

'Le Phuong said he was grateful for my views'

Vietnam in the collections

democracy and the traditional Communist Party of Sweden were viewed as traitors when they did not commit themselves sufficiently explicitly to a conflict in which, according to the DFFG, one could be either right or wrong. Much later, Sköld Peter Matthis, a prominent figure in the FNL movement, described in the reportage book *FNL i Sverige* [*FNL in Sweden*], how he perceived the heart of the conflict:

The first FNL group was formed in opposition to the established peace movement. Throughout 1965 there was a clear conflict between the FNL supporters' line, expressed by the slogans 'Yanks out of Nam' and 'Support the FNL', and the demands of the peace movement and the Communist Party for 'Peace in Vietnam' on the basis of a mutual ceasefire and negotiations. The pacifist line made no distinction between attacker and attacked. The result was that they gave their support to President Johnson's demands of the Vietnamese on negotiation.²

Demonstration against the war in Vietnam. Photo from the archives of the Swedish Communist Youth Association.

It was in the mid-60s that the Vietnam issue made its way onto the political agenda in Sweden. The reason it did so was the war, which arose from the active involvement of the USA in Vietnam's domestic affairs, in one sense a continuation of the earlier colonial war in Indochina.¹ Nowadays, when we think of solidarity work with Vietnam, pictures of FNL [National Liberation Front] supporters are probably what spring to mind – the people who stood outside Systembolaget [the state wine and spirits shops] on Saturdays and collected money or sold their *Vietnam bulletins* on the stairways of the subway. The FNL supporters made demonstrations, fought with the police, threw eggs and burned American flags. In a sense, they became a kind of icon of a contemporary lifestyle. The FNL movement was a movement of its time or of the spirit of the age (the 'student revolt', the '68 movement'). New life was also breathed into activism in Swedish political life. The FNL movement – the United FNL groups (DFFG) – also came to dominate Swedish public debate on the Vietnam War for many years.

Vietnam, Sweden and the labour movement

For the 15 years the movement was in existence, the DFFG's relationship with the traditional labour movement was characterised largely by suspicion and, during the first few years of the movement, pure hostility. The government, social

In 1964, Sköld Peter Matthis was the chairman of Svenska Clartéförbundet (the leftist organisation the Swedish Clarté Association). He became well known among the general public on 14 July 1965, when he and a companion were arrested in sensational circumstances for obstructing pedestrians in Hötorget, Stockholm, at a demonstration. Documentation dealing with the subsequent and, at the time, famous legal proceedings is held with the records of the law firm A. Rudling.

There was enormous suspicion of the FNL movement within the mainstream of the Swedish labour movement. On the one hand, the Swedish Social Democrats dissociated themselves from extra-parliamentary movements, while on the other hand the struggle against Communism was, by tradition, an important part of social democratic policy. Moreover, the ties of friendship with the USA were strong.

However, the conflict between the DFFG and the labour movement did diminish over the years. This was partly due to the fact that the DFFG's slogans came to be embraced by almost the entire labour movement and partly because the organisation itself acted in a more thoughtful manner. The high point of the closer associa-

tion might be said to be when almost 50,000 people gathered at Norra bantorget on 1 May 1972 to listen to Nguyen Van Thien, chief negotiator in Paris for the PRR, the provisional government of South Vietnam. Bert Lundin, chairman of Metallindustriarbetareförbundet [Swedish Metal Workers' Union] and representatives of the DFFG and Svenska kommittén för Vietnam SkfV [the Swedish Committee for Vietnam] also spoke at this meeting. The DFFG's documentation was transferred to Riksarkivet [the National Archives]. Only a small number of documents from the DFFG itself exist at ARAB, along with documentation from local FNL groups such as those in Märsta and Stockholm.

The DFFG's ideological and organisational roots were linked with the pro-Chinese, Maoist wing of Swedish Communism in the early 1960s. Documentation that sheds light upon this early development can be found in a number of archives at ARAB, including those of Svenska Clartéförbundet, Vänsterpartiet kommunisterna [the Left Party - Communists] and Demokratisk ungdom [Democratic Youth]. Developments after 1967 can be seen primarily in the Maoist movement's own archives - Kommunistiska förbundet marxist-leninisterna (the Marxist-Leninist Communist Union) - Sveriges kommunistiska parti [the Communist Party of Sweden] (1973-1986) and Röd ungdom [Red Youth]. Unique photographic documentation of the Maoist movement can also be found in the picture archives of the magazine *Gnistan* [the Spark].

However, the political message of Maoism has not been allowed to remain unchallenged, no matter how much it was 'in the spirit of its time'. Until 1968, Rolf Bucht was the DFFG's international secretary, but after that he became involved with the SkfV. In 1975, he reviewed the DFFG's description of its own history, *FNL i Sverige* [NFL in Sweden], under the heading 'Historieförfalskare i farten' (Falsifiers of History on the March).

History demonstrates the advantages of writing one's own story, as these leading Maoists were now doing. Sticking to Swedish history, we can see that it was being done with great success as early as the time of Gustav Vasa. In fact, it took several hundred years for Gustav Vasa's stories to be unmasked as falsifications of history. It is probable that historical examples such as these have served as guidance for these modern falsifiers of history. But of course, to presuppose that there are and will be no source-critical researchers in this field is an untenable position. Even if one has done one's best to raise as much dust as possible over the battlefield, sooner or later that dust will settle unless I have completely misunderstood Newton's law of gravity.³

Since the end of the war in Vietnam, Swedish Maoism and its successors have had a kind of interpretative advantage as regards the image of themselves and their role in the Swedish movement of solidarity with Vietnam. However, when Kim Salomon discusses the FNL movement in his book *Rebeller i takt med tiden* [Rebels in the spirit of the time] he does so primarily in terms of lifestyle, rituals and symbols.⁴ Moreover, the DFFG was far from the only group in Sweden to do public opinion work on the Vietnam War. Questions on which individuals or organisations did what can certainly be made the topic of further discussion, among other things on the basis of archives documents held at ARAB.

The 'other' Vietnam movement

The most extensive archives is that of Svenska kommittén för Vietnam, Laos och Kambodja [the Swedish Committee for Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia]. Many of the leading personalities within this organisation have also submitted their personal archives to ARAB: Gunnar Myrdal, Hans Göran Frank, Bertil Svahnström, John Takman and Hjalmar Mehr.

The Swedish general public and the labour movement, including the traditional Communist Party, recommended negotiated settlements of the conflict in Vietnam in the mid-1960s. Nor was the first Swedish Vietnam organisation, 'Svenska Vietnamkommittén' (the Swedish Vietnam Committee) rooted in revolutionary communism, but in the peace movement and *Kampanjen mot svenska atomvapen* [the Campaign against Swedish Nuclear Weapons] (KMA).

August 1964 saw the first Swedish demonstration on Vietnam,⁵ and the debate on the war got off the ground in earnest only in 1965.⁶ The Swedish Vietnam Committee, together with 'Nationalinsamlingen för Vietnam' [National Vietnam Fund] and 'Stödkommittén för Stockholmskonferenserna om Vietnam' [Support Committee for the Stockholm Conferences on Vietnam] came to constitute a kind of organisational background to the 1968 formation of Svenska kommittén för Vietnam [Swedish Committee for Vietnam], which in 1975 became Svenska kommittén för Vietnam, Laos och Kambodja (1981 and 1982: Kampuchea). The first chairman of this organisation was the renowned economist Gunnar Myrdal, and the Executive also included the former chairman of the KMA, Bertil Svahnström. Other active members of the committee at various times were John Takman (a member of the Swedish Parliament), Hans Göran Frank and Anita Gradin. In 1971, Gunnar Myrdal was succeeded as chairman of the SkfV by Birgitta Dahl.

On 13 February 1968, the SkfV adopted a programme, 'Appell för Vietnams folk' [Appeal for the People of Vietnam], which came close to the peace terms which the

FNL and North Vietnam had formulated at the time. On 21 February, the committee arranged a torchlight procession through Stockholm in which Olof Palme, then Minister for Education and Science, took part together with the North Vietnamese Ambassador. This event triggered diplomatic complications between Sweden and the USA. This intergovernmental conflict has been dealt with in detail by a variety of researchers, but there probably exists even now documentation that can shed more light on the matter.

For example, the archive of the Executive of the Swedish Social Democratic Party contains a series of documents arranged by country which include much basic material in the form of reports, notes and press cuttings. Six days after the famous demonstration in Stockholm, for example, Lars Thalén from SSU (the Swedish Social Democratic Youth Association) strode into the FNL's legation in Moscow, where he passed on the congratulations of Social Democratic Youth of Sweden. His conversation with Dang Quang, head of the legation, took two hours.⁷

There is also an original report from when Bo Ringholm, Thage G Peterson and Pierre Schori met representatives of a youth delegation from the FNL over lunch on 16 June 1967. Pierre Schori writes:

At the end of our conversation, I told the FNL representative about my view of the Swedish FNL committees. From my observations, the committees' activities have tended more and more in a Maoist direction. Sköld Peter Matthis and other leaders on the FNL committees now seem to be using the Vietnam issue to enlist sympathisers for a pro-Chinese policy. The FNL committees will become more and more isolated and turn into a small sect if they continue along these lines. Within the Party, we are seriously concerned about this development, and we fear that it will harm the FNL's cause. I asked the delegation whether they had had any contact with Sköld Peter Matthis and his fellows.

Le Phuong replied that no contact had been sought with the FNL committees, but that Matthis himself had looked them up in Stockholm. Le Phuong said that he was grateful for my views on the FNL committee. He himself, and other FNL representatives who had been to Sweden previously, had also sensed this tendency, which, of course, they regret. During the tribunal, FNL people had also expressed their concern about the working methods of the committees to Sköld Peter Matthis.⁸

The conflict between the Maoist-dominated Swedish FNL committees, the DFFG, and the rest of the movement of solidarity with Vietnam is something, which can still to a certain extent be regarded as controversial. One of the people who was perhaps most subject to the condemnation of the Maoists was communist John Takman.

John Takman's personal contact with Vietnam dated back to the 1940s, and he had become an authority on the matter through his books *Vår vid sydkinesiska sjön* [Spring in the South China Sea] (1959) and *Vietnam – ockupanterna och folket* [Vietnam – its Occupiers and its People] (1965). Takman was also one of the few Swedes to meet Ho Chi Minh, the legendary President of North Vietnam, on a number of occasions.

In 1966, Takman, together with a number of young communists, started Vietnam-Press, which was tasked with monitoring and passing on information on Vietnam. To the Maoists, John Takman represented Soviet revisionism, but his contact with Vietnam and the Vietnamese was difficult to ignore.

One of the earliest Vietnam demonstrations, on June 14 1965. The chairman of the Swedish Clarté Association, Sköld Peter Matthis, 'obstructs pedestrian traffic' in central Stockholm (Hötorget), according to the police. Photo: DFFG archives.

Nor did Takman himself mince his words when he was attacked, as we can see from this letter to C.H. Hermansson:

Comrade C.H.! After Ingberg's latest iniquities (see Stormklockan), I at least am forced, when pressed, to note that a movement which to date has never done anything productive is entirely alien to me. Fortunately, there is no one who takes this playground anarchism seriously any more. Please find enclosed a copy of today's letter to Hanoi.⁹

Takman's extremely extensive records contain much documentation that touches upon his commitment in a variety of ways. This applies to such bodies as the World Peace Council, Vietnamhjälpen [Vietnam Aid], the SkfV and Vietnam-Press.

Another archives which may illustrate the background to the attitudes of the traditional communists is that of Svenska fredskommittén [Swedish Peace Committee]. The SkfV acted within the framework of the democratic

In 1974 the communist Member of Parliament and Doctor John Takman visited the printing shop of the Laotian Patriotic Front. It was hidden in a cave in Nakay, Jaguari. Photo by Klas Thorberg, SkfV's archives.

system, and its task, according to its first chairman Gunnar Myrdal, was – among other things – to support the American minority who shared a moral repugnance of the Johnson government's war policy on Vietnam. The SkfV was of the opinion that the USA was a political democracy with freedom of opinion and the organisation dissociated itself from flag burning, window breaking, egg throwing and other breaches of the law. This type of activity obstructed the committee's objectives and tended to give the impression that the opposition to the Vietnam War was insignificant in terms of numbers, and at the same time encouraged reactionary sentiments in Sweden. The SkfV intended to organise the popular movements and thereby amass public opinion against the Vietnam War.

The SkfV arranged meetings and also helped other organisations to do so. It pursued with gusto the issue of whether South Vietnam's national liberation front

should be given the opportunity to open an information office in Stockholm and also worked to promote material aid to Vietnam and a halt to American bombing. A 'Vietnam Lottery' was organised and representatives of the committee also took part in the Working Group for the Support of Conscientious Objectors to the Vietnam War. Another issue that very much interested the committee was the establishment of diplomatic relations with North Vietnam. In addition, the SkfV hosted the annual International Stockholm Conferences on Vietnam. Erik Svanfeldt discusses the political role of the SkfV in a paper.¹⁰

Conferences on Vietnam

In 1966, Svenska freds- och skiljedomsföreningen [the Swedish Peace and Arbitration Association] invited international peace organisations to take part in discussions in order to co-ordinate international protest actions against

the Vietnam War. These conferences took place in 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970 (all in Stockholm), 1972 in Versailles, 1976 in Rome, 1973 in Paris and 1974 in Stockholm. Documentation on these conferences is collated in the archives of the Stockholm Conference on Vietnam, international liaison committee.

On the initiative of the Stockholm Conference, the International Commission of Enquiry into US Crimes in Indochina, was also set up and operated from 1970. The Secretary General of this commission was the lawyer Hans Göran Frank and documentation from it can be found mainly in his personal papers.

In 1972, the biggest international conference ever held up to that time, the UN's conference on the Human Environment, was held in Stockholm. A specialist conference on the destruction of the human environment in Indochina was organised at the same time. The opinions expressed here were partly why Prime Minister Olof Palme greatly dissociated himself from the USA's environmental war. He developed these thoughts in a speech to the SSU's Congress:

NOTES

1. There are diverse documents at ARAB from, among others, the communist youth movement, which was very much involved in the fight against colonialism in the late 1940s.

2. *FNL i Sverige* [The FNL in Sweden]. Ed.: Tommy Hammarström. Stockholm 1975, pp 15 ff, 1975.

3. *Vietnam Nu* [Vietnam Now], issue 5-6 1975, p. 15.

4. See also Lars Åke Augustsson and Stig Hansén: *De svenska maoisterna* [The Swedish Maoists]. Stockholm 1997; new edition titled *Maoisterna. En historia berättad av några som var med* [The Maoists. A history told by some of those involved]. Gothenburg 2001. The background to this book (interviews) can be found in Augustsson's personal papers at ARAB.

5. Erik Svanfeldt: *Svenska kommittén för Vietnam. Regeringens megafon eller folklig kravmaskin* [the Swedish Committee for Vietnam. Government megaphone or popular demand machine]. Uppsala 1992.

6. See Vietnam i svensk pressdebatt sommaren 1965 [Vietnam

in Swedish Press debate Summer 1965]. Stockholm 1965.

7. Fonds of Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti SAP [the Social Democratic Party of Sweden] F 02 D:10.

8. Ibid.

9. John Takman's papers; arranged by subject 'Vietnam'; list not available. By John Takman: *Krigsförbrytelser i Vietnam* [War crimes in Vietnam]. Stockholm 1967; *Vietnam – ockupanterna och folket* [Vietnam - its Occupiers and its People]. Malmö 1965; *Vår vid Syd kinesiska sjön* [Spring in the South China Sea]. Stockholm 1959.

10. Svanfeldt, see note 5.

11. Minutes, Sveriges socialdemokratiska ungdomsförbund SSU [Swedish Social Democratic Youth Association] 20th Congress, p 80.

12. *Vietnambulletinen* 1 1979, p 2.

13. Documentation and photographs on reconstruction and aid work after the war can be found in the personal archives of Thorsten Nilsson, among others.

*Today, public opinion the world over is faced with the urgent political task of immediately putting a stop to the mass destruction, the environmental war, the extermination of people. It has been said that the United States wishes to avoid in Vietnam the humiliation, which a military setback would entail. But the greatest humiliation for the people of America would be a military victory for the United States in Vietnam. The greatest defeat would be a victory for this kind of war.*¹¹

Another conference which aroused strong feelings was 'the Russell Tribunal', the international war crimes tribunal held in Stockholm in 1967. This tribunal was originally intended to take place in Paris, but French President de Gaulle refused to sanction it. Bertrand Russell then chose Stockholm despite the fact that Prime Minister Tage Erlander was trying to discourage him and even pleaded that he not do so. Moreover, the DFFG adopted a

negative attitude towards this tribunal, as it was based on what was referred to as 'Bourgeois international law'.

Documentation on the Russell Tribunal can be found in the John Takman and Olof Palme archives, among others.

When the war ended

In 1975, the Vietnam War came to an end and the Swedish movement of solidarity with the people of Indochina entered a new phase. Now, working for greater aid and support for the liberated countries became a central issue. It was also considered important to break down these countries' international isolation. However, before long new political battle lines were being drawn, as the friendship between the former guerrilla groups proved fragile. For the DFFG, this was the beginning of the end of the organisation. It changed its name to Vietnam & Laosförbundet [Vietnam & Laos Federation] within

LIST OF ARCHIVES AND COLLECTIONS

Archives mainly on Vietnam

De förenade FNL-grupperna [the United FNL Groups] in Sweden – 2 volumes
Föreningen Böcker till Hanoi [Books to Hanoi Association] – 6 boxes
Föreningen mot USA:s krigsförbrytelser i Vietnam [Association against the USA's War Crimes in Vietnam] – See Hans Göran Frank's papers
Märsta FNL-grupp [Märsta FNL group] – 3 volumes
Stockholm conference on Vietnam, International liaison committee – 74 volumes
Stockholms FLN-grupper [Stockholm FNL groups] – 1 volume

Svenska kommittén för Vietnam, Laos och Kambodja [the Swedish Committee for Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia] – 34 volumes, 26 boxes
Vietnam-aktion [Vietnam Action] – 1 volume

Archives in which Vietnam appears to a limited extent

Demokratisk ungdom [Democratic Youth]
Hans Göran Frank
Anita Gradin
Kommunistisk ungdom [Communist Youth]
Hjalmar Mehr
Gunnar Myrdal
Ture Nerman
Olof Palme

which conflict broke out in earnest when Vietnam occupied Kampuchea and China invaded Vietnam. As a consequence of these events, the federation was disbanded on 14 May 1979:

The federation was split into three factions. One group uncritically expressed its support for Vietnam even in respect of Vietnam's military occupation of Kampuchea. Another group was firmly on the side of China and gave its full support to China's invasion of Vietnam. The third group at the meeting condemned Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea but at the same time was of the opinion that Vietnam's crimes against the people of Kampuchea could in no way justify what was known as China's punitive expedition.¹²

In April 1977, a friendship league was formed with the aim of supporting the new Kampuchea. This league pas-

sed on the Maoist traditions of the DFFG. In the terminology of the day its guiding light was resistance to the superpowers. The league also took it upon itself to pass on the views of the Pol Pot regime. Over time, this consistent support for the Khmer Rouge meant that the organisation came to be regarded by many as a support organisation for genocide.

The SkfV was also dragged into the conflicts, even though it had initially attempted to keep a low profile. As the world became aware of the genocide in Kampuchea, the organisation also dissociated itself from this. It worked hard to support the new regime in Kampuchea after the fall of the Red Khmers, but at the same time it was of the opinion that the Vietnamese troops should leave the country.

Once again, the countries of Indochina became 'ordinary countries', far removed from the hot air of Swedish politics. Now that the war was over, reconstruction and aid work were required.¹³

Röd Ungdom [Red Youth]
Pierre Schori
Stockholms arbetarekommun [Stockholm branch
of the Social Democratic Party of Sweden]
Bertil Svahnström
Svenska Clartéförbundet [Swedish Clarté Association]
Sveriges kommunistiska parti [Communist Party of Sweden]
(1973)
Sveriges kommunistiska ungdomsförbund [Swedish Communist
Youth Association] (1921)
Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti SAP
[Social Democratic Party of Sweden]
Sveriges socialdemokratiska ungdomsförbund [Swedish
Social Democratic Youth Association]
John Takman
Anders Walldén
Vänsterpartiet kommunisterna [the Left Party - Communists]

Picture archives in which Vietnam is relatively well represented

Gnistan
LO-Tidningen
Thorsten Nilsson
Ny Dag
Svenska kommittén för Vietnam, Laos och Kambodja [Swedish
Committee for Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia]

Around 275 posters in the poster collection

L I T E R A T U R E

Augustsson, Lars Åke and Hansén, Stig: *De svenska maoisterna*. Stockholm 1997; new edition titled *Maoisterna. En historia berättad av några som var med*. Gothenburg 2001
Möller, Yngve: *Sverige och Vietnamkriget*. Stockholm 1992
Svanfeldt, Erik: *Svenska kommittén för Vietnam. Regeringens megafon eller folklig kravmaskin*. Uppsala 1992

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