodia's pre-1975 population perished under the Khmer Rouge reign. So shocking were these reports that much of the international left initially dismissed them as CIA propaganda. In the long run, however, the revelations of what life had been like inside Democratic Kampuchea did little to encourage foreign emulators.[22]

Just as unsettling, for some observers, was the realization that two communist states – the products of successful revolutions that had triumphed less than two weeks apart – were now engaged in a fratricidal war. The worst was yet to come. In February 1979, the Chinese People's Liberation Army launched an invasion of Vietnam. Beijing was now at war with Hanoi. The Sino-Vietnamese War would conclude in less than a month and leave somewhere around 60,000 people dead. Although short and strategically inconclusive, the symbolism of the conflict – and the larger Third Indochina War – reverberated throughout the communist and postcolonial worlds. The spectacle of three of the Third World's most successful revolutionary states at war with one another devastated the illusion of global communist solidarity. Political scientist Benedict Anderson captured the gravity of the moment when he identified the Vietnamese–Cambodian and Sino-Vietnamese Wars as markers of "a fundamental transformation in the history of Marxism and Marxist movements" in the introduction to his seminal study of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*.[23] The Third Indochina War, the Sino-Soviet split, and the growing list of indictments regarding the human rights records of communist regimes crippled the appeal of leftwing politics for revolutionaries around the Third World. That same year, 1979, however, aspiring postcolonial revolutionaries would receive a new, dynamic, noncommunist model of liberation war.

## The New Face of Revolution

The world's next great revolution would appear in Iran. The Iranian Revolution began, like many other postcolonial upheavals, as a broadbased protest movement against an oppressive regime. Shah Reza Pahlavi had ruled Iran with an iron fist since a 1953 joint CIA–MI6 coup had reinstalled him in power. The Shah had remained a reliably conservative Cold War ally to the

22 See Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution* (New York, 1998).

23 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York, 1983), 1.

United States who secured massive amounts of Nixon Doctrine aid, which he hoped to use to build his nation into a major regional power. By the late 1970s, Iran's forces fielded some of the most sophisticated military equipment in the US arsenal. Meanwhile, the regime's secret police force, the SAVAK, enjoyed a fearsome reputation bolstered by its deep penetration of Iranian society, its working relationship with the CIA and the Israeli Mossad, and rumors of horrific torture techniques employed by its interrogators.[24] But none of this would prove sufficient to save the Shah's regime. Disgruntled elements from across Iranian society – liberals, reformers, merchants, socialists, communists, students, and clergy – joined a wave of protests against the regime beginning in 1977. In the coming months, the protests grew to include tens of thousands of demonstrators. By late 1978, even US officials were coming to question whether the Shah could survive. In January 1979, the Shah – who had learned he was dying of cancer – chose to flee with his family rather than launch a military crackdown that would have guaranteed a massive bloodbath.[25]

Initially, Iran's broad revolutionary coalition remained mostly intact – but this was about to change. In February 1979, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from his exile in France to massive crowds of cheering supporters. Khomeini and his allies quickly set about building up the clergy's power in the new revolutionary regime and marginalizing rival factions. In short order, radical clergy were able to push aside more moderate leaders in the provisional government and assume positions of power. The hostage crisis at the US Embassy in Iran proved to be the last straw for the moderate holdouts in the regime – the path was now clear for Khomeini to assume total control. In this way, Iran's revolution became the first large theocratic revolution of the twentieth century. This shift shocked contemporary observers around the world who had come to assume that modern revolutions were generally led by leftwing forces. Indeed, since the eighteenth century, the forces of revolution had tended to identify as liberal, socialist, or Marxist. Iran's revolution reversed this historical momentum, signaled a structural shift in global politics, and dealt yet another blow against the secular, leftwing forces of Third World revolution.[26]

24 Roham Alvandi, *Nixon and the Shah* (Oxford, 2014).
25 Charles Kurzman, *Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge, MA, 2004) and Said Arjomand, *Turban for the Crown* (Oxford, 1988).
26 See James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American–Iranian Relations* (Princeton, 1988) and Gary Sick, *All Fall Down* (New York, 1985).

Khomeini and his supporters borrowed elements from Third World revolutionary movements and saw themselves as liberation warriors in a similar mold to the Vietnamese. But in place of Marxism, Iran's revolutionary leaders touted their Shi'a faith. The Iranian Revolution thus combined elements of political Islam with Third World revolutionary warfare. Indeed, the Iranian experience revealed the depleted state of the leftwing, secular politics in the postcolonial world. For a new generation of Iranians, Marxism did not appear as the most promising path to revolutionary change. This stemmed in part from the strong Shi'a faith held by many Iranians and, perhaps more importantly, from the fact that Iran's clergy remained the best, organized institution in the country under the Shah's reign that nevertheless managed to remain outside the regime's control. But the collapse of worldwide communist solidarity with the Sino-Soviet split and the Third Indochina War dealt a devastating blow to the movement.

At the same time, the Iranian Revolution sent shockwaves across Central Asia and the Middle East. Iran's eastern neighbor, Afghanistan, was also facing a challenge from Islamic revolutionaries. The previous year, communist forces had seized power in Kabul and created a Marxist regime. The new Afghan regime promptly bungled efforts to stage reforms and undercut much of what little popular support it had initially enjoyed. Infighting between rival Marxist factions and the murder of one of the key revolutionary leaders only made matters worse. These struggles placed Soviet leaders in a difficult position. Although many in the Kremlin doubted their Afghan comrades were up to the task of running the country, Moscow could not simply ignore the requests for assistance from a Marxist regime on its own borders. The unfolding revolution in Iran – which was destabilizing the region, leading the United States to expand its presence in the Persian Gulf, and leading some US officials to consider expanding relations with Kabul – added to this urgency. Ironically, the Iranian Revolution had also sown insecurities in Washington, where US officials feared that the Soviet Union might seek to expand its influence in the aftermath of the Shah's departure. With tensions rising, Moscow decided to act: on the night of December 24, 1979, while Soviet troops moved across the border, KGB commandos staged an assault on the presidential palace in Kabul, killing Afghanistan's president and installing Babrak Karmal in power.[27]

The stage was now set for the last major battle of the Cold War. In a key sense, the tables had turned in the Soviet–Afghan War from earlier cases

27 See Artemy Kalinovsky, *The Long Goodbye* (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Gareth Braithwaite, *Afgantsy* (Oxford, 2011); Elisabeth Leake, *Afghan Crucible* (Oxford, 2022).

of Cold War insurgencies. Instead of a Western-backed government battling communist guerrillas, the Kremlin now supported a Marxist regime fighting against Western-backed rebels. In this same vein, the rebels – the Mujahideen, "the ones who struggle" – borrowed some of the techniques pioneered from leftwing fighters such as the Chinese, Algerians, Vietnamese, and Palestinians, but they had little use for Marxist doctrine. Rather, political Islam emerged as the prevailing ideological tendencies among the Mujahideen. Although many Mujahideen fighters and commanders were deeply religious and fought in defense of their faith, instrumentalist motivations figured heavily in this transformation. By the early 1980s, Islamist Mujahideen organizations enjoyed an overwhelming strategic advantage over their more moderate rivals.[28]

In 1979, US President Jimmy Carter had committed to providing a modest amount of financial aid to Mujahideen guerrillas fighting the Marxist regime in Kabul. Carter's support marked the beginning of what was to become the largest CIA covert operation of the Cold War, whereby the United States established a massive pipeline of aid to the Afghan rebels. Saudi Arabia provided matching funds that, together with CIA support, was funneled through Pakistani intelligence services (ISI) who provided on-the-ground contacts with the Mujahideen. Because CIA officers rarely entered Afghanistan, Washington effectively outsourced decisions as to which rebels received aid to the ISI. Pakistani officials – who hoped to use the Mujahideen as a bulwark against Indian influence in South Asia – chose to direct the majority of funds to Islamic fighters. In short order, the religious extremists became the best-funded and best-armed factions of the Afghan resistance.[29]

Afghanistan would come to represent the centerpiece of the so-called Reagan Doctrine – an update of the Nixon Doctrine aimed at rolling back communism in the Third World not just by aiding conservative regimes, but also by providing aid to rightwing insurgencies. In the eyes of many US officials, the war in Afghanistan would become payback for Soviet aid to Hanoi during the Vietnam War. The aim of US policy in Afghanistan would be to create a "Soviet Vietnam" – a bloody, indecisive conflict engineered to kill thousands of Soviet soldiers and drain the Soviet economy. Whereas earlier periods had seen Moscow and Beijing functioning as key sources of foreign aid for revolutionary movements, Washington assumed this position in

28 Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (Princeton, 2002).
29 Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars* (London, 2004).

the final decade of the Cold War. Furthermore, Beijing also reemerged as a patron of the Mujahideen, forming a link in the foreign supply chain to the rebels, and effectively partnering with the United States in waging a proxy war against the Soviet Union.[30]

If the long 1960s belonged to the Vietnamese Revolution, the 1980s belonged to the Mujahideen. The Vietnam analogies made by US officials would hold true for the Soviet–Afghan War with one glaring exception. Whereas Washington emerged from Vietnam in a stronger position vis-à-vis the Cold War, the war in Afghanistan would leave Moscow crippled. By the time the last Soviet troops left Afghanistan, the Soviet Union was spiraling toward collapse. Furthermore, if the fall of Saigon marked one of the last great victories for a Third World communist movement, the fall of Kabul in 1992 to Mujahideen forces was only the beginning of a larger story of the rise of Islamic revolutionary forces through much of the postcolonial world. Afghanistan descended into a vicious civil war between rival Mujahideen factions that, in 1996, gave an opening to a little-known Islamist movement calling itself the Taliban that would, five years later, burst onto the world stage as part of the September 11, 2001 attacks. The most notorious revolutionary of the twenty-first century would likewise emerge from the crucible of the Soviet–Afghan War. Osama Bin Laden launched his career as an Islamic militant as a minor figure in the anti-Soviet resistance. Through the 1990s, Bin Laden had built a potent, transnational force of committed Islamic fighters that would mount a global campaign of violence in the coming years.

Indeed, as the tides of the Cold War receded, the forces of Islamic revolution were on the march. Along the shores of the Mediterranean, PLO fighters – who had cast themselves as Arab incarnations of Vietnamese and Cuban liberation fighters and, in doing so, became darlings of the international left in the 1970s – faced a major internal challenge for leadership of the Palestinian liberation movement from Hamas, an extremist offshoot of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood. Meanwhile, in Algeria – a state created by a Third World revolution that had inspired and been inspired by the Vietnamese example – an even bloodier fate awaited. When the religious party, the Islamic Salvation Front, appeared to be on the verge of a victory in the 1992 parliamentary elections, the Algerian military suspended the election, sparking a vicious civil war that killed perhaps over 100,000 people.[31]

30 See, for instance, Milt Bearden, *The Main Enemy* (New York, 2003).

31 On Algeria's place in the changing landscape of Third World revolution, see Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution* and Robert Malley, *The Call from Algeria* (Berkeley, 1996).

Figure 14.1 Afghan Mujahideen who fought against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1980s).
Source: Pascal Manoukian / Contributor / Sygma / Getty Images.

## Conclusion

If the communist triumphs of 1975 in Vietnam and across the rest of Indochina marked the zenith of the Third World's communist revolution, they also signaled that movement's shockingly rapid decline. The string of communist victories in East Asia stretching back to 1949 effectively came to an end with the fall of Saigon and the fall of Phnom Penh. By that time, the Sino-Soviet split had torn the global communist movement apart, Suharto had consolidated a pro-Western military regime in Jakarta, and Beijing had chosen to align with Washington in the Cold War struggle. The coming years held mainly defeat and disappointment for the forces of secular Third World revolution on the battlefields of the Third Indochina War, the streets of revolutionary Tehran, and in the mountain passes of Afghanistan. As the Cold War came to an end, the Soviet Union perched on the brink of collapse, the CCP focused on competing in a globalizing capitalist economy, US leaders pushed neoliberal policies while boasting about the inevitability of a liberal-capitalist world order, and aspiring postcolonial revolutionaries joined the ranks of ethno-sectarian movements such as Al-Qaeda, Hamas, and Islamic State

(ISIS). Meanwhile, the communist government in Hanoi kept a nervous eye on Beijing's rising power and expanding regional ambitions while pursuing a cautious rapprochement with Washington. To many Vietnamese leaders, the United States, a former enemy, came to appear as a potential ally in counterbalancing the expanding influence of China, Hanoi's former ally. In the event that it continues, this strategic reversal may one day be remembered as the greatest irony and a testament to the ultimate tragedy and futility of America's war in Vietnam.



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