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Hanoi's Diplomatic Front in Sweden: Communist Propaganda Strategies in the Vietnam War

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This article offers a new perspective on the Swedish protests against the Vietnam War by placing it in its broader global Cold War context. As a case study on 'people's diplomacy' and 'united front strategy', it acknowledges the importance of Chinese and Vietnamese influences on the peace campaigns in Sweden and aims, as far as possible, to reconstruct Hanoi's motives, strategies and actions to create and direct Sweden's policy and opinion on the war. With the extremely generous political freedoms granted it by official Sweden, Hanoi was able to find new international allies as well as organise political propaganda manifestations from their Stockholm base. In the end, North Vietnam's version of the war as being about national liberation fought by a people united in their resistance to a foreign, genocidal, aggressor won a large enough share of the opinion in the West to force the American political leadership to give up the fight. Hanoi's Diplomatic Front in Sweden was one of the important battlefields behind that victory

Introduction

Recurrently through the last few decades, the communist leadership of Vietnam has praised Sweden for its help in winning the war against the United States. Nguyễn Thị Bình, who was one of the foremost diplomats and propagandists during the war, devotes a number of grateful comments in her recent memoirs to explain how, 'Sweden was a true friend and devotee for Vietnam, from their people to their government' and how truly grateful she was for its unflinching support.¹ The war museums in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City devote more space to Sweden than they do to any other Western country (except the United States, of course). The single largest artifact in the Ho Chi Minh Museum's section for foreign support is a National Liberation Front (NLF) flag, one of many – blue and red with a yellow star in the middle – carried at anti-American activities by the Swedish NLF groups.

By all accounts Sweden, since 1812 a de facto neutral state, was the staunchest Western critic of the United States while acting as an outright ally of Hanoi. While not the only Western critical voice during the war – the governments of the UK and France, for example, also distanced themselves from the American war in Vietnam – Sweden was, in 1969, the first Western nation to establish diplomatic relations with North Vietnam. It did not replace its ambassador in Saigon after he transferred back home in 1967. The social democratic government severely criticised the Americans during the war, even comparing their actions to the Holocaust. At the same time they invited Hanoi propagandists to its party congress. Why did Sweden not only abandon its otherwise strict neutralist stance in international relations but actually side with the communist camp in such a momentous Cold War conflict?

The answer has conventionally been given in terms of either genuine Swedish outrage at American atrocities in the battle against the NLF and North Vietnam's armed forces, or a somewhat cynical

¹ Nguyễn Thị Bình, *Family, Friends and Country: A Memoir* (Hanoi: Tri Thuc, 2015), 165–6.

attempt by the Social Democratic Party (SAP) to retain its young voters to remain in power. Not much has been said about the motives, machinations and agency of Hanoi and Beijing. The focus instead has always been on Swedish actors and agency. When Kim Salomon's fine study of the Swedish Vietnam movement as cultural history was published in 1996, one review astutely pointed out this flaw, remarking: 'It is a little strange to refer to the spirit of the times in Sweden to explain phenomena that were the result of views and influences from Hanoi and Beijing.'² Carl Gustaf Scott's magisterial account, *Swedish Social Democracy and the Vietnam War*, argues that the SAP was forced by pro-NLF organisations on the left to get closer to Hanoi but does not follow the chain of agents all the way back to North Vietnam.³ Gunnar Åselius, in a recent, similarly brilliant exhaustive study, accounts for the role of Swedish diplomats in moving Sweden closer to North Vietnam.⁴ Åselius shows how heavily biased towards Hanoi these diplomats were, but he does not explain the role of North Vietnamese propagandists to create this bias.

Starting with a study published in the anthology *The Cold War in Asia* and then in an article on revolutionary chronology in *Monde(s)*, I have begun to prove the agency of China behind the Maoist parties that sprang up in Western Europe in the late 1960s, whose main task actually was to engage, in united front style, the general populations against American involvement in Vietnam. What we know so far is how, in Sweden, a secretly Maoist-led organisation stood behind a growing youth-based mass movement which became a threat to the ruling Social Democratic Party (SAP). We also know how the SAP, partly in a bid for prolonged political power, took the side of Hanoi. Doing so, it engaged in some very fierce protests against the US government. We know that the Foreign Ministry played a decisive role in this radical shift of Sweden's foreign policy. What we so far have not been informed about is the view from the other side. What did North Vietnam and China do to gain a foothold among and then win over Swedish public opinion?

Part of China's rationale in creating global support behind Hanoi lay in sharply deteriorated relations with the Soviet Union. China challenged Moscow as the centre of world revolution. The North Vietnamese decision to take South Vietnam with force was initially only supported by China, which saw the conflict as a litmus test about which communist strategy was the correct one.⁵ The reason behind Vietnamese propaganda activities lay, on the other hand, in Hanoi's failures, both in defeating the United States on the battlefield and in causing a popular uprising in South Vietnam. Hanoi increasingly came to rely on what was referred to as a 'diplomatic front' which included a propaganda attempt to sway world opinion against the United States. The North Vietnamese leadership calculated Washington was not able to *politically* muster a long-drawn-out struggle, and that communist propaganda would add to the political pressure.

There is a growing literature about this diplomatic front. Nguyen Lien-Hang's *Hanoi's War* focuses on Hanoi's strategy of 'fighting while talking'.⁶ Robert Brigham's *Guerrilla Diplomacy* describes how Hanoi tried to win friends around the world and balance its relations with its main patrons, China and the Soviet Union.⁷ Harish Mehta's 'People's Diplomacy' dives deep into the elusive tactics of communist public diplomacy strategies.⁸

² Kim Salomon, *Rebeller i takt med tiden: FNL-rörelsen och 60-talets politiska ritualer* (Stockholm: Rabén Prisma, 1996). Reviewed by Urban Lundberg and Klas Åmark in 'En vänster i takt med tiden?: 60-talets politiska kultur i 90-talets självförståelse', in *Häftan för kritiska studier*, 2 (1997), 60.

³ Carl Gustaf Scott, *Swedish Social Democracy and the Vietnam War* (Stockholm: Elanders, 2017).

⁴ Gunnar Åselius, *Vietnamkriget och de svenska diplomaterna* (Stockholm: Dialogos, 2019).

⁵ See Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) and Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962–1967* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2009).

⁶ Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

⁷ Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁸ Harish C. Mehta, 'People's Diplomacy: The Diplomatic Front of North Vietnam during the War against the United States, 1965–1972', diss., McMaster University, 2009.

The present article is a case study of how the tactics and strategies described by these authors were used to win the support of one Western nation from where Hanoi could spread propaganda and launch semi-diplomatic campaigns globally. In addition, it also explores the content of the propaganda, arguing that it was by transforming the discourse about the war – presenting it as an international affair – that Hanoi's diplomatic front became so successful in turning opinion in the West against the political leadership in Washington.

In his book *A Diplomatic Revolution*, Matthew Connelly points out how the National Liberation Front (NLF) of Algeria managed to construct a discourse about its war with France as a global event.⁹ Since decolonisation around that time came to be considered as nothing less than 'the spirit of the times' or 'the winds of change', this was not too difficult to accomplish.¹⁰ For North Vietnam to appeal to international opinion to support its anticolonial struggle was more difficult. Both the North and the South were independent Vietnamese states. Hanoi had to make what was an ideological *and* civil war appear as a neocolonial genocide conducted by the mighty United States of America against a poor Third World country.

To achieve this strategic propaganda objective, Hanoi needed friends in what China at the time referred to as 'intermediate countries' – those nonaligned between the two superpowers. These nations could credibly agitate against American intervention and change the discourse in terms transcending the Cold War paradigm. Sweden was such an 'intermediate' country, or rather belonged to the second of the 'intermediate zones' that could be turned against the imperialist camps. Furthermore, Sweden was a leading proponent of internationalism and a strong supporter of the United Nations. In short, it was a perfect ally from where Hanoi could work to change the international discourse on the war.¹¹

This article proceeds from research in the Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives that reveals how China went about creating a Swedish pro-Hanoi united front.¹² To describe the actions of Hanoi, it relies on recently published research and Vietnamese and Swedish language sources. The North Vietnamese Workers Party mouthpiece, *Nhân Dân* (1965–74), reveals how closely the pro-Hanoi events in Sweden were tracked in North Vietnam and discloses the activities of various propagandists they sent there. Swedish publications like *Vietnambulletinen* and *Vietnam Nu* also provide much valuable information on how Hanoi coordinated and carried out its propaganda and people-to-people diplomacy in Sweden, as do a growing number of memoirs by politicians, activists and journalists.

China, via its embassy in Stockholm, managed to foster a protest movement and introduce NLF representatives to radical Swedish activists. With continuing assistance from the Chinese embassy and a growing presence of NLF and North Vietnamese propagandists in Sweden arriving undercover as various 'front organisations', Hanoi was able to establish a Stockholm NLF information bureau, a North Vietnamese embassy in Sweden, and finally a semi-official Provisional Revolutionary Government representing South Vietnam. The Swedish government, all political parties, as well as a third of the population, eventually signed a petition officially supporting Hanoi's demand for full American withdrawal.¹³ In the end, North Vietnam's version of the war as being about national liberation fought by a people united in their resistance to a foreign, genocidal, aggressor won a large enough share of the opinion in the West to force the American political leadership to give up the fight.

⁹ Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Connelly describes how the Algerian National Liberation Front (NLF), seeing the futility of confronting France in a military struggle, sought to exploit the Cold War competition to divide France internally and isolate it from the world community.

¹⁰ Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution*, 279.

¹¹ See, for example, Annika Bergman Rosamond, 'Swedish Internationalism and Development Aid', in Jon Pierre, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Swedish Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 462–478.

¹² All Chinese and Swedish language sources are translated by the author. All translations from Vietnamese are by my research assistant, Yin Li.

¹³ The Swedish demand of the United States was to stop the bombings and to sign a peace treaty based on the October 1972 negotiations that agreed that the United States would withdraw all American and allied foreign troops from South Vietnam. See http://www.olofpalme.org/wp-content/dokument/721228_upprop.pdf. [accessed 5 Mar. 2020].

China Instigates a Swedish Protest Movement

It was not only for the Americans that the Vietnam War was a symbolic issue of high importance. For the Chinese, by now in a heated ideological conflict with Moscow about which country was the true leader of the global war against Western capitalism, Vietnam turned into something of a litmus test. If communism prevailed there, China could claim leadership to a new communist international focused on the Third World. A negotiated peace solution was therefore unthinkable for the Chinese leadership, who supported the North Vietnamese with advice, weapons and manpower, while also helping with propaganda and massive demonstrations in support of the NLF.¹⁴

In August 1964 China's embassy in Stockholm invited people from Sweden's Communist Party and its newspaper, *Ny Dag*, for movie viewing and talks about Vietnam.¹⁵ The expressed reason was to create a Swedish anti-war movement as the Americans had just escalated the simmering conflict in partitioned Vietnam.¹⁶ Among the participants at this meeting was Bo Gustafsson, referred to in the Chinese Foreign Ministry archives as leader of the China-friendly faction of Sweden's Communist Party.¹⁷ Gustafsson had turned Maoist already in 1960 when China invited him with a group of five other members of the Communist Democratic Youth on a propaganda tour focusing on the ideological dispute with the Soviet Union.¹⁸ Gustafsson was later one of the very first who broke out of the Soviet-dominated Swedish Communist Party (SKP) to set up a new party organisation, the Communist League Marxists-Leninists (*Kommunistiska Förbundet Marxist-Leninisterna*; KFML), which was loyal instead to China.

As the war intensified, Ambassador Yang Bozhen had to apologise to his superiors in Beijing that it had been hard to rally people because it was still the summer holiday, and, he added, 'We have not yet found the right organisation to work with'.¹⁹ After meeting Gustafsson in August, the solution became to recruit young individuals from the socialist student organisation *Clarté*. The Chinese were familiar with two of its members, Åsa Hallström and Sköld Peter Matthis, who in 1963 had visited the embassy.²⁰ Hallström and Matthis had also been invited for a propaganda tour to China in 1964, after which they returned to Sweden as dedicated Maoists.²¹

Now in 1965, China's Stockholm embassy arranged a meeting between, on the one hand, Hallström, Matthis and the communist Gunnar Bylin and, on the other, two seasoned Vietnamese NLF propagandists: Duong Dinh Thao, NLF 'ambassador' in Prague, and Pham van Chuong, NLF 'embassy secretary' in East Berlin.²² These two had in April 1965 travelled to Stockholm for a World Peace Council meeting. In order to get their entry visas, they had to promise not to talk with anyone outside the conference.²³

When Duong Dinh Thao and Pham van Chuong met the three Swedes in Stockholm, they described to them a war for liberation and atrocities committed by the Americans against ordinary Vietnamese. One thing they pointed out especially to the young communists was the determination

¹⁴ See Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) or Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

¹⁵ The Chinese embassy in Sweden, reports on activities 1964. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, Beijing. Document No. 110-01709-2.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ For more on how Beijing managed to influence various socialist organisations in Sweden to become loyal to China and consequently support the North Vietnamese side in the war, see Perry Johansson, 'Mao and the Swedish United Front against the USA', in Zheng Yangwen, Hong Liu, and Michael Szonyi, eds., *The Cold War in Asia: The Battle for Hearts and Minds* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 217–40.

¹⁸ For Gustafsson and the Beijing trip, see Johansson, 'Mao and the Swedish United Front'.

¹⁹ Ambassador Yang Bozhen to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Document No. 110-01709-2, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, Beijing.

²⁰ Report on activities 1963. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, Beijing. Document No. 110-01581.

²¹ See Johansson, 'Mao and the Swedish United Front', 227–8.

²² Chinese embassy reports 1965. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, Beijing.

²³ Åke Kilander, *Vietnam var nära: En berättelse om FNL-rörelsen och solidaritetsarbetet i Sverige 1965–1975* (Stockholm: Leopard, 2007), 38.

to fight the Americans until none remained inside Vietnam. Peace negotiations or armistice before that was achieved were not to be thought of, they emphasised.²⁴

Duong Dinh Thao and Pham van Chuong impressed the three Swedes greatly. Immediately after the meeting they turned their Clarté South East Asia study group into an organisation for regularly arranging protests outside the US embassy, albeit in small numbers, with the message that the United States must leave Vietnam. In June 1965 the protests moved to a square in central Stockholm to attract more attention. Hallström and Matthis carried sandwich placards proclaiming, 'USA must leave Vietnam'. They were arrested for demonstrating without permission (which they actually had been given).²⁵ When they refused to leave the police carried them away screaming, and Hallström's hand was accidentally broken by a police officer. The next day the incident, which is now regarded as the birth of the broad anti-war movement, was in the news.²⁶

As Hallström and Matthis reflected back in 2007, they had 'these contacts with the official representatives of the NLF to thank for their later strong commitment to the cause'.²⁷ They also had Duong Dinh Thao and Pham van Chuong to thank for handing them texts they could use to start publishing what would become the main 'propaganda' vehicle of the Swedish Vietnam movement, the *Vietnambulletinen*.²⁸ The first two issues, published in 1965, consisted solely of material the two Vietnamese NLF cadres had brought them on the war, together with basic knowledge about Vietnam, including maps. The activists sold the bulletin on city squares and at meetings. It eventually sold 60,000 copies monthly – in a country of only seven million. The same activists in numerous local NLF groups collected around US\$8 million (in today's value) from ordinary Swedes who wanted to support North Vietnam and the NLF in their struggle against the United States.²⁹

Hanoi was well aware of what was going on in Stockholm. *Nhân Dân*, the main mouthpiece of the North Vietnam's Communist Workers Party, reported about all major protest meetings taking place in Sweden. For example when, on 28 August 1965, hundreds of young Swedish people gathered in front of the US embassy in Stockholm, *Nhân Dân* described how the flag of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam was raised, as well as banners proclaiming: 'Johnson, how many children have you killed today?', 'Here is the American contribution to building world peace: Bombing Vietnam!', 'Stop McNamara's "help" in Vietnam!', 'U.S. imperialism means napalm bombs!', and 'U.S. troops must get out of Vietnam!'³⁰

Swedish writer and activist Sara Lidman, who later became North Vietnam's most important propagandist in Sweden, had, with the help of Beijing, been invited to Hanoi in 1965, just months after the first summer protest in Stockholm. A party cadre at a Hanoi factory talked to her and the workers about the demonstration where Matthis had been dragged away by the police, showing how well informed about this Hanoi was and the importance it placed on these activities.³¹

In Sweden you have also demonstrated against imperialism. It makes us happy to know that you are thinking about us. The student whose hand was injured by the police for our sake, we think of her as a sister.³²

Lidman felt proud hearing that people in a random factory in Hanoi knew so well how hard she and other Swedes were fighting for them.³³ When Lidman returned home from this trip she would

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See Åselius, *Vietnamkriget*, Scott, *Swedish Social Democracy*, or Kilander, *Vietnam var nära* for more details on the Haymarket Square demonstration.

²⁶ See Yngve Möller, *Sverige och Vietnamkriget, ett unikt kapitel i svensk utrikespolitik* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1992).

²⁷ Kilander, *Vietnam var nära*, 392.

²⁸ Ibid., 216, 392.

²⁹ Ibid., 216.

³⁰ 'People in Sweden Brought the Flag of the NLF of South Vietnam to Protest in Front of the U.S. Embassy', *Nhân Dân*, 30 Aug. 1965, 4.

³¹ Sara Lidman, *Samtal i Hanoi* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1966), 20.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

spend her next fifteen years as something of an unpaid propagandist for the Hanoi cause, constantly in contact with the North Vietnamese while NLF politicians praised her but also told her what to do.

Front Organisations/Vietnam Weeks

Already in the 1920s Ho Chi Minh had understood that liberating Vietnam from colonial rule would need a huge amount of international public diplomacy.³⁴ After having defeated the French he similarly realised they had to cover up the communist reality of North Vietnam to be able to win international support for reunification with the South. North Vietnam therefore launched a broad ‘people’s diplomacy’ campaign to clandestinely propagate the views of Hanoi. But first, of course, it made sure through political education that everybody who, as presumably non-political actors, would engage in this people’s diplomacy also knew exactly the goals and ambitions of North Vietnam.³⁵

People’s diplomacy is the term used by communist regimes to describe one strategy of international propaganda and public relations work abroad. The lexical definition of the term refers to citizen exchanges, outside of state involvement. But what North Vietnam with the NLF engaged in was in reality a clandestine public diplomacy, i.e. government-sponsored efforts aimed at communicating directly with foreign publics.³⁶ The individuals involved in people’s diplomacy thereby became propagandists in disguise, with the task of selling what was, in a great many respects, an inaccurate image of North Vietnam, the NLF, and the war.³⁷

The NLF goodwill tour of 1962 was a first attempt outside of the communist bloc at ‘people’s diplomacy’ connected with Hanoi’s decision to take South Vietnam by force. It went to some of the more radical non-aligned nations of the time, such as Sukarno’s Indonesia, Sihanouk’s Cambodia, and Souvanna Phouma’s Laos.³⁸ For the rest of the war, Hanoi, with the NLF, would successfully continue this diplomatic push in the Third World – where the struggle for decolonisation was widespread at the time. Many of these Third World nations also inclined towards neutralism vis-a-vis the two-camp structure of the Cold War and had been or were members of the non-aligned movement. But to really launch its international diplomatic front, Hanoi needed supporters in the West.

A first diplomacy push towards Western Europe came at the time of Sara Lidman’s visit to Hanoi, in October 1965. A delegation led by Nguyen Van Dong, chief of the NLF mission in Moscow, first travelled to Helsinki and met students, peace activists and representatives of The Social Democratic Party of Finland.³⁹ From Finland it continued on to Stockholm where, at a press conference in late October, the delegation explained to the congregated Western press corps that nothing but full American withdrawal was acceptable to the NLF.⁴⁰ Even with such an uncompromising stance, these NLF representatives were warmly welcomed by the Swedish government. On 28 October at a reception held in Stockholm for the Vietnamese propaganda mission, the city’s mayor, Hjalmar Mehr, raised his glass to the Vietnamese rebels, pledging support for neutralism but only after all American troops had been withdrawn.⁴¹ Upon returning to Moscow the NLF delegates declared their West European tour a great victory.⁴²

³⁴ Mehta, ‘People’s Diplomacy’, 60.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ For an illuminating case of people’s diplomacy, see Gordon Barrett, ‘China’s “People’s Diplomacy” and the Pugwash Conferences, 1957–1964’, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 20, 1 (2018), 140–69.

³⁷ As William Turley pointed out in *The Second Indochina War: A Concise Political and Military History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), 10, 11, the idea that Vietnam throughout history had been a victim, always threatened by invading nations, did not square well with the reality of it as an aggressive state constantly expanding southwards through war and occupation.

³⁸ Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, 24.

³⁹ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 80.

⁴² Ibid., 52.

An extra complication for the diplomatic front was that, although the NLF was in all practical ways run from Hanoi, it was important for them to uphold to the world the illusion that it was not. Therefore several front organisations said to represent the 'south' were set up. North Vietnam thus dispatched a number of representatives for mass organisations, like labour unions, women's organisations, youth organisations, etc., to meet and engage with their counterparts around the world. These were all 'front organisations', not genuine parts of civil society.⁴³ The representatives had little to do with those they were said to represent; instead, in the service of the Communist Workers Party of North Vietnam, they were sent to lead and influence an attempt to win over and create a united front with foreign non-communist organisations and individuals.

The internationally best-known diplomat for the NLF, Nguyễn Thị Bình, was, of course, also working for Hanoi. In a multitude of public relations and propaganda trips around the world, she represented all of the following front organisations: the Liberated Students Association, the Youth Party, the Committee for Afro-American Solidarity, the Peace Committee of South Vietnam, and the South Vietnam Women's Association.⁴⁴ Beginning in 1969, Nguyễn Thị Bình would also serve as the front figure of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRG), a political body she, through skilful diplomacy and propaganda, made appear legitimate in the eyes of Western war protesters and politicians alike.⁴⁵

In early October 1966, Nguyễn Thị Bình, together with two other Vietnamese women, travelled to Stockholm, staying for weeks in the home of two members of Sweden's Communist Party. The son in the family remembers not only this but that a number of Vietnamese NLF delegations constantly moved in and out of the family's apartment.⁴⁶

The three Vietnamese women officially were coming to Stockholm for an international children's conference held 3–6 October. They introduced themselves as representatives of the South Vietnam Women's Organisation. In reality, their task was to supervise and shape the first in a long series of 'Vietnam Weeks' that the Swedish pro-NLF movement would stage simultaneously in numerous cities. The organisers of these 'Vietnam Weeks' would present information and arrange cultural events related to the war, the resistance, and the 'liberation' struggle in Vietnam. All these activities were designed to gain support for the NLF and Hanoi. *Vietnambulletinen* was sold at these events and money collected for the NLF. Lectures, speeches, film screenings, theatre plays, concerts and other activities attracted a great number of people to these increasingly popular events taking place across the country.⁴⁷

The Vietnamese delegation under Nguyễn Thị Bình played a key role in a number of these meetings. On 14 October, she accompanied Pham Thanh Van when she spoke at Folkets Hus in the university town of Uppsala.⁴⁸ Pham Thanh Van started by talking about Nguyễn Văn Trỗi, who recently had been made an official martyr by the Hanoi regime after he attempted to assassinate US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and future ambassador to Saigon Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. in Saigon. The South Vietnamese government subsequently executed him. Pham Thanh Van said that Nguyễn Văn Trỗi embodied the Vietnamese people and their millennium-long struggle against foreign invasions. This idea of a long national struggle against foreign aggressors was only one of the successful, but incorrect, propaganda stories Hanoi managed to sell the West.⁴⁹ She then turned directly to the Swedes, saying:

⁴³ See J.D. Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy: Chinese Foreign Policy and the United Front Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) and Richard H. Shultz, Jr. *The Soviet Union and Revolutionary Warfare: Principles, Practices, and Regional Comparisons* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1988) for accounts of Chinese and Soviet diplomatic warfare along these lines.

⁴⁴ Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 183.

⁴⁵ Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, 91–2.

⁴⁶ Kilander, *Vietnam var nära*, 296.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴⁸ *Vietnambulletinen*, 1–2 (1967), 44–7.

⁴⁹ See Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 143.

Nguyễn Văn Trỗi, today I honour your memory in a country thousands of miles away from the beloved Vietnam where you lay down your life for eternity. I honour your memory together with our Swedish friends, and I know they are keeping your pure image in their hearts.⁵⁰

Pham Thanh Van went on to repeat the official Hanoi position that all American soldiers must leave Vietnam and that the Vietnamese of the South should run their own affairs. Then she aired the somewhat contradictory demand that the NLF was and should remain the only rightful representative of the South Vietnamese people. At the end of her speech Pham Thanh Van exclaimed:

Your calls to ‘help Vietnam’ – ‘support NLF’ – ‘USA out of Vietnam’ rise like a mighty thunderstorm over Uppsala, and all other Swedish cities. It blends with the roar of our partisans’ artillery against the American bases in Vietnam’s many battlefields, all in order to avenge our beloved martyr, to strike hard against the American attackers, and finally to throw them all out of our country.⁵¹

Hanoi had made Nguyễn Văn Trỗi into a martyr and subsequently managed to turn him into a hero for the Western anti-war protesters. Two years later, on the day that was the second anniversary of Nguyen Van Troi’s execution, 15 October 1966, the first Swedish ‘Vietnam Week’ ended. In the years to come a number of similar ‘Vietnam Weeks’ would end or start on this ‘Nguyễn Văn Trỗi Memorial Day’. The newspaper *Nhân Dân* reported on this memorial day in 1966:

During the second anniversary of Nguyễn Văn Trỗi’s death, in the capital city of Stockholm as well as in other major cities in Sweden, a ‘uniting with the Vietnamese people in struggle’ week was organised by a Swedish social activism group.⁵²

This united front week, the paper wrote, ‘commenced with a number of speeches held before a large audience in the Folkets Hus of Stockholm angrily condemning the United States and telling it to stop their invasion of Vietnam immediately’.⁵³ The newspaper also mentioned how the Swedes during this ‘Vietnam Week’ had raised another 140,000 krona (approximately US\$143,000 in today’s dollars) to support the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam.⁵⁴

In 1966, at this first ‘Vietnam Week’, the pro-NLF movement in Sweden really started to take on steam, fanning out to become a nationwide mass movement. Nguyễn Thị Bình’s delegation was not the only one arriving for clandestine propaganda work. Also, in October 1966, another propaganda delegation was sent from Vietnam. The Swedish NLF sympathisers naively described its head, Nguyen Van But, as ‘vice chairman of DRV’s LO (trade union confederation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam)’.⁵⁵ In communist North Vietnam there were no independent labour unions like those of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO). But by pretending to partake in an international workers congregation, Nguyen Van But and his delegates were able to get entry visas for Europe and use their status as labour union representatives to travel around the West and propagandise against the United States. In reality he and his entourage had come to Stockholm not for any labour union meetings but to conduct public diplomacy and educate the Swedes about Hanoi’s position on the war. Speaking at the stylish concert hall in central Stockholm, Nguyen Van But also laid out the

⁵⁰ *Vietnambulletinen*, 1–2 (1967), 44–7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵² ‘The World supports our people to win over the American invaders. Sweden and Finland organised the “Vietnam Week.”’ *Nhân Dân*, 15 Oct. 1966. ‘Taking part in this group is Ms. Sara Lidman, a famous journalist who had come to Vietnam, the anti-fascist playwright Peter Weiss and many others’ it further reported.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Vietnambulletinen*, 1–2 (1967), 63–8.

expectations Hanoi held for Sweden's role in the international public relations war. Acknowledging the huge importance of creating pro-NLF solidarity opinion around the world, Nguyen Van But urged ...

... that you help us to enlighten as many people as possible so that the situation is explained, and that incorrect and confusing American statements are revealed. This in order that all people will become fully clear in their heads about who is right and who is wrong.⁵⁶

Countless similar admonitions were disseminated around the country by the likes of Nguyen Van But, coming to Sweden to preach Hanoi's propaganda message during 'Vietnam Weeks', international conferences on Vietnam, and other important anti-American manifestations. The message appears not really well-suited for its intended audience, a democratic European nation, but it was always popular to have Vietnamese officials turn up and speak to the local activists and general public in places that in many instances had never seen someone from Asia, much less a Vietnamese.

Changing the Discourse

It was not obvious in any way that the Swedish anti-Vietnam War movement would take the direction it did. The first manifestations against the war in Vietnam comprised true peace movements and anti-nuclear weapon organisations. The protests in Sweden, as in many other countries, were originally against war per se, not a position taken for one side against the other. In 1965 the Campaign against Atomic Weapons (KMA), the Swedish anti-nuclear weapons movement, organised a protest march against the Vietnam War. Among the thousand Swedish participants were members of the Clarté South East Asia study group, who wanted to carry a placard saying, 'The NLF says no, we also say no' (to peace negotiations).⁵⁷ But since this demonstration, on the contrary, was in favour of peace negotiations, the organisers did not allow the placard.⁵⁸ As Sköld Peter Matthis recalls, when the Swedish NLF groups held their first national congress in August 1966, it was still overwhelmingly pacifist. Matthis and his Maoist pro-Hanoi group were therefore not able to push for a programme in which the North Vietnamese leaders' main demand – that the United States must leave Vietnam – could even be voiced.⁵⁹

This pacifism was something that the Chinese authorities worried about as they manoeuvred the Swedish anti-Vietnam War movement from their embassy in Stockholm. Christian organisations as well as anti-nuclear and peace movement representatives were, according to them, far too prominent.⁶⁰ It was unfortunate, the embassy stated, that these groups wanted peace. 'The majority of the Swedish population dislikes the American attack on Vietnam, but they have not understood the situation properly because they talk about working hard to achieve peace.'⁶¹ The leader of the Swedish Communist Party and the chairperson of the anti-nuclear weapon organisation were also wrong in talking about 'peace in Vietnam', he continued. 'They are not taking the evil plans of the United States seriously, and this threatens to ruin the people's struggle.'⁶² Beijing admonished that the Swedish peace fighters had to be quelled. The entire embassy had to participate in the propaganda work needed to accomplish such a proper change in the direction of the protest movement.⁶³

Without the foreign involvement from Beijing and Hanoi described above, the anti-war movement would most probably have kept its original, pacifist orientation. Instead, the Maoist pro-NLF

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Kilander, *Vietnam var nära*, 113.

⁵⁸ Salomon, *Rebeller*, 97.

⁵⁹ Salomon, *Rebeller*, 99.

⁶⁰ A report on the embassy propaganda work about the Vietnam War sent to Beijing, June 1965. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, Beijing. Document No 110-01842-02, 2.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 3.

⁶³ Ibid.

movement continued to pick up steam in the winter of 1966–7. In less than twelve months the number of local Swedish NLF chapters more than doubled.⁶⁴ The mid-April ‘Vietnam Week’ of 1967 attracted its biggest crowds so far, with 50,000 people participating in 170 different locations across Sweden.⁶⁵ Now the posters could express exactly the views of Hanoi, calling President Johnson a murderer and a new Hitler, and calling for the United States to unconditionally withdraw from Vietnam. This was an important propaganda victory for Hanoi. An even greater victory in changing the discourse on the war would come with the Stockholm Russell Tribunal the same year.

Ralph Schoenman, Bertrand Russell’s personal secretary, had already in April 1965 expressed a wish to set up a Nuremberg-style tribunal to try the United States for war crimes against the people of Vietnam.⁶⁶ Preparations lasted through 1966 when it was decided the tribunal would convene in Paris. Charles de Gaulle, however, decided against such an outright propagandistic anti-American activity on French soil. Luckily for the organisers, they had already prepared for Sweden as their back-up plan.⁶⁷ The ruling SAP allowed the tribunal to be held in Stockholm with some of its MPs even participating in the proceedings.⁶⁸

When the Swedish government agreed to permit Russell’s International War Crimes Tribunal to convene in Stockholm, North Vietnam’s ambassador to Beijing, Ngo Dinh Loan, hailed the decision as ‘more valuable than shiploads of weapons’.⁶⁹ The tables were turned from the Nuremberg Tribunal it was based on.⁷⁰ The Americans were not the judges now, but instead were accused of having committed crimes similar to those for which some Nazi leaders had been hanged. And, as historian Fredrik Logevall laconically comments, ‘No mention was made of possible war crimes committed by North Vietnamese or NLF forces.’⁷¹

Although remembered and portrayed as a white Western meeting that was chaired by the famous French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, the Vietnamese actually played an active part in planning and carrying out the tribunal. In February 1966, Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong explained to Ralph Schoenman in Hanoi that North Vietnam would make evidence available for the tribunal, including exhibits of weapons used against the people of Vietnam.⁷² The tribunal was invited to send a commission to Vietnam to document American war crimes on-site. Leading members of that commission included KGB-employed propagandist William Burchett. Vietnamese witnesses and victims would also testify before the tribunal, it was agreed. As Ho Chi Minh had promised, Hanoi hosted investigating teams and furnished the necessary facilities in North Vietnam.⁷³ Free hotel stay, food, local transport, and translation services were given to teams of the Russell Tribunal investigators coming to Vietnam.⁷⁴

Several Vietnamese war victims were flown in from Hanoi to Stockholm to give physical witness.⁷⁵ Among them was the nine-year-old boy Do Van Ngoc, so severely wounded by napalm that he was

⁶⁴ Scott, *Swedish Social Democracy*, 62.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁶⁶ Tariq Ali, *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties* (London: Verso Books, 2018), 113.

⁶⁷ Arthur Jay Klinghoffer and Judith Apter Klinghoffer, *International Citizens’ Tribunals: Mobilizing Public Opinion to Advance Human Rights* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

⁶⁸ For background on the tribunal and Hanoi’s part in it, see Harish C. Mehta, ‘North Vietnam’s Informal Diplomacy with Bertrand Russell: Peace Activism and the International War Crimes Tribunal’, *Peace & Change*, 37, 1 (2012), 64–94.

⁶⁹ Fredrik Logevall, ‘The ASPEN Channel and the Problem of the Bombing’, in Lloyd C. Gardner, ed., *The Search for Peace in Vietnam, 1964–1968* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2005), 433.

⁷⁰ For more on how references to Hitler and the Holocaust were made constantly around this time, see Perry Johansson, ‘Resistance and Repetition: The Holocaust in the Art, Propaganda, and Political Discourse of Vietnam War Protests’, *Cultural History*, 10, 1 (2021).

⁷¹ Fredrik Logevall, ‘The Swedish American Conflict over Vietnam’, *Diplomatic History*, 17, 3 (1993), 111–132.

⁷² Mehta, ‘People’s Diplomacy’, 211.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁷⁵ For the victims and their testimonials see Peter Limquenco and Peter Weiss, eds., *Prevent the Crime of Silence: Reports from the Sessions of the International War Crimes Tribunal Founded by Bertrand Russell* (London: Allen Lane, 1971).

carried naked to the witness stand in order to display his severely burned genitals. The twenty-three-year-old female teacher Ngo Thi Nga who, despite surgery, still had bomb shrapnel in her brain after leading her young pupils to shelter during an American bomb raid, also gave witness. So did forty-five-year-old villager Hoang Tan Hung, seriously injured from a bomb attack, as did seventeen-year-old Thai Binh Dan. On the third day of the tribunal, lawyer Phạm Văn Bạch, President of the Committee Investigating United States War Crimes, gave his testimony.⁷⁶ Officially representing the NLF, Nguyen Van Dong then presented a comprehensive overview of crimes the Americans had committed in the war.⁷⁷

The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre had opened the tribunal by strongly condemning the Americans, accusing President Johnson of misdeeds against a defenceless Vietnamese people. Evidence was then presented for four full days. The conclusion was that the United States was guilty of international war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity. The conference was a considerable victory for the Hanoi reinterpretation of the war that presented the United States playing the role of Hitler's Germany, an international threat to peace.

As deemed by the reactions, it was something of a shock for the Americans that a Western country such as Sweden stood up so brazenly for a communist war effort. The symbolic value of Swedish actions was clear for Hanoi. When Nguyen Tho Chan, the ambassador in Moscow who had demonstrated at Palme's side, returned to Sweden in the summer of 1969 to negotiate Swedish aid to North Vietnam, he, at a meeting with Prime Minister Tage Erlander and his Vietnam expert, Jean Christophe Öberg, declared that Swedish aid 'would also make an impression on other Western countries willing to follow the Swedish example – that is, have a demonstration effect'.⁷⁸

But for Hanoi it was probably more important that Sweden lent itself to organising such events as the Russell Tribunal. It was not just about what was said and done at those occasions. More importantly, Stockholm became a place where people from communist and democratic nations could meet freely. Only two months after the Russell Tribunal, another international conference on the Vietnam War was organised at the same venue. It was followed by nine more such conferences, partly financed by the ruling political party SAP, and eventually led and organised by an SAP member of parliament.⁷⁹ It was not for nothing that the CIA followed these conferences closely and eventually came to place Stockholm on their list of cities around the world to be kept under special surveillance.⁸⁰

The backstory of the SAP's support of the ten Stockholm international conferences on Vietnam was how, during the summer of 1967, in the aftermath of the Russell Tribunal, Sweden's ruling party had started to seriously worry about the influence of the Maoist-led United NLF Groups (DDFG) to attract young voters. Bo Ringholm, Thage G. Peterson, and Pierre Schori (all of whom eventually became top leaders in the SAP) in June that year met representatives of an NLF youth delegation that visited Sweden. Somewhat naively they complained that the Swedish NLF groups had started to appear Maoist and that Sköld Peter Matthis used the Vietnam War for pro-Chinese agenda. 'We in the party are seriously worried about this development as we fear it will damage the cause of the NLF', they explained to the Vietnamese communists.⁸¹

⁷⁶ *Nhân Dân*, of course, reported from the Stockholm tribunal in a number of articles.

⁷⁷ Kilander, *Vietnam var nära*, 118. Although the Americans did their best to ignore the tribunal, it was widely publicised, covered by some ten television outlets and 200 journalists.

⁷⁸ Alf Morten Jerve, Irene Nörlund and Astri Suhrke, Nguyen Thanh Ha, *A Leap of Faith: A Story of Swedish Aid and Paper Production in Vietnam – the Bai Bang Project, 1969–1996* (Stockholm: SIDA, 1999), 31.

⁷⁹ There is no place in this article to discuss these ten conferences. They instead will be dealt with in a forthcoming article.

⁸⁰ 'Over the course of the MHCHAOS program, there have been approximately 20 important areas of operational interest, which at the present time have been reduced to around ten: Paris, Stockholm, Brussels, Dar es Salaam, Conakry, Algiers, Mexico City, Santiago, Ottawa and Hong Kong', a two-page CIA document dated 8 May 1973 spelled out. See: <https://www.cia.gov/open/Family%20Jewels.pdf>. [accessed 5 Mar. 2020].

⁸¹ Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetarepartis arkiv housed in Arbetarrörelsens Arkiv och Bibliotek, Stockholm. Document F 02 D:10.

Schori and his friends in the SAP were, of course, worried about the damage the continued growth of the Maoist-led anti-war protests could inflict on the party in the upcoming national elections. And they would act on that threat.

Official Recognition and More United Front Tactics

In the last days of January 1968, North Vietnam launched the so-called Tet offensive, striking a multitude of cities and villages around South Vietnam. Continuing until the end of February, the offensive turned into a clear military defeat for Hanoi. And it did not create the public uprising in South Vietnam that Hanoi had expected. However, as the leader of North Vietnam, Lê Duẩn, explained, this offensive had also intended to sap the will of the Americans to fight the war. In that, with the help of the diplomatic front propaganda, it was more successful. In the United States and other countries around the world, people came to believe that the Americans would never win this war and should pull out immediately.

On 21 February 1968, with the Tet offensive still raging, a line of 6,000 war protesters with lit torches marched solemnly through the icy streets of Stockholm. In the lead, followed by thirty members of Sweden's parliament, and side by side with Swedish Minister of Education Olof Palme, walked North Vietnam's Moscow ambassador, Nguyễn Thọ Chân.⁸² As *Nhân Dân* reported from the march, "The protesters carried portraits of President Ho Chi Minh, Vietnamese National Liberation Front flags, and shouted slogans like "American empire out of Vietnam!", "Johnson is a murderer!", "The National Liberation Front of South Vietnam will definitely win!"⁸³ At the end of the demonstration Palme, who was soon to become prime minister, addressed the protesters, declaring that 'if one is to speak of democracy in Vietnam, it is obvious that this is represented in a considerably higher degree by the NLF than by the United States and its allied juntas.'⁸⁴ This was quite a statement coming from the leader of a Western nation in the midst of the Cold War. The NLF was, we must remember, in reality under the command of Hanoi, a communist regime run as a one-party dictatorship.

When Nguyễn Thọ Chân stepped out of the Aeroflot plane in Stockholm the day before, it was as a propagandist for the ongoing Tet offensive. At the conclusion of the protest march, he delivered the closing speech, coming on to the stage right after Palme. He lauded North Vietnam's victories in the ongoing Tet offensive, explaining triumphantly that 250,000 of the enemy had already deserted, been captured or killed. As he finished his talk, the Swedish United NLF Groups' participants in the protest march shouted in unison, 'Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh'. After that it was unanimously decided among the protest marchers that the United States was conducting genocide in Vietnam.

With the attendance of the official North Vietnamese Moscow ambassador and the one-sided, harsh criticism of the United States, the Stockholm protest was really extraordinary. What made it all the more astonishing was the fact that it was organised by the government party in power (SAP) and that youth organisations of every political party in the parliament, except the Conservatives, participated. With this broad official backing and the international impact of the event, the party mouthpiece *Nhân Dân*, not unexpectedly, claimed Nguyễn Thọ Chân's visit to Stockholm as a great success.⁸⁵

The February 1968 visit by the North Vietnamese ambassador to Moscow also meant that Hanoi's diplomatic front in Sweden had changed strategy. Up to then it had been a clandestine attempt at creating a Maoist-led, revolutionary, united front. Now, with Sweden's next prime minister walking side by side with the North Vietnamese diplomat, putting himself and the nation in the face of American

⁸² Scott, *Swedish Social Democracy*, 93.

⁸³ 'On the evening of Feb. 21, thousands of Swedish people marched with torches through the streets of Sweden to protest against America's imperialist war in Vietnam', *Nhân Dân*, 27 Feb. 1968, 4.

⁸⁴ Translation of the speech of Minister of Education Palme, delivered at the Vietnam demonstration on 21 Feb. 1968. See http://www.olofpalme.org/wp-content/dokument/680221c_vietnamdemonstration.pdf. [accessed 5 Mar. 2020].

⁸⁵ 'Our government representative paid a visit to Sweden – The Viet Nam News Agency', *Nhân Dân*, 6 Mar. 1968, 4.

wrath, Hanoi realised the interest and support from the Swedish government was real and highly valuable.

The Swedish United NLF Groups (DFFG) reacted with surprise and dismay at this development of events. When Nguyễn Thọ Chân unexpectedly landed in Stockholm, they had a hard time even getting to talk with him.⁸⁶ It was reported to Sköld Peter Matthis that the North Vietnamese ambassador was tired and stressed, and not very interested in a meeting.⁸⁷ Matthis and others tried to talk Nguyễn Thọ Chân out of joining the march, but without success. It was the DFFG – by challenging and harshly criticising the SAP government for not doing enough for the Vietnamese people – that had caused the party's turnabout. Now it seemed the DFFG had been pawns in the kind of united front strategy they thought they themselves were in charge of. For the SAP the February march turned out to be very beneficial. Palme was Erlander's right-hand man and had since the mid-1960s been slated to take over after Erlander, who was tired and saw the need for someone younger to lead the party. The 1968 election became a triumph for Erlander and the SAP, and he repeatedly expressed how grateful and impressed he was by how Palme handled the Vietnam issue to the good of the party. The next year at the party congress, as he himself chose to step down, the reins were handed over to Palme.⁸⁸

The other great winner was of course Hanoi, as favours from the SAP from then on arrived one after the other. In October 1968 the NLF information bureau that Swedish activists had helped Hanoi pressure the SAP government for was now warmly welcomed by Sweden's political leadership.⁸⁹ The counsellor of the foreign minister and head of the foreign ministry's political bureau, Dag Malm, even greeted the NLF representatives with a public reception, pledging the government's full support.⁹⁰ No less a person than Foreign Minister Torsten Nilsson, at the same reception, promised the NLF they would fully enjoy the liberties of Sweden and assured no foreign government's interference in their work.⁹¹ In addition, the SAP paid for the establishment and running of the NLF information bureau.⁹²

As historian Robert Brigham points out, this Swedish information bureau would 'serve as the staging area for diplomats preparing trips to Western Europe' for the NLF.⁹³ Le Phuong, who was asked by the worried SAP delegates about possible interferences in the Swedish peace movement, became its first head. He had spent the previous six months with Communist Party leaders in Hanoi preparing for the post.⁹⁴ Tran Van Anh, a seasoned propagandist who in 1964 had been the NLF's top representative in Beijing, arrived with the NLF/Hanoi delegation to Stockholm.

Only a few months later, in January 1969, Sweden became the first Western nation to establish full diplomatic relations with North Vietnam. Nguyễn Thọ Chân, who had marched with Palme a year before, became the first ambassador. Initially, however, he ran this post from Moscow with a chargé d'affaires in place in Stockholm. That same year when it established diplomatic relations, Sweden also allowed the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRG) to open an office in Stockholm. This was a creation of Hanoi, made to appear as a government of South Vietnam in exile, all designed to make the actual South Vietnamese government look illegitimate. Since it so flagrantly went against Sweden's policy on international law, it was not possible for

⁸⁶ At the time of the Tet Offensive, the Soviet Union had stepped up to become the main benefactor of Hanoi, which had become increasingly suspicious of China's real motives.

⁸⁷ Riksarkivet, Stockholm. Handwritten note by Jenny Resch to Sköld Peter Matthis and Rolf Bucht (no date), the international secretariat of DFFG, korrespondens.

⁸⁸ In an otherwise masterful study, Brigham wrongly claims that the prime minister, Tage Erlander, 'faced a serious challenge from Olof Palme, who attacked Erlander for not backing the NLF' and that 'one year later Erlander and de Gaulle suffered political defeat at the hands of the NLF'. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, 82, 83.

⁸⁹ With Indochina's French colonial history – and in light of President de Gaulle's criticism of American foreign policy – it made sense for the NLF to set up its only other Western information bureau in Paris, simultaneously with the one in Stockholm.

⁹⁰ Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, 80.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* Foreign Minister Torsten Nilsson was, of course, referring to the United States.

⁹² Åselius, *Vietnamkriget*, 498.

⁹³ Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, 80.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

the government to recognise this Provincial Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam. Instead, it symbolically downgraded the status of Saigon by not sending an ambassador there beginning in 1967, when diplomatic exchange with South Vietnam was effectively frozen.

Although Hanoi by now had established official relations with Sweden and enjoyed strong support from its political establishment, it, in true united front style, also maintained its relations with the anti-government Maoist youth. Right after Nguyễn Thọ Chân's 1968 visit, Hanoi even sent a ten-person strong delegation to help with the upcoming 'Vietnam Week' the DFFG was organising.⁹⁵ The DFFG was, with its 'Vietnam Weeks', the *Vietnambulletinen* and the collecting of money, still quite useful for Hanoi. It could also help with organising and spreading propaganda from American deserters in Sweden.

In December 1967 the first American deserters, the so-called Intrepid Four, arrived in Sweden. They would be followed by many hundreds more. The government-sanctioned Swedish Committee for Vietnam (SKfV), set up in 1968, made sure that hundreds of American deserters – who potentially had a tremendous propaganda value for Hanoi – were welcomed and taken care of in Sweden. The Maoist DFFG, however, managed to hijack many of the deserters for its own, more radical objectives. To turn their comrades inside Vietnam against the war, some deserters in Sweden started recording tapes with anti-war propaganda. Calling themselves 'The Second Front Radio', they sent their tapes via the North Vietnamese embassy or the NLF Information Bureau to Hanoi, from where they would be broadcast to the American soldiers in South Vietnam.⁹⁶

In 1968 Hanoi asked the DFFG to also help 'spread propaganda among U.S. soldiers in Europe'.⁹⁷ Since the Americans had military bases in West Germany from where they sent soldiers to Vietnam, the international secretariat of the DFFG wrote to the Socialist German Student Union (*Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund*) about help with this request.⁹⁸ There was even a way, Hanoi discovered early on, to use some American soldiers' heritage to connect with Swedish politicians and the general public. When author Sara Lidman during her trip to North Vietnam in 1965 was asked to speak to American soldiers on Radio Hanoi, Vietnamese propagandists prepared her with an ID card from a fallen soldier with the Swedish sounding last name Martinson.⁹⁹ 'He appeared so familiar to me', Lidman reflected. 'It felt like I had always known him. My eyes opened wide when I saw that his last name was Swedish.'¹⁰⁰ From this revelation the Swedish author wove together a speech in which she pleaded with the American soldiers to drop their weapons and go home because, just like Martinson, they had been duped into fighting this unrighteous war and risked dying if they stayed.

Later on the Swedish-American connection would be used again when Hanoi, in a show of goodwill, handed out a list of names of American prisoners via a Swedish politician. He noted immediately that a number of the names were Swedish-American. When pointing this out he received a knowing smile from the Vietnamese cadre.¹⁰¹ In September 1972 the international secretary of the DFFG wrote to a number of Americans to ask for help in arranging a tour by a Swedish delegation with the intent to reach out 'to the millions of American citizens of Swedish heritage, to let them know what the people from their mother country think of their own country's shameful war'.¹⁰² The DFFG received a

⁹⁵ De förenade FNL gruppernas arkiv housed in the Riksarkivet, Stockholm. Mats Widgren to Rolf Bucht (no date), international secretariat of DFFG, korrespondens.

⁹⁶ See Johan Erlandsson, *Desertörerna* (Stockholm: Carlsson, 2016), 64.

⁹⁷ De förenade FNL gruppernas arkiv housed in the Riksarkivet, Stockholm. Letter to SDS, West Germany, from Rolf Bucht, international secretary DFFG, korrespondens.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ For more on Lidman in Hanoi, see Perry Johansson, 'Sara Lidman: A Case study of Beijing's and Hanoi's Use of Foreigners during the Vietnam War', *Journal of Cold War Studies* (forthcoming).

¹⁰⁰ Sara Lidman Archives, Umeå Universitetsbibliotek, Umeå. Author's translation from Lidman's Swedish version of the speech.

¹⁰¹ Åselius, *Vietnamkriget*, 304.

¹⁰² De förenade FNL gruppernas arkiv housed in the Riksarkivet, Stockholm. Letter from Joel Miller, international secretary of DFFG, 12 Sept. 1972, korrespondens, 1970–1974.

considerable number of replies from organisations and individuals willing to assist them, and the trip took place in the early summer of the following year.

With official relations established, Swedish politicians, unknowingly or not, became propagandists for Hanoi, publicising to the world Hanoi's narrative of what was happening in Vietnam. Politicians and civil servants started visiting Hanoi regularly, not least for planning and conducting the massive Swedish aid program initiated in 1969. As they arrived they were repeatedly taken to various sites for propaganda purposes. Hanoi did not have many such high-level political visitors from Western countries, and the Swedish politicians' testimonies from North Vietnam appeared more trustworthy to an international audience than those from communist politicians. Simultaneously, North Vietnamese politicians now had reason to visit Sweden and, from this European bridgehead, gave numerous press interviews, participated in conferences and spoke at public meetings.¹⁰³

The good relations also gave special privileges and access to Swedish reporters, which worked in Hanoi's favour as the news stories produced circulated in international media. Erik Eriksson, as an example, had, as a young student, become attentive to the ongoing Vietnam War and helped to set up the Russell Tribunal. As Eriksson had read up on the situation in Vietnam, Palme and the SAP government frequently enlisted him as an expert on Indochina. When invited to visit North Vietnam toward the end of 1968, Eriksson commenced a new career – as a foreign correspondent.

After this first visit Eriksson was soon back again in Hanoi, staying for months at a time as an employee of Swedish Television. As Eriksson himself acknowledges, his TV team received special treatment from the Vietnamese, getting much better access than even the Russians or the Chinese.¹⁰⁴ Hanoi, for example, provided the Swedish news team with a jeep that was at their disposal day and night. The Vietnamese chauffeur on stand-by slept in the room next to the Swedes. All papers and permissions needed for various trips were, quite miraculously, prepared in advance so the Swedes could leave on a minute's notice if anything of interest came up.¹⁰⁵

The Soviets were not happy with this situation – being less favourably treated than the Swedish 'bourgeois media' – and often complained to the Vietnamese press service. Eriksson speculated about why he received such preferential treatment. One of his two Vietnamese interpreters explained, in confidence: 'What they will write and say on television we know already beforehand, and their reports do not travel outside Moscow. What you report, on the other hand, is broadcast all over the planet.'¹⁰⁶ Later Eriksson would have this situation further clarified to him by a high-ranking official at the Foreign Ministry in Hanoi: 'What Palme says comes from his heart. What they will say in Beijing or in Moscow, we guess in advance and nobody in the West pays any attention.'¹⁰⁷ This arrangement worked extraordinarily well for Hanoi. Eriksson's was often the only Western television team present that reported stories from North Vietnam or the 'liberated' areas, and the Swedish news stories, clearly favourable to Hanoi, were purchased and broadcast by TV stations from other Western nations.

The Swedish propaganda support increased substantially in 1970, when Jean Christophe Öberg, who had been controversially supportive of North Vietnam and the NLF since the beginning of the war, began serving as Sweden's ambassador in Hanoi.¹⁰⁸ His reports to the Foreign Ministry in Stockholm displayed a great degree of bias, as he drew all his information from the North Vietnamese and was quite naive about how he was being played by the propaganda-savvy Hanoi. When, for example, in 1972 he crossed the border into 'liberated' areas in South Vietnam, Öberg was met at the border by a customs official who in impeccable French – Öberg's mother tongue – thanked Sweden for all its support and Prime Minister Olof Palme for all his benevolent statements. Öberg found this reception a little surprising but failed to understand it was part of a well-organised

¹⁰³ Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, 80.

¹⁰⁴ Erik Eriksson, *Jag såg kärleken och döden* (Stockholm: Ordupplaget, 2008), 189.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 190. Again he was told not to pass the information on.

¹⁰⁸ See Åselius, *Vietnamkriget*, or Kaj Björk, *Vägen till Indokina* (Stockholm: Atlas, 2003).

visit.¹⁰⁹ Öberg was not unique in his naiveté at the time, but since he for so long had been one of the main Vietnam experts for the Swedish Foreign Ministry and now served as the ambassador in Hanoi, he was especially useful to the North Vietnamese regime.

The Full Triumph of Hanoi's Propaganda War

In April 1972, in the so-called Easter Offensive, tens of thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers, fully equipped with Soviet tanks and Chinese weapons, crossed the border to 'liberate' South Vietnam. As with the earlier Tet Offensive, the objective was to attack South Vietnam with conventional military force while also unleashing the clandestine NLF cells hidden within South Vietnam. This, the North Vietnam Communist Party again believed, would inspire the people in the south to rise spontaneously and overthrow the government. Concurrently on the first of May, Swedish organisations and political parties on the left, including the SAP and its youth organisation, Soviet-leaning communist organisations, the new left, the Swedish Communist Party, as well as liberal political parties and labour unions came together in a united front to show their support for Hanoi, the NLF, and the spring offensive. This Swedish self-proclaimed 'Red Front' held a powerful May First rally with Nguyen Van Thien, the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam's (PRG) chief negotiator, addressing an audience of 50,000 people in central Stockholm, again demanding the United States get out of Vietnam.

By this time North Vietnam had made itself an indispensable ally of the SAP, and when Nguyễn Thị Bình again visited Sweden that year, it was for the SAP Party congress.¹¹⁰ Landing in Stockholm at the end of September, she was met at the airport by a delegation of top leaders from the SAP. A group from the Swedish NLF was also there, waving NLF flags.¹¹¹ The next day, in her role as Foreign Minister of the PRG, Nguyễn Thị Bình was warmly welcomed at the door by Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme and a row of other party dignitaries as she arrived for the opening of the party congress.

In the keynote speech at the SAP party congress, Palme expressed 'admiration and strong support from the Social Democratic Party, the Swedish government as well as all classes of Swedish citizens for the Vietnamese people's war for justice'. The North Vietnamese Workers Party mouthpiece *Nhân Dân*, which of course covered the meeting, relayed how Palme ...

... particularly praised the rightful stance of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam and agreed with the demand that America must retreat from South Vietnam, stop the bombings as well as every other act of war in Vietnam, plus respect the rights of the people in South Vietnam for self-determination.¹¹²

Palme, as Hanoi's propaganda daily reported, finished his talk by exclaiming, 'When the National Harmony Government is established, peace will finally come to South Vietnam.'¹¹³

Nguyễn Thị Bình was the only foreign guest to give a speech at the congress. She took the opportunity to call upon the Swedish ruling party to recognise the PRG as the legitimate representatives of South Vietnam.¹¹⁴ Nguyễn Thị Bình furthermore latched onto the internationalisation discourse used to transform the war into a struggle for independence from a genocidal enemy. Describing the atrocities Americans were committing in Vietnam, she compared them with the Nazi slaughter of whole

¹⁰⁹ Åselius, *Vietnamkriget*, 503.

¹¹⁰ 'Welcoming Foreign Minister Nguyễn Thị Bình at the Swedish Social Democratic Party Congress', *Nhân Dân*, 3 Oct. 1972, 4. Nguyễn Thị Bình arrived in Stockholm together with other representatives of the National Liberation Front, led by Minister of Culture Hoàng Minh Giám.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Björk, *Vägen till Indokina*, 208.

villages in Lidice and Oradour.¹¹⁵ Nguyễn Thị Bình told how the war had become more brutal, adding:

If Guernica, Lidice, and Oradour here in Europe will always be remembered as tantamount to crimes against humanity, there are thousands of similar events in our country, and the United States creates more of them every day.¹¹⁶

This equivalence between Vietnam and the Holocaust was something the propaganda head for the Vietnamese NLF had already come up with in 1962.¹¹⁷

As Nguyễn Thị Bình finished her long speech, the 3,500 participants in the congress gave her a standing ovation. According to *Nhân Dân*, thousands of party delegates sang along as the orchestra played 'Liberating the South', which by now had become a tune familiar to the Swedish people.¹¹⁸ Nguyễn Thị Bình then held a press briefing and on the evening of 29 September also appeared as a guest on Swedish national television.

Nguyễn Thị Bình then returned to work on a peace accord between Hanoi and Washington that would, in a couple of months, be agreed on in secret. But before South Vietnam had even been informed, North Vietnam made the terms public. Nixon suspected this was to hurt his presidential campaign, and as Hanoi in addition demanded further changes to the accord, he authorised yet another bombing campaign.

Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme responded furiously to Nixon's 1972 Christmas bombings. In a statement for the TT News Agency and Swedish Television, he, just like Nguyễn Thị Bình a few months earlier, compared the American actions with European atrocities, including those of the Holocaust:

One should refer to things by their accurate designation. What is happening right now in Vietnam is a form of torture. What they are doing is tormenting people. They torment a nation in order to humiliate it, compel it with brute force to subjugate. That is why the bombings are an infamy. Of such there are many in modern history. They are often linked by name: Guernica, Oradour, Babij Jar, Katyn, Lidice, Sharpeville, and Treblinka. In all those places violence was triumphant, but the judgment of history came down hard on those who were responsible. Now there is another name to add to the list: Hanoi, Christmas 1972.¹¹⁹

The Americans, not surprisingly, took great offense. Palme's analogy, according to Kissinger, who himself had fled the Nazis together with his Jewish parents, stuck with Nixon for a long time, like a 'painful tooth'.¹²⁰ Since the Russell Tribunal, however, Hanoi had continually explained the war as an unjust attack on a vulnerable people with the purpose of eradicating the Vietnamese, just like Hitler's goal for the Jews. Palme's statement, which garnered attention all over the world, fed right into this discourse.

Soon after this, on 13 January 1973, a peace accord was finally signed. Nguyễn Thị Bình, the PRG representative at the negotiation table, was adamant about the powerful effect people's diplomacy had had in hurting Nixon's approval ratings, which contributed to forcing him finally to pull out of Vietnam.¹²¹ An important part of this people's diplomacy had been carried out from within Sweden, with international conferences and the unceasing work of the Stockholm NLF information bureau, the Stockholm PRG office and the North Vietnamese embassy. Nguyễn Thị Bình herself

¹¹⁵ Möller, *Sverige och Vietnamkriget*, 224.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, 23.

¹¹⁸ 'Welcoming Foreign Minister Nguyễn Thị Bình', *Nhân Dân*.

¹¹⁹ *Olof Palme – Hanoi Speech 1972*, see http://www.olofpalme.org/wp-content/dokument/721223a_hanoi_julen_1972.pdf [accessed 5 Mar. 2020].

¹²⁰ Möller, *Sverige och Vietnamkriget*, 325.

¹²¹ Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 296.

was of course aware of Sweden's role and, as we saw in the introduction, still remembers and honours that particular battlefield of Hanoi's diplomatic front.

Conclusion

In April 1974, not long before Hanoi broke the signed peace accord with the United States and invaded the South, North Vietnamese Premier Phạm Văn Đồng arrived in Sweden. Prime Minister Olof Palme welcomed him at the airport with a long hug. It was the premier's first visit to any European country. Many leaders of the Communist Workers Party of Vietnam believed he should visit Paris first, but the argument prevailed that 'Sweden's exceptional demonstration of solidarity must be recognised ahead of France'.¹²² Although France, the United Kingdom and Australia officially held more weight and direct influence on American politicians, Sweden, as a neutral nation, had been more suited to act as a credible moral voice for human rights and internationalism.

The North Vietnamese certainly were not passive recipients of Sweden's magnanimous help. From start to finish, they directed the Swedes with various well-tested communist political strategies: front organisations, techniques of hospitality, people-to-people diplomacy and united front thinking among them. After climbing on the backs of revolutionary Maoist youth, North Vietnamese leaders succeeded in influencing the top echelons of the Swedish political elite. By then they could start treating some of their early comrades with less respect, ordering them around at will. When in 1972 the important Maoist intellectual Jan Myrdal, always on the front line of Vietnam War protests, declared Nixon's visit to Beijing a victory for China, Hanoi's representatives in Sweden exploded in anger.¹²³ The North Vietnamese ambassador in Stockholm immediately called in the political leadership of the Unified NLF Groups (DFFG), spewed gall all over Myrdal and demanded that his Swedish comrades ostracise and denounce him.¹²⁴

Hanoi's diplomatic front functionaries were equally demanding of the brilliant but naively good-hearted writer Sara Lidman, who was another extremely important propagandist advancing pro-Hanoi opinion. As Lidman struggled with putting together yet another book on Vietnam, Hanoi did not allow her any rest. They wanted to see texts and statements and demanded that she come to Vietnam. At one point Nguyễn Thị Bình sent Lidman a letter which Lidman perceived as 'an invitation formulated as an order that I must come to Vietnam'.¹²⁵

Hanoi opened up its diplomatic front in Sweden in 1966. From that year on, a large number of clandestine propaganda organisations arrived in Sweden, posing as representatives of a North Vietnamese civil society that in reality did not exist. In just a few years a secretly-led Maoist mass organisation, set up with help from China and North Vietnam, managed to turn around Swedish opinion about the war. What had originally been peace-oriented Vietnam War protests now asked for the war to continue until every American had either left Vietnam or been annihilated. But what's more, because this youth movement posed a domestic political challenge, the SAP came to take the side of Hanoi as well. Already in 1967 the government welcomed an NLF information office on Swedish soil. The following year full diplomatic relations were established with North Vietnam and, soon after, even the presence of a Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam was established in Stockholm. All this as Sweden decided in 1967 to end its diplomatic presence in Saigon. With the extremely generous political protections and freedoms it was granted by the Swedish government, Hanoi furthermore was able to find new international allies as well as to organise various political activities from its Stockholm base. From the Swedish capital the North Vietnamese could successfully disseminate a propaganda message to the world that the war was genocidal and imperialistic. The only morally just outcome, a large segment of international opinion influenced by this propaganda came to believe, would be a Vietnam united under communist rule.

¹²² Jerve et al., *A Leap of Faith*, 30

¹²³ Kilander, *Vietnam var nära*, 296.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Annelie Bränström Öhman, *Stilens munterhet: Sara Lidmans författardagböcker från Missenträsk 1975–1985* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 2014), 305.

The Swedish example described in this article reveals in detail how Hanoi successfully employed united front work and people's diplomacy in the West during the Vietnam War. This is something that has never really been analysed and presented in scholarly research before. In the end, was Sweden a unique example, and therefore more important than previously acknowledged in shaping international opinion on the war, or are there similar stories to be told about Hanoi influencing other Western nations during the Vietnam War?

Acknowledgements. I want to thank the anonymous reviewers for consistent, helpful comments, suggestions and questions; Jean Olson for her, as always, thorough editing; my research assistant Yin Li for help with Vietnamese sources; and the Hong Kong Research Grants Council for supporting the early stage of my research.