

Soviet Aid to Vietnam

Albert Parry



LAST summer, Ivan Shchedrov of *Pravda* accompanied a Viet Cong unit as it made its way through the South Vietnamese jungle some 35 miles northwest of Saigon. He wrote in *Pravda* about his experiences although without revealing many vital facts. More recently, two Soviet motion-picture cameramen, Oleg Artseu-

lov and Vladimir Komarov, returned from South Vietnam where for weeks they lived and traveled with the guerrillas of the Mekong Delta's swamps and rice paddies.

In September 1966, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* ran four long articles on Artseulov's adventures. In late October and early November, Komarov wrote

of his South Vietnam impressions in *Izvestiya*. Judging from the 16 photos in both papers, all interesting and some forceful despite their murky reproduction, the two Soviets brought back a notable pictorial haul.

Soviet Presence

It is from reports like these that one gets an impression of the growing Soviet presence in Vietnam. The picture can be filled out by bits and pieces of information, some casual and scattered yet significant, in the Soviet and other East European press; the monitored texts of the surprisingly frequent broadcasts on the subject emanating from sundry East European radio stations; and the reports on the topic reaching us from a wide range of non-Communist diplomats, soldiers, seamen, newsmen, travelers, and other observers in southeast Asia. And one thing is clear: the Soviets are stepping up their aid to Vietnam.

The sheer logistics of getting aid and supplies into the country is a problem for the Soviet Union. Increasingly, she is sending them via the 7,500-mile sealanes from Eastern Europe instead of relying on dubious Chinese cooperation in allowing men and materiel to proceed overland.

This article was digested from the original, published in THE REPORTER, 12 January 1967. Copyrighted © 1967 by The Reporter Magazine Company.

Dr. Parry is Professor of Russian Civilization and Language and Chairman of the Department of Russian Studies at Colgate University, Hamilton, New York. He is the author of the books Russia's Rockets and Missiles and The New Class Divided: Science and Technology Versus Communism.

Until recently, while the bulk of Soviet aid still arrived by rail and truck via Communist China, each US raid on the Vietnamese roads leading south from the Chinese border gave Peking one more excuse to halt or slow down the Soviet shipments, then to blame the Soviets for the sluggish trickle. Chief among Peking's aims was to force Moscow to increase its seaborne aid and thus cause a US blockade of the Soviet sea traffic as well as US raids on the port of Haiphong. Such a development, the Chinese hoped, would lead to a break between Moscow and Washington.

No Blockade

In spite of some angry insistence in the Congress and elsewhere in the United States, there is no blockade so far. But the United States did start bombing the outskirts of Haiphong, and her shell and shot have fallen close to the Soviet ships; a few Soviet seamen have been wounded or injured. Also, US naval units insistently follow and query, by semaphore, Communist vessels en route to Vietnam.

Nevertheless, despite a few angry notes of diplomatic protest, the Soviets are relieved that the United States has not resorted to anything like the stringent sea-and-air measures of the 1962 Cuban crisis, and they continue to increase supplies to North Vietnam by sea.

It is not so generally known that the Chinese, too, are in this sea commerce with North Vietnam. In mid-August 1966, word from Hong Kong indicated that the so-called Socialist traffic coming into Haiphong consisted in an average month of 10 to 15 Red Chinese ships in addition to six to eight Soviet vessels and five from other Eastern European nations, each ship bringing from 6,000 to 10,000

tons of cargo. The Soviet Government, however, claims a larger share of this sea traffic to Haiphong. Last August, it declared that more than half of all the ships then entering Haiphong were of Soviet registry.

"Odessa-Mamma," as the Soviets fondly call the port, is the foremost source of all this traffic. An English-language broadcast from Moscow to southern Asia on 23 December 1965 exulted:

Odessa is the biggest port on the Black Sea. Its busiest route is the one leading to Haiphong. A constant caravan of big merchant ships is plying this lane.

At the empire's eastern end, Vladivostok plays a role too. The local stevedores' morale is kept up by frequent rallies.

Soviet Sailors Assist

Official Soviet statements praise Soviet sailors for helping North Vietnam's longshoremen unload their ships in record time. It may be surmised, however, that part of the seamen's eagerness to help stems from a desire to cut short their own dangerous stay in North Vietnam's ports. Unofficial accounts from Soviet ports tend to confirm this. Not only reasons of security but also of the seamen's morale seem to be involved in the practice whereby some Soviet ships are announced as sailing for Latin-American destinations—until they reach the Mediterranean, where the crews are told that the course has been changed from Havana to Haiphong.

The overland route across China is by no means abandoned even if it no longer carries as much of the Soviet aid as before. The history of the dispute over Soviet arms has been colorful.

Early in 1965, Hanoi urgently asked

Moscow to help with anti-aircraft defenses. Ho Chi-minh wanted not only guns, but also surface-to-air missiles. In February 1965, the Soviets agreed to send the first important shipments of weapons and groups of technicians, on the condition that China clear their passage. China demanded the right of inspection. The Soviets agreed, but began to complain that China took her time about the job. China countered that she was sending the Soviet military loads and personnel across her soil with all possible dispatch, but that the Soviet materiel sent to Vietnam was either obsolete or so damaged that it was useless.

Materiel Copied

The Soviets were accused of using this aid to Vietnam as a handy chance to clear damaged materiel from their warehouses. Moscow retorted that the Chinese often removed for themselves the best of the Soviet arms destined for Hanoi. A contact in Washington said that much of the delay in Soviet shipments was due to the Chinese practice of copying, rather than keeping, certain pieces of Soviet equipment. He said:

In some cases the Soviet equipment was indeed damaged, but it was damaged by the Chinese experts, who weren't too expert. They didn't know how to reassemble the Soviet materiel after taking it apart for copying.

In March 1966, in reply to Chinese charges that the Soviet help to Hanoi was all too scant, the Moscow leaders sent a confidential letter to all fraternal Communist Parties. Carefully leaked out to the world at large via the East German Communists, the letter stressed that in 1965 North Vietnam received from the Soviet Union arms and military equipment worth 555 million dollars. The list included missile

installations and anti-aircraft guns, MiG's and other aircraft, tanks, coastal artillery, and small warships.

On 21 April 1966, Marshal Rodion Y. Malinovsky, the Soviet Defense Minister, delivered a public speech in which he again accused Communist China of obstructing Soviet aid on

The truth seems to be that the Chinese railroads and truck roads are generally inadequate to the sudden burden of Soviet shipments. The freight cars are poorly ballasted; the trains are small and slow. Furthermore, the changes from the broad Soviet and Outer Mongolian gauge of



The busiest route from Odessa, the largest port on the Black Sea, is the one leading to Haiphong

her overland route to North Vietnam.

In an indignant rejoinder of 3 May, Peking's Foreign Ministry claimed that, from February 1965 when the Vietnam conflict was first seriously stepped up, to the end of that year, the Soviet Union shipped to Hanoi across China a total of 48,000 tons of war materiel—a pittance, in Peking's scornful opinion. Peking insisted that it was helping, not hindering, Soviet aid. Furthermore, the Chinese claimed that in one period they provided 1,780 Chinese freight cars, of which the Soviets used only 556.

five feet to China's four feet eight and a half inches and then to North Vietnam's even narrower roadbed involve a lot of lifting and shifting of the car bodies.

Nevertheless, the Chinese have made an attempt to cope with the problems: it is the well-disciplined and hard-working railroad troops they sent to Ho Chi-minh who keep the Vietnamese part of the supply route going in the face of US raids. These are regular soldier-builders, in uniform, organized in divisions, but not armed. They repair tracks and bridges and

build alternative routes. Some have been reported to be laying out small airstrips near the border.

A very few man the antiaircraft batteries guarding North Vietnam's main transport centers, but usually this task is a jealously guarded prerogative of the Vietnamese. Last July, officials in Washington estimated the number of such Chinese roadbuilders at from 30,000 to 40,000. In August, the guess went up to 50,000 and in December to 100,000 (while the native Vietnamese busy on road work number a quarter million).

Air Transport

There is, of course, a third way of sending help to Hanoi: by air. But this would mean flying Soviet cargo planes over China, and Peking does not like this at all. It insists on clearing each plane separately, rather than issuing a wholesale permit for overflight. And so the sea is more and more the answer. US reconnaissance planes flying over Haiphong have photographed more and more supplies being unloaded from Soviet ships—not only peaceful machinery, but also missiles and launching equipment, as well as antiaircraft guns.

Since the fall of 1965, the number of antiaircraft guns in North Vietnam has risen from 1,500 to at least 5,000; one unofficial estimate in Washington puts the figure at 7,000. In the fall of 1965, there were only four North Vietnamese batteries firing surface-to-air missiles. By early October 1966, this number had risen to 25 or 30, each with six launchers. There were then some 130 sites from which the batteries could operate; 20 percent were occupied and active at any given time.

An interesting domestic radio broadcast in Czech, devoted, in part,

to the military problems in Vietnam, was monitored in the West as it came out of Prague last 29 July. Czech officers were asked questions that showed dissatisfaction on the part of local Communists with the surface-to-air missile performance in Vietnam. One question was:

Is there no more effective anti-aircraft defense in existence that would prevent U.S. aircraft from bombing North Vietnam, and have the socialist states [meaning Czechoslovakia, of course] such means?

In reply, Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Novak of the Czech Military Academy reassured the listeners that, naturally, Czech radar and missile defenses were better. He explained:

This is because our defense is handled by men who have had years of training and also because we have a perfect ground warning system of long standing. This does not exist in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. I would not say that the number of American planes brought down is low. Several dozen have been shot down. Many more have been shot down by artillery and some by aircraft. The reason is that rockets demand years of experience and training. Incidentally, it is wrong to assume that the introduction of missiles means the end of anti-aircraft artillery. Missiles are too expensive and costly to be used against just any aircraft. They are used against aircraft that are carrying particularly dangerous bombs or attacking very important targets. For this reason it cannot be expected even in the future that this would change substantially—that missiles would become the sole defense against air raids. They are rather the exception. . . .

Thus, via Prague, we garner one more hint that the Soviets do not want to escalate the Vietnam war if they can help it—and surely not by sending in a substantially greater number of surface-to-air missiles than they already have there, nor by training far larger numbers of North Vietnamese officers and soldiers to operate those computers and launchers.

Soviet Rocket Men

It is believed in Washington that some of the Soviet military personnel assigned to surface-to-air missile sites in North Vietnam may have been wounded or even killed since they serve beside their native pupils in combat conditions. The Soviet experts train their students in or near Hanoi, then go with them to the actual battle stations to see how they do under fire. More coaching follows on the spot, so it is almost inevitable that the Soviet officers and soldiers actually man the radar screens and the missile-launching devices, at least in the initial stages of instruction.

According to *Krasnaya Zvezda*, the Soviet rocket men's working day in Vietnam officially lasts 13 hours—unofficially, far longer. The extra time is devoted to "individual consultations" between the Soviet teachers and their charges. The trouble at first was that some of the young Vietnamese soldiers turned out to be deficient not only in technical knowledge needed for radar operation and missile firing, but also in "general education," as the Soviets gently put it.

And so the spare hours were used to teach the Vietnamese their mathematics, chemistry, and elements of "electrotechnology." The group had native Vietnamese on the staff who spoke Russian, but many of the teachers and their pupils "worked out a

language all their own—a wondrous mixture of Russian and Vietnamese words with technical terms." Both components of the group learned to understand one another very well, said the *Krasnaya Zvezda* correspondent in Hanoi.

Training in USSR

Much of the Soviet training of the Vietnamese goes on amid safer circumstances—in the Soviet Union. The sheer numerical record is impressive. Speaking in Mandarin to China on 15 March 1966, Radio Moscow boasted that at the time nearly 3,000 young Vietnamese men and women were studying in the Soviet Union, and that while a total of 2,300 Soviet experts worked in North Vietnam in the years 1955-64, some 4,500 Vietnamese experts had been trained in the Soviet colleges and universities by the spring of 1966.

In the summer and fall of 1966, these Vietnamese included enrollees in Odessa's higher Maritime Engineering School, training to be captains and engineers of North Vietnam's Fleet. Nor would the Soviet Union let China remain the sole patron of Vietnam's railroad construction: among recent arrivals in Moscow are a group of North Vietnamese young men and women studying at the Institute of Railroad Transport Engineers.

The full course lasts six years, and one might suppose that this project represents long-range Soviet plans of aid to Hanoi. But Communist history is replete with cases of emergency graduation of experts long before the set dates. These young students may be flown back home any day.

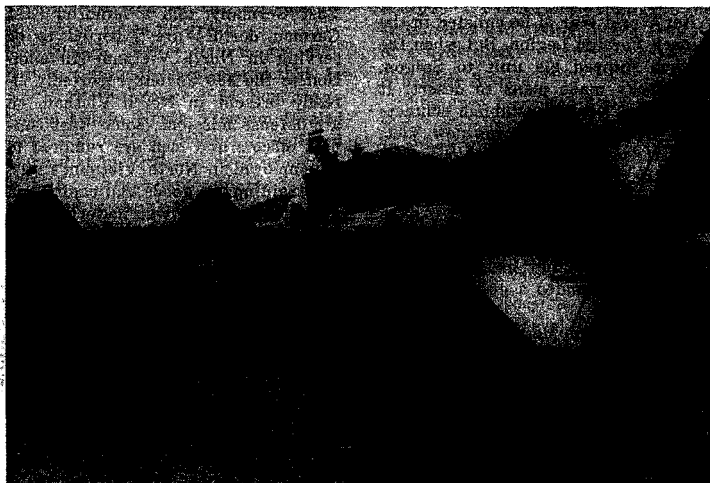
The most significant case of training involves the North Vietnamese air cadets now being taught by Soviet Air Force veterans to fly supersonic

MiG-21 jets. One group of cadets succeeds another at graduation ceremonies near Rostov-on-Don—at the Soviet Air Force School of Bataisk.

Photos and motion pictures made public in the Soviet Union show well-fed and smartly uniformed North Vietnamese cadets as they march or listen to lectures. The faces and fig-

its unofficial estimate of the number of *MiG's* in Vietnam to 180 or even 200, the latest being some delta-winged *MiG-21C's* and *MiG-21D's*.

Also great is the need for interpreters to accompany the Soviet lecturers. A Soviet film recently released showed a Soviet military instructor teaching North Vietnamese flying ca-



Interavia

SA-2 (Guideline) missile. The number of surface-to-air missile batteries in North Vietnam increased from four in the fall of 1965 to 25 or 30 in October 1966.

ures are youthful, but an official Soviet report reveals that at least a few of the trainees are seasoned jungle fighters in their thirties.

The need for flying cadets is urgent if we are to believe the Western estimate of mid-October that Ho Chi-minh's air force then consisted of some 50 older *MiG-15's* and *MiG-17's* and 20 *MiG-21's*, but that the Soviets were about to increase the number of the later models. Indeed, in mid-December, Western intelligence raised

cadets without any visible aid from interpreters. This apparently meant that either at least one of the Soviet instructors speaks fluent Vietnamese or some of the students learn Russian quickly.

As Moscow sends its experts to Vietnam to help the natives in matters both military and peaceful, the gain is, of course, in the fact that such specialists return home with a vastly expanded knowledge of Vietnam. Of an older yet very valuable vintage are

those Soviets who learned Vietnam and her ways and language in the 1940's and 1950's, and who, in fact, are veterans of the jungle warfare of that remote time.

Deserters

Such a man is Platon Skrzhinsky, 44 years old and a native of the Ukraine now residing in Moscow. After World War II he enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. But when the French shipped his unit to Saigon, Skrzhinsky made plans to desert. It took him a year to establish contacts with the guerrillas. In his new Viet-minh ranks, he found other deserters from the French: one Austrian, two Germans, and several Algerians. He received a Vietnamese name, Than, meaning "Loyal One." He married a native girl, and they had a baby. By 1950 he commanded a guerrilla artillery unit.

He returned to Moscow in 1955 with his six-year-old Vietnamese daughter. For nearly 10 years he has been employed as an editor with Radio Moscow, possibly helping with those broadcasts in Vietnamese to southeast Asia. Present-day survivors of such desertions from the French Foreign Legion include a Pole, a Czech, and an East German. Most of this romantic group may still be used for whatever training, advising, or interpreting is required in their countries in connection with Vietnam.

Of the "people's democracies" contributing to Ho Chi-minh today, East Germany is probably the most active. Military aid from Walter Ulbricht's government includes arms and electronic equipment specially made to stand up in tropical weather. Also included are motorcycles and bicycles which are so important for messenger service on North Vietnam's war-torn

roads where automobiles cannot get through easily. Last September, the writers' union in East Germany launched a fund drive to buy a thousand bicycles as a gift to Hanoi. The money comes by setting aside a percentage of the writers' honoraria.

The major part of Ho Chi-minh's medical supplies seems to come from East Germany, and a hundred East German doctors are reported to be serving in North Vietnam. In addition to the 800 Soviets reportedly already present in North Vietnam on air defense missions, some East German officers and men are rumored to be employed in North Vietnam's missile training. In goods and capital aid not directly of the war materiel kind, Ulbricht's government is thought to have delivered to Ho Chi-minh from June 1965 to October 1966 a total of four million dollars worth.

Economic Aid

But the bloc's largest economic aid to and trade with Hanoi is, of course, extended by the Soviet Union. Gathered at a summit meeting in Moscow in mid-October 1966, the Soviet Union and her eight allies agreed to give about one billion dollars worth of additional help to Hanoi in materiel and money, of which 800 million dollars are to come from the USSR. Contributions from the others are typified by the Polish pledge of 30 million dollars.

Ingenious Soviet deals to help North Vietnam began in the middle 1950's, right after the Geneva division of the country, with the celebrated "triangular" deal. In this transaction, Burma, to pay for Soviet cement, delivered 150,000 tons of rice to Haiphong, thus, in Bernard B. Fall's opinion, saving North Vietnam from starvation.

The first Soviet engineer came to

the Haiphong cement plant in September 1955, and it was he who showed the natives how to dig up the machines buried by the retreating French. In November of that year, the first cement was produced, and by 1958 the output was twice as high as in the French era. In the summer of 1966, despite US bombing raids, the Soviets claimed that production was three times as great.

Although precise figures are difficult to obtain, it is estimated that, in the 10 years through 1964, Soviet economic aid to North Vietnam totaled some 350 million dollars. It faltered somewhat in 1963 and 1964 when Nikita S. Khrushchev apparently was resigned to seeing the country in China's orbit (in 1955-64, China's economic aid to North Vietnam amounted to about 450 million dollars).

Soviet Interest Revived

However, Khrushchev's successors have revived the Soviet interest in Ho Chi-minh. Moscow's exports to North Vietnam rose from 47.6 million dollars in 1964 to more than 74.8 million in 1965—this, of course, in addition to some 555 million dollars worth of arms sent in 1965 alone. The figures for 1966 promise to be still higher.

In its German-language broadcast to Germany on 21 June 1965, Radio Moscow declared that, of the funds that North Vietnam was then getting from all Socialist countries, nearly half came from the Soviet Union. A third of this Soviet aid, the broadcast said, was given free of charge. Some 50 industrial enterprises had by then been built or rebuilt with Soviet technical aid. Such Soviet-assisted plants produced all of North Vietnam's apatite and superphosphates, about 90 percent of her coal, and more than half of her machine tools. The coun-

try's power, mining, engineering, and technical industries were all helped or run by the Soviet donors and advisors.

From other Soviet sources we learn that the economic division of the Soviet Embassy in Hanoi is in charge of all this aid. It is claimed that the Hanoi machine-tool plant, covering 14 acres, is entirely fitted out with Soviet equipment. Forty Soviet engineers and technicians are aiding in the erection of a hydroelectric plant at Tkhak Ba.

A Delicate Balance

Whatever facts and figures the Soviets officially reveal about their aid to North Vietnam are being made public not in order to taunt the United States, but to impress Peking—and even more to refute to the rest of the Communist world the Chinese charges that Moscow is not helping Hanoi enough.

Wherever possible, Moscow cites high-minded generalities rather than hard details. And this is not only for reasons of security, but also, most definitely, so as not to anger the United States too much.

Yet Moscow is not equivocal about its part in the conflict, even if it allots the quantities of arms it sends extremely gingerly. Obviously, the Soviet Union wants neither the United States nor China to win. Still, she wants no third world war to result from the struggle in Vietnam. So her stream of arms is speeded up only after the United States escalates her involvement in one way or another, as she did in February 1965 by striking at North Vietnam, and last summer by hitting Haiphong's and Hanoi's installations more directly.

The official word is that the Soviet Union and her East European allies have offered to send volunteers to fight in North Vietnam, but that Hanoi has

politely and gratefully declined the offer. The chances are that, fearing still another escalation of the war, Moscow has, in fact, refrained from such an offer, and that, for reasons of propaganda and diplomacy, it was agreed between Moscow and Hanoi that a fiction of offer and refusal would be maintained although not too loudly or repeatedly.

An American colonel conversant with the situation put it this way:

Hanoi would like to get all those volunteers but doesn't dare to ask for them. For were she to ask Russia and her allies, she would have to invite China, too, and this she wants to avoid. It's one thing to tolerate those Chinese railroad construction men with no guns, but quite another to have a whole army of Chinese with weapons. No, not in North Vietnam.

Informed US officials feel that Hanoi does not fear the Soviets even if

they come armed. And, perhaps, this is so, because Hanoi knows that Moscow is not eager to send armed men so far away to so many risks of greater conflicts. In fact, Moscow may yet return to its pre-October 1964 attitude even in economic matters. Its large and growing investment in North Vietnam may be curtailed if things calm down in southeast Asia—for instance, if China should relax in her post-Mao Tse-tung phase and an accommodation with Mao's more sensible successors became possible.

A Washington observer speculated:

If this happens, Khrushchev's heirs may come to believe, as Khrushchev apparently did, that North Vietnam is after all too distant from Russia, and why not make a deal with Peking, exchanging, say, that wonderful machine-tool plant in Hanoi for some far more desirable properties closer to home—in Sinkiang, for instance?

MILITARY REVIEW BINDERS

Are your back issues of the Military Review becoming dog-eared? Bind them in a sturdy, hard-covered binder.

- Holds 12 issues and the index.
- Gold lettering on maroon.
- \$2.50 plus 50 cents postage.

Send check or money order to: Book Department, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027. Please include name, address, and Zip code.

