

# **IN THE CROSSFIRE**

**Adventures of a  
Vietnamese Revolutionary**

**Ngo Van**

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Vietnamese Revolutionary**

Edited by Ken Knabb and Hélène Fleury

Translated from the French by Hélène Fleury,  
Hilary Horrocks, Ken Knabb and Naomi Sager

AK PRESS

*In the Crossfire* is a translation of Ngo Van's *Au pays de la Cloche fêlée* (Paris: L'Insomniaque, 2000) and of excerpts from Ngo Van's *Au pays d'Héloïse* (L'Insomniaque, 2005). It has been edited by Ken Knabb and H el ene Fleury and translated by H el ene Fleury, Hilary Horrocks, Ken Knabb and Naomi Sager.

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ISBN 978-1-84935-013-6  
Library of Congress Control Number: 2010925754

AK Press  
674-A 23rd St.  
Oakland, CA 94612  
www.akpress.org

AK Press  
P.O. Box 12766  
Edinburgh, Scotland EH8 9YE  
www.akuk.com

Cover illustration: *Saigon Insurrection 1945* by Ngo Van  
Cover design: Kate Khatib

The paintings following page 192 are by Ngo Van. Most of the other illustrations are from the original French editions of Ngo Van's works.

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## INTRODUCTION

“History is written by the victors.” With the increasing spectacularization of modern society, this truism has become truer than ever. The most radical revolts are not only physically crushed, they are falsified, trivialized, and buried under a constant barrage of superficial and ephemeral bits of “information,” to the point that most people do not even know they happened.

Ngo Van’s *In the Crossfire* is among the most illuminating revelations of this repressed and hidden history, worthy of a place alongside such works as Voline’s *The Unknown Revolution* and Harold Isaacs’s *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*. It is also a very moving human document: dramatic political events are interwoven with intimate personal concerns, just as they always are in reality. In this respect, Van’s book is perhaps more akin to Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* or Victor Serge’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*.

The two-stage Vietnam war against French and then American occupation (1945–1975) is still fairly well known; but almost no one knows anything about the long and complex struggles that preceded it, including the fact that many of those struggles were inspired by an indigenous Trotskyist movement that was often more popular and more influential than the rival Stalinist movement under Ho Chi Minh. While Ho’s Communist Party slavishly followed the constantly shifting policy lines ordered by his masters in the Kremlin (which often called for alliances with the native landowners and bourgeoisie in the name of “national unity,” or at times even with the French colonial regime when France happened to be allied with Russia), the Vietnamese Trotskyists expressed more consistently radical perspectives. The situation was somewhat analogous to what was going on in Spain during the same period. In both cases a radical popular movement was fighting against foreign and reactionary forces while being stabbed in the back by the Stalinists. One

### *Note on the Present Edition*

*In the Crossfire* is a translation of Ngo Van’s *Au pays de la Cloche fêlée* (Paris, 2000) and of excerpts from Ngo Van’s *Au pays d’Héloïse* (Paris, 2005), including three articles reprinted in the latter volume. An initial English translation of *Au pays de la Cloche fêlée* was made by Hilary Horrocks; the translation that appears in the present book is a revised version made by Hélène Fleury, Ken Knabb and Naomi Sager. Ken translated the selections from *Au pays d’Héloïse* and the three articles (revising earlier versions of the articles by Brian Pearce and Jackie Reuss). Ken and Hélène prepared the introductions and end matter. Ken then reviewed the whole project and prepared the book for publication, with technical assistance from Charles Weigl.

**Hélène Fleury** (Paris) collaborated with Ngo Van on his later writings. She is also the author of a study of Shelley: *La Mascarade de l’Anarchie*, and has participated in various radical publications.

**Hilary Horrocks** (Edinburgh) is a writer and editor. In the 1980s she also ran a radical bookshop in Glasgow. She met Ngo Van in the 1990s and has written several articles about his life and work.

**Ken Knabb** (Berkeley) has translated numerous works by Guy Debord and the Situationist International. His writings and translations are online at his “Bureau of Public Secrets” website: [www.bopsecrets.org](http://www.bopsecrets.org).

**Naomi Sager** (New York) has since the 1940s been associated with individuals and groups close to the workers council movement: Paul Mattick, Maximilien Rubel, Noir et Rouge, ICO, and more recently Ngo Van and Hélène Fleury.

significant difference was that in Spain the popular movement was predominantly anarchist, whereas anarchism was virtually unknown in Vietnam.\* [See *Translators' Notes, beginning on p. 223.*] Many Vietnamese rebels thus understandably saw the Trotskyist movement as the only alternative, the only movement fighting simultaneously against colonialism, capitalism and Stalinism.

In any case, spontaneous popular revolts often bypassed whatever ideologies were officially in play, implicitly calling in question the whole social order even when their explicit demands were much more minimal. What stands out is the readiness of ordinary people to create their own forms of action—workers forming underground unions and carrying out illegal strikes, peasants seizing land and forming “soviets,” prisoners organizing resistance networks, women breaking out of their traditional roles, students and teachers putting their learning to subversive use, neighborhoods organizing themselves into “people’s committees,” streetcar workers creating an independent militia, and most astonishing of all, 30,000 coal miners forming a workers-council “Commune” that manages to hold out for three months before being destroyed by the Stalinists. These are not the proverbial “masses” meekly waiting for some leader or “vanguard party” to tell them what to do. They are participants in one of the most broad-based and persevering revolutionary movements of the twentieth century.

Ngo Van took part in that movement as a young man, and in his old age, half a century later, he became the preeminent chronicler of its remarkable victories and tragic defeats.

In Part I of this book Van recounts his experiences growing up in a peasant village; working as a teenager in Saigon; discovering the true nature of the colonial system; becoming aware of movements that were fighting it; cautiously seeking out other dissidents; attending clandestine meetings; establishing underground networks; disseminating radical publications; organizing strikes and protests; taking part in insurrections and partisan warfare; being jailed and tortured by the French; and facing the murderous betrayals by the Stalinists, who systematically liquidated the Trotskyists and all the other oppositional movements in the aftermath of World War II.

Constantly harassed by the French colonial police in Saigon and

risking assassination by the Stalinists if he ventured into the countryside, Van emigrated to France in 1948. As described in Part II, he became a factory worker, struggled with tuberculosis, took up painting, and discovered new political perspectives. His encounters with anarchists, councilists and libertarian Marxists reaffirmed the most radical aspects of his previous experiences while verifying his increasing suspicions that there were significant problems with Trotskyism as well as Stalinism. From that point on, Van carried out his activities as an independent radical more or less in the council-communist tradition, whether in taking part in rank-and-file worker struggles or in writing articles on East Asian politics and history.

After his retirement in 1978, Van devoted the next seventeen years to researching and writing his monumental history, *Vietnam 1920–1945: révolution et contre-révolution sous la domination coloniale*. Following the publication of that book in 1995, he wrote a parallel autobiographical account of the same period: *Au pays de la Cloche fêlée* (2000). When that was done, he returned to his more “objective” history of modern Vietnam. (I might mention here that in addition to his works on Vietnamese history, he also authored two studies of radical currents in ancient China and put together a collection of Vietnamese folktales. See the Bibliography for information on these and other publications.)

After completing the second volume of his Vietnam history, *Le Joueur de flûte et l’Oncle Hô: Vietnam 1945–2005*, Van returned to his autobiography, envisioning a continuation that would cover his years in France. Unfortunately he did not live long enough to complete this latter project. He died January 2, 2005, at the age of 92. Later the same year his publishers, Insomniaque, issued a memorial volume, *Au pays d’Héloïse*, comprising the few chapters he had completed (mostly about his life during the 1950s) along with several articles, numerous photographs and a selection of his lovely paintings, many of which are reproduced in the present volume.

\* \* \*

Anticolonial movements have long been a source of political blackmail. People who become aware of the horrors of colonialism usually know little else about the countries involved and have

often been ready to applaud any purportedly “progressive” leadership, supporting practices they would never dream of defending if they took place in a modern Western country. Radical social critique has been discouraged by the argument that criticizing even the most brutal Third World regimes is “playing into the hands of the imperialist powers.” Moreover, in many cases apologists have been able to argue that despite regrettable defects, those regimes are the only possibility, there are no apparent alternatives.

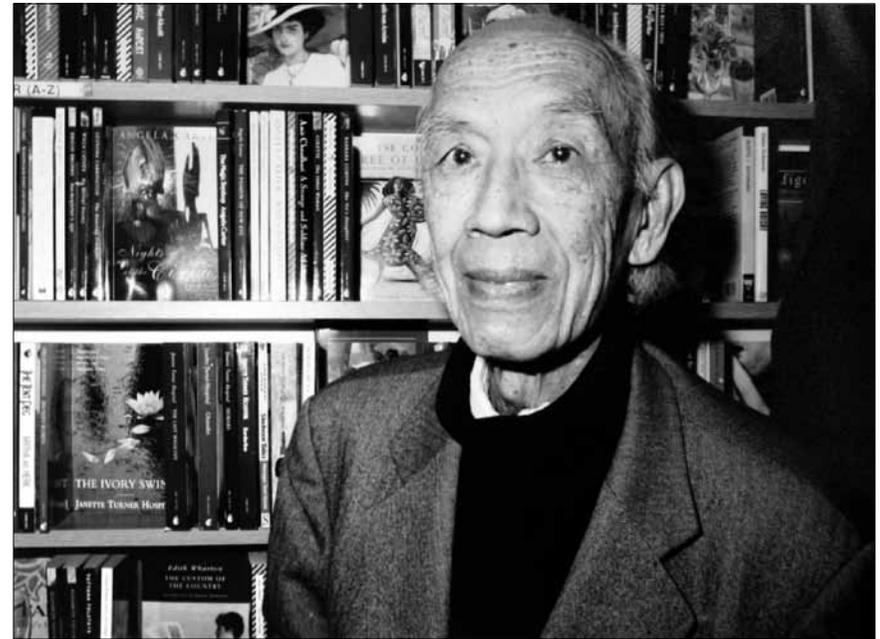
But this is not always the case. Readers of *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* are aware that China did not have to go Stalinist (i.e. Maoist); there were other currents and other strategies that might have led to different results. The same is true of many other countries, including Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh’s Communist Party was not the only serious oppositional movement; it ultimately made itself so only by ruthlessly destroying all its rivals. Ngo Van’s books bear witness that there were many other possibilities.

There is nothing eccentric or exaggerated about those books. They are scrupulously accurate and thoroughly documented, and you can find verifications of most of the material in many other reliable sources. But to do so you would have to search long and deeply, wading through the immense mass of lies and distortions that have surrounded this topic. Van has brought it all together into a coherent and comprehensive account in his two-volume historical chronicle (as yet untranslated), then narrated the same events in a briefer and more personal manner in the autobiography that we are presenting here.

\* \* \*

I met Ngo Van in Paris in 2001, along with his friend H el ene Fleury, and during the next few weeks saw them several more times. Although I could hardly get to know Van all that well in such a short period of time, we almost immediately became very dear friends.

Those who had the pleasure of knowing him will agree that despite the horrors he had endured and his lack of illusions about the violent nature of the present social order, Van was the sweetest and most gentle person one can imagine. His rebelliousness arose not only out of a justified rage at poverty and meanness and oppression,



but out of his profound love of life. He was an all-round and wide-ranging person: a *bon vivant* at home in the lively give-and-take of Parisian bars and caf es, but also capable of quietly appreciating nature and solitude; a factory worker who was at the same time an artist and a connoisseur of classic literature; a radical agitator who was also a radical historian; a resolutely antireligious person who was nevertheless graced with an almost Buddhist stoicism and equanimity and who ultimately became a scholar of East Asian religious movements; a modest, unassuming man of the people who yet possessed a great nobility of character. It was a pleasure to know him, and it’s been a pleasure to work with H el ene and the other translators in presenting his work to English-speaking readers.

KEN KNABB



*Ngo Van beside the Seine in Paris (1970s)*

## **NGO VAN, RELAYER OF LIVING HISTORY**

Ngo Van lived through almost the entire twentieth century (1912–2005) and his life and work are intimately intertwined with the revolutionary hopes and conflicts of that century.

In his writings he speaks not as an academically “neutral” historian, but as a participant actively engaged in the events he recounts; not as a “party spokesperson,” but as a humble individual struggling alongside so many other anonymous, unknown persons, the “wretched of the earth” who are also the salt of the earth, fraternal, generous and inventive. With them he experiences those sublime moments when people unite to attack the sources of their exploitation and enslavement; when they break through the bounds of the “possible” and strive to create a life worthy of their deepest dreams and aspirations. With them he also experiences the merciless repression the established powers invariably resort to when they sense that their system is in danger.

After emigrating to France in 1948, Van continued that struggle as a resolutely independent individual, without label or party, in groups of councilist revolutionaries and alongside other rebellious workers in the factories.

It was a time when anticolonial movements, in the colonized countries and the West alike, were dominated by the ideology of “Third World-ism”—an ideology that obscured the real enemies while weakening or paralyzing truly radical social criticism. Faced with this situation, Van sought to transmit the real, hitherto unwritten history of Vietnam, to challenge and refute the official histories propagated by the “masters of the present”\* and uncritically parroted in Europe and America by the self-proclaimed supporters of the “struggles of the Vietnamese people.” Following his retirement

in 1978, and with the constant support of Sophie Moen (his partner from 1952 until her death in 1994), Van devoted the next seventeen years to researching and writing *Vietnam 1920–1945: révolution et contre-révolution sous la domination coloniale* (1995). In that book he brought back to life the era of fierce class struggles that preceded the two Vietnam wars, a period when the workers and peasants believed that putting an end to colonialism was inseparable from a social revolution. In so doing he also exposed the devious maneuvers of the Communist Party as it seized control over those struggles through double-dealing, lies, intimidation and murder.

I first met Van in November 1995, and there was an immediate rapport between us—an alchemy of elective affinities and of shared dreams and convictions. Having just finished *Vietnam 1920–1945*, he was wondering whether to undertake an autobiographical account of the same period before returning to his more strictly “objective” history. I and several of his other friends convinced him to do so. It is hard to convey just how exciting it was to share in this project. Though it involved returning to the past, it was at the same time a march forward, a call for new perspectives, a defiance of time. Nine years of companionship in shared journeys, readings, writings, discoveries, friendships. . . .

Van’s memoirs of his Vietnam years, which form the first part of the present volume, were published in 2000 under the title *Au pays de la Cloche fêlée*. The title alluded both to Baudelaire’s poem “La Cloche Fêlée” (The Cracked Bell)\* and to a subversive journal of the same title published in Vietnam in 1923–1926 by Nguyen An Ninh, a journal that influenced a whole generation of anticolonial revolutionaries. Van shared a period of detention with Nguyen An Ninh in the Saigon prison and remained permanently marked by the encounter.

Having completed *Au pays de la Cloche fêlée*, which he considered essential in perpetuating the memory of his departed comrades, Van envisaged a sequel that would recount his years in France. He did not have time to complete this project, except for a few fragmentary chapters, but he had already chosen the title. As chance would have it, during the last twenty years of his life he lived in a small apartment on the Île de la Cité, an island in the heart of the most an-

cient part of Paris, near the home of the medieval philosopher Peter Abelard. Led by his insatiable curiosity, Van explored the audacities and misadventures of this great spirit and of his brilliant student and secret lover, Héloïse. The story of these dissident and tragic lovers inspired the title of the second part of his autobiography—*Au pays d’Héloïse*—and their correspondence became part of his personal literary pantheon, alongside the libertine poetry of Claude Le Petit (burned at the stake in 1662), the fiery poems of Louise Michel, “Père Duchêne” sung by the implacable Ravachol as he climbed to the guillotine, Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde, Céline, Travençolo, and last but not least the classic Chinese writings populated with rebels, bandits and cantankerous hermits. Ever on the lookout for sparks of poetic freedom, he was delighted to discover connections between the anarchistic Taoists of ancient China and the enemies of capitalism the world over. His researches in this area led to the publication of an erudite study, *Divination, magie et politique dans la Chine ancienne* (1976), as well as to a smaller and more accessible book, *Utopie antique et guerre des paysans en Chine* (2004).

A chapter is missing from *Au pays d’Héloïse* that Van particularly wished to include: what he called “The Story of the Book.” The reputation of *Vietnam 1920–1945* had soon spread beyond small circles of radicals to reach a much larger readership among Vietnamese people throughout the world. For many of them the book was an un-hoped-for chance to reconnect with their own history. Enthusiastic responses arrived from the diaspora and from within Vietnam itself (where a number of copies or photocopies had been smuggled in). People were moved to discover their old friends and comrades mentioned in the book by name. Researchers furnished Van with precious information drawn from difficult-to-access archives. Others provided him with dissident texts, old and new, or with accounts by other survivors. Support from these diverse contacts also enabled him and his publisher friends at Insomniaque to print a Vietnamese-language edition of the book, making it much more accessible to the people most directly concerned.

These new-found contacts and collaborations also paved the way for several trips to Barcelona, London, Edinburgh, Boston and New York. Van was particularly interested in sharing experiences with



*At a protest against police brutality in New York (1998)*

Americans, who in their different way had also been so strongly affected by the Vietnam War, and was thrilled to hear their stories of draft refusal, demonstrations and other forms of antiwar resistance, both in the United States and among the soldiers in Vietnam; notably including the practice of “fragging,” that desperate act echoing the mutinies of 1917–1918 and putting into practice the famous cry: “Let’s save our bullets for our own generals!”

On the opposing side, too, not all the soldiers in the North Vietnamese army submissively marched off to slaughter. Although the exact numbers are unknown, many did indeed desert and many were executed. Van was able to hear several firsthand accounts when, after forty-nine years of exile, he finally made a trip back to his native country in 1997. He had intended to tell the story of that visit in the second part of his autobiography, but there was not enough time. He did, however, succeed in completing the second volume of his history of twentieth-century Vietnam, *Le Joueur de flûte et l’Oncle Hô: Vietnam 1945–2005*, and that book contains some references to his trip back to Vietnam, though in a less personal form.

One day as we wandered around in Hanoi, we kept running into the huge mausoleum where Ho Chi Minh’s embalmed corpse is enshrined. As a fitting tribute to the despicable occupant of that temple of servile submission, Van sang Céline’s “Le Règlement” [Payback] at the top of his lungs:

*Mais la question qui me tracasse  
En te regardant:  
Est-ce que tu seras plus dégueulasse  
Mort que vivant?*

[But looking at you, I can’t help asking myself: Will you be any more rotten dead than alive?]

One of the consequences of the American intervention was that it enabled the new “Socialist” Republic of Vietnam to conceal the destructive nature of its own system of oppression. In *Le Joueur de flûte et l’Oncle Hô*, Van shows how Ho Chi Minh rose to power, and how this master of a system of coercion and terror modeled on Stalin’s succeeded in becoming “Uncle Ho,” a figure admired by millions of devoted anti-imperialists around the world who either did not know anything about the Vietnamese people’s actual fate or preferred to ignore it in order to avoid tarnishing the image of the charismatic leader. Ho’s bloody “agrarian reform” and his repression of dissident intellectuals in the mid-1950s were every bit as vicious as the repressions in other Stalinist countries during the same period, from Mao’s double-crossing of the “Hundred Flowers” movement\* to the Russians’ crushing of the revolutionary insurrection in Hungary. And over the decades since that time we have continued to see the same sorts of sordid manipulations at the summit of the state machine—rivalries, plots, betrayals, along with a number of “suicides” and “accidents.”

Upon his return to Saigon, Van was brought close to the daily lives and working conditions of present-day Vietnamese people, thrust by the “new” economy into development projects funded by South Korean, European, American and Japanese capital. *Le Joueur de flûte et l’Oncle Hô* provides numerous firsthand accounts by workers at companies like Nike or Coca-Cola, whose foreign owners are pleased at how easily the exploited workers can be kept in line by the police-state machinery. The book also provides information on strikes and other signs of revolt against these conditions and against the current regime.

By a tragic irony of history, the heirs of the old anti-imperialist generation in Vietnam, although still professing an obligatory de-

votion to the memory of Uncle Ho, have turned to the country's former enemy for support, welcoming the almighty dollar while the "heroic masses" continue to struggle for survival. But this new-found complicity in Vietnam between private capitalism and state capitalism came as no surprise to Van, who had always said that those enemies were in fact blood brothers.



*With Abel Paz in Barcelona (2004)*

When we were in Barcelona on the occasion of the publication of the Spanish version of *Au pays de la Cloche fêlée*, someone asked him, "Why, after all this time, do you so stubbornly persist in bearing witness to this past history?" He replied, "Because the world hasn't changed."

During our Vietnam trip, Van also returned to the village of his birth. Nieces and nephews whom he had left as children told him candidly, and often with humor, about their life during the decades of war, when they had been caught in the crossfire between the Vietcong, the Binh Xuyen pirates and the South Vietnamese army, in some cases joining one to protect themselves from the others, thus becoming alternately deserters and new recruits.

Each night when we went back to our hotel we would discuss the day's events and conversations, so as to compare and then record our recollections. During one of those sessions Van described his encounter with one of his nephews:

He urged me to come back and stay with them. "Come back and I'll build you a room. You can live with us and when the time comes for you to die, the children will be around you as you go to your final resting place." Ancestor worship is very strong. He wants me to be buried in the family graveyard. His idea is that in my final hour the children and grandchildren will surround my mortal remains. We must lie among our ancestors, that way we will always feel close to them and won't be lost in the world. But me, I'm a wanderer. I've always believed that once you're gone, you're gone, and there's nothing more to say. I couldn't care less about how I go.

Then he began softly singing this fragment from Brassens:

*J'aimerais mieux mourir dans l'eau, dans le feu, n'importe où,  
Et même, à la grande rigueur, ne pas mourir du tout.*

[I would prefer to die in water, in fire, anywhere at all, or even, if it were possible, not to die at all.]\*

Then he continued: "It's life, the instant of life, that is eternity. . . . I feel immortal, I feel eternal. You may die tomorrow or right now, but when you really immerse yourself in some project you're living beyond the hundred revolutions of the earth around the sun. Actually, time has nothing to do with it. When you're eternal, you're eternal."

HÉLÈNE FLEURY