

Kissinger and the historical record

ANTHONY BARNETT talks to Vietnam's LE DUC THO.

Is Henry Kissinger's book *The White House Years* a reliable record of US activity during the Nixon administration? One person in a position to answer this question is Le Duc Tho (right), the Hanoi Politbureau member who sat opposite Kissinger for many hours in the negotiating sessions which led to the Paris Peace Accords. A substantial part of Kissinger's book is concerned with these talks. Le Duc Tho challenges Kissinger's veracity, and is scornful of his world view. He sees him as a man outdated by at least a century.

I sought out Le Duc Tho's views on a recent trip to the Vietnamese capital. I put down questions in writing, and asked for a written response in English. This seemed both the most exact procedure, given the length of Kissinger's book, and the one most likely to succeed.

The administration in Hanoi is extremely baffling. It combines extremes of competence and inefficiency, people are both unnecessarily secretive and unexpectedly frank. Relations with Westerners are contradictory, in a way which perhaps reflects recent history. The anti-war movement assisted the Vietnamese and they are grateful, yet at the same time their country has been singled out for military and political victimisation. Thus Le Duc Tho's appeal for international assistance in understanding Pol Pot, which I mention below, should be read in combination with the fact that William Shawcross has just been refused a visa. This despite the fact that he was among the first to recognise that Cambodia's contemporary history is one of the utmost moral importance for our time. Such action by Hanoi is made all the more paradoxical by the fact that figures such as Arnaud de Borchgrave of *Newsweek* have been allowed in recently.

Le Duc Tho's response to my questions was only delivered on the penultimate day of my stay. I was therefore unable to put supplementary questions to him. Nonetheless, I had taken the opportunity to register certain differences between interviewer and interviewee. When it seemed possible that my suggestion would be accepted I put down



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three types of questions: those concerned with Kissinger's book, some about the actual negotiations so far as Cambodia was concerned, and others on more general matters. These latter ranged from relations to China and the USSR, to Vietnam's historic expansion southwards and its attempt to conquer Cambodia in the 1830s (which was a costly failure). I made it clear that my analysis of China differed from Hanoi's official view, and I suggested that it was time to abandon Ho Chi Minh's tradition of not speaking openly about differences with fraternal countries, an aspect of political democracy particularly important for Cambodia. Le Duc Tho decided that he could answer for the record only the first two sets of questions. In a private talk he alluded to some of the others, and I also discussed these with Viet-

nam's new Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach.

The obvious come-back question which follows from Le Duc Tho's replies concerns Cambodia. He emphasises that Hanoi assisted the Khmer revolutionaries, yet denounces their leader as 'more Maoist than Mao'. Why then did Vietnam back Pol Pot through 1976? It seems that Hanoi viewed his animosity towards the Vietnamese as an understandable expression of nationalism, which would at least guarantee Cambodia's independence from Peking.

If this was so, it was a fatal miscalculation. Today, the Vietnamese do not fully believe what happened in Cambodia, despite their propaganda about the 'genocidal Pol Pot Ieng Sary clique'. Le Duc Tho could laugh at Kissinger. He was composed when he discussed policy in Cambodia today; Vietnamese forces would not get bogged down, and would in time withdraw, he insisted.

But when he spoke of Pol Pot a genuine pre-occupation seemed to emerge. The Cambodian people do not understand how it could have happened, nor do the Vietnamese, he stated, and he went on to urge foreign scholars to help explain how Pol Pot's regime could have come about. A note of inquiry about the modern world was struck that cannot be found at all in Kissinger's memoirs. Perhaps it was due to this capacity that, in the end, Le Duc Tho got the better of the American.

Question: In an interview you gave to Cora Weiss at the end of 1973, you said: 'During our talks I told Kissinger that I will not write a book. He said he would. I said, "Do not distort the truth"'. Are there any distortions or omissions in his account of the negotiations?

Answer: The NEW STATESMAN review called the memoirs of Kissinger 'a web of untruths'. In my opinion, this is a quite precise assessment.

As everybody knows, the United States could have come out of Vietnam in 1969. But the Nixon-Kissinger administration nurtured an illusion of using 'Vietnamisation' of the war together with the 'China card' to pull out of South Vietnam militarily - while still maintaining its presence politically through the puppet administration in Saigon. Its aim was to perpetuate the partition of Vietnam.

But the United States had to pull out militarily, which led to the collapse of the Thieu administration and the complete liberation of South Vietnam. That was the biggest ever setback for the United States. Mr Kissinger cannot tell the truth about this.

Instead, Mr Kissinger has tried to 'rewrite history' in an attempt to claim as his own success the policy which led to the setback. He attempts to justify the crimes that the Nixon-Kissinger administration further perpetrated against the Indochinese peoples and the

additional losses in lives, money, material and national dignity to the United States which they caused. That is the main distortion in the chapters dealing with the war in Vietnam and Indochina.

The book says that the United States had to carry out B52 bombing at the end of 1972, because Vietnam wanted to prolong the negotiations and refused to sign the agreement the fundamental content of which had been agreed upon by both sides in October.

As a matter of fact, it was the United States that did a complete about-face. As both sides had agreed, Kissinger should have come to Hanoi on 23 October 1972 to initial the Agreement, which could have been officially signed on 31 October 1972. On 21 October 1972, Nixon sent a message to Prime Minister Pham Van Dong saying that the United States 'considers the Agreement complete'.

But on the following day, 22 October, Kissinger said it was still necessary to hold another session and, therefore, the Agreement could not be signed on 31 October. That was why the negotiation was prolonged, solely because of the United States.

The US manoeuvre in that terror bombing was that the Nixon-Kissinger administration hoped it could seriously weaken the potentialities of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, thereby forcing us to accept additional terms posed by the United States. On the

contrary, the US lost 32 B52s, together with many pilots captured or killed. At the same time there was angry condemnation of the Nixon and Kissinger administration by world opinion, including opinion in the US itself. The victory of this 'Dien Bien Phu in the air' compelled the United States to sign an Agreement the content of which was not in the main different from that in October.

THE BOOK CLAIMS that I had 'secretly' told Kissinger that 'the mission of the Vietnamese people was not only to take over South Vietnam but to dominate the whole of Indochina as well'. This is a brazen fabrication.

In fact, when Mr Kissinger asked me to discuss the 'neutralisation' of Kampuchea (Cambodia), I told him that he and I had only the right to discuss the Vietnam problem.

To understand why he has made up such 'secret' remarks, you must remember that the book also serves Kissinger's desire to return to office - despite his record of war crimes. So he had joined in a new anti-Vietnam campaign, in which Washington and Peking are now engaged.

The book also states that I had suggested to Mr Kissinger that Thieu should be eliminated. This too is a fabrication. We did not fight against one person, but against the entire reactionary regime. The elimination of the



Le Duc Tho at the Paris Peace Negotiations, flanked by Vietnam's new Foreign Minister, Nguyen Co Thach (right) and Xuan Thuy (left).

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individual chieftain is the traditional job of the United States.

It was the United States that had previously eliminated Diem, and Mr Kissinger himself suggested more than once that Thieu should be replaced by big Minh*.

I told him once that 'you are a liar'. Even his close associates, Helmut Sonnenfeldt, for example, also confirmed that he 'tells lies because that is his nature'.

Question: What is your estimate of Kissinger's real role in US policy making? In the aftermath of Nixon's downfall some people are presenting Kissinger as the main architect of American foreign policy, especially with regard to China. Kissinger himself, however, in the midst of one policy crisis, over India, said: 'We are the President's men'. Although a skilful servant of power, was Kissinger ever in fact its master?

Answer: When successful, Mr Kissinger wants to claim his own contribution. When failing to achieve success, he shifts the responsibility on to Nixon.

Notwithstanding, Nixon and Kissinger complement each other to such an extent that public opinion calls them 'Nissinger'. And both of them must be held responsible for the US foreign policy in the years 1968-74.

Kissinger typified post Second World War US diplomacy - its aggressive nature and arrogance. That is why, although politically he sometimes praised highly the policy of negotiation and compromise, basically, he attempted to use military strength. Threats, treachery and deception were his stock in trade.

Yet he is living in the 20th century. The balance of forces favours socialism, national independence, peace and democracy. Kissinger is under the illusion that he can repeat the 19th century policy of Metternich, and in his vanity he thinks this shows his mastery of realpolitik.

Actually, he and Nixon were naive and their compatriots who opposed the war were more realistic. Today his effort to justify the past could lead to further setbacks. The same applies to China, as it has already discovered through its support of Pol Pot aggression against Vietnam.

*A tall general who became president in the last hours of the Saigon regime. (Ed.)

Question: Kissinger presents the Paris Peace Accords as a complete triumph for Nixon's and his diplomacy. He presents an interpretation of the Accords in which they are seen as allowing the US to provide unlimited military supplies to the Thieu regime, as prohibiting the replacement of North Vietnamese forces south of the old DMZ, and as preserving the Saigon Government. He states that Nixon would have used 'the means necessary to enforce a peace'. Recently, an American liberal columnist, Anthony Lewis, described the Christmas bombing as establishing a level of violence that America would be prepared to repeat, to maintain peace (*New York Times*, 2/12/79). Do you think this is accurate? If so, to what extent did you realise at the time that Nixon considered the withdrawal of US troops as a means of perpetuating the bombing?

Answer: The objectives of the Nixon-Kissinger administration in the Paris Agreement were to withdraw the US troops but at the same time to maintain the puppet administration to implement its neo-colonialism in South Vietnam.

The United States, in fact, was compelled:

- To recognise all the fundamental national rights of the Vietnamese people written down in Chapter I, Article I of the Agreement.
- To accept the presence of Vietnamese armed forces in South Vietnam while the United States had to withdraw all its troops from South Vietnam.
- To accept the existence of two zones of control, two administrations, two armies and three political forces in South Vietnam.

These provisions created extremely favourable conditions, both military and political, for the victorious Spring 1975 general offensives completely to liberate the South and reunify our Motherland.

Question: Kissinger treats Watergate and the downfall of the Nixon presidency as an arbitrary and irrational event, quite unconnected to the way Nixon conducted policy. Yet the secret telephone tapping and other manoeuvres against political opponents began

Next week, Anthony Barnett concludes his three-part series on Cambodia.

with the 'secret' bombing of Cambodia and Nixon's decision to obtain a military victory despite US opinion. How did you view Watergate? Did your interpretation of it change at all, as it developed?

Answer: The Watergate scandal was the biggest and worst political crisis in the US history and also a natural aftermath of the aggressive war in Indochina, and dirty tricks carried out by successive US administrations, particularly the Nixon administration in an attempt to conceal their deeds from and deceive the American people.

Question: In your Foreign Ministry's White Paper, 'The Truth about Vietnam-Chinese relations over the last thirty years', Mao's inviting Nixon to Peking is described as a decisive turning point and a betrayal of the Vietnamese, the Indochinese, and the world revolutions. What do you think would have happened if Mao had not imposed this policy?

Answer: If the Peking ruling circles had pursued a correct revolutionary line, the fight of the Vietnamese people would have had much better conditions on the way to victory and US imperialism would have met even more difficulties and the world revolutionary movement would certainly have been marked by more vigorous developments. Nonetheless, the revolutionary currents will continue to develop.

Question: In the *White Paper*, America and China are charged with making a deal in which the delivery of a divided Vietnam and a stable Thieu regime would be traded for Peking's supremacy over Taiwan. Indeed Kissinger states specifically that there was a 'linkage' between Taiwan and Vietnam established in the Shanghai communique (*The White House Years*, p. 1077). He also says that around the issue of Taiwan there was not 'a sharp bargain but ... a joint understanding'. What, in your opinion, was the understanding reached by the US and China in 1972?

Answer: The 1972 Agreement between the United States and China marked the beginning of the open and comprehensive collusion between imperialism and the Peking rulers. It meant that the US would be assisted by China to settle the Vietnam question to the advantage of the US and disadvantage of Vietnam, and would use the 'China card' to oppose the Soviet Union and the world revolutionary movement.

Exploiting the United States' need to solve the Vietnam question in its favour, and its anti-Soviet and anti-world-revolution positions, the Chinese rulers attempted to turn China into one of the three world superpowers, so as to have a say in solving international problems, especially in Asia, and to seek a solution for the Taiwan question.

Question: When the US demanded changes and commitments in addition to your draft of the Accords, did it try to pressure Vietnam into a Cambodian cease-fire? In particular, it has been said, by Cambodians, that the Christmas bombing was in part an attempt to get a Cambodian settlement, and that Kissinger threatened Hanoi, should Phnom Penh fall to the Khmer Rouge. Is this true?

Answer: Our position was that Vietnam should not negotiate on Kampuchea's behalf. Vietnam respected the independence and sovereignty of the Kampuchean people and supported them, whether negotiating or fighting.

The aims of the Christmas B52 bombing by the US were not to put pressure on Vietnam

so as to obtain a solution to Kampuchea, I have discussed its purpose above.

Kissinger made no threat as to the possibility of Phnom Penh falling to Pol Pot - Ieng Sary, and we ourselves helped the Kampuchean people and contributed to the liberation of Phnom Penh.

Question: What did Kissinger say the United States would do to Cambodia, if a cease-fire was not obtained there?

Answer: Mr Kissinger made no reference to this question.

Question: It has been argued, I think plausibly, that the tremendously intensive American bombing of Cambodia from January to August 1973, so brutalised the countryside and punished the revolutionary forces, that it helped to create the social and psychological conditions that made the draconian measures of the Pol Pot regime possible. But if Pol Pot had accepted a cease-fire the bombing would not have taken place. Furthermore, the revolutionary forces were perhaps better placed to go over to political struggle in Cambodia than they were in South Vietnam. Why did Pol Pot refuse a cease-fire in 1973, in

your view? What arguments were put to the Cambodian leadership by Pham Hung, when talks were held in Cambodia at that time? What do you think would have happened had they agreed to a cease-fire?

Answer: The bombing of Kampuchea from January to August, 1973 was not much heavier than before. If comparison is to be made according to the American sources, the amount of US bombs dropped in Laos and North Vietnam was much more than that dropped in Kampuchea.

The genocidal policy of Pol Pot - Ieng Sary was in the main more Maoist than Mao's, was abetted and aided by the Peking rulers and had nothing to do with the US bombing in Kampuchea. Shortly before Phnom Penh was liberated, they had already started a cruel and much-hated policy in newly liberated areas.

In their mind, a cease-fire at that time was not to their advantage. With the Paris Agreement signed, they knew that the US defeat was obvious. The Agreement paved the way and created favourable conditions, both military and political, for the victory of the Kampuchean revolution. Therefore, they wanted

to fight to the end in order to seize total power in Kampuchea, rather than to have a cease-fire and then to negotiate a political solution.

Question: Given the importance of these issues, did you try to circulate your own arguments and explain your own policy to Cambodian cadres, given that your forces were there at the time?

Answer: It is our view-point that the affairs of Kampuchea are to be settled by the Kampucheans.

Question: How did you relate to the Cambodian revolution after the breach of 1973? Did you make any efforts to supply aid and assistance? Were Vietnamese forces able to obtain rice supplies from Cambodia at all?

Answer: After 1973, the Vietnamese forces were faced with obstacles created by Pol Pot, to their moving about and purchasing necessary foodstuffs. Yet we continued giving them aid and helped them in the transportation of weapons and ammunitions and assisted them in other necessary things in the liberation of Phnom Penh.

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Christopher Hitchens

Oxford's unlikely liaisons

THERE COMES a time in the life of all police states when their representatives go just a little bit too far. In the case of Czechoslovakia, there have been many such moments. But the guardians of law and order really exceeded themselves when they interrogated Professor Jan Patocka. Formerly Professor of Philosophy at Charles University in Prague, Patocka emerged from an honourable retirement to help write Charter 77. Despite his advanced age, the police interrogated him mercilessly until he suffered a heart attack. He was taken to hospital, but the police pursued him even there, persisting with their questioning until he had a brain haemorrhage and died. Julius Tomin and his philosophy seminars go under the name of 'The Patocka University' as a mark of respect: respect both for philosophy and for courage.

The Czech regime's methods of philosophical discourse have led to an unusual and interesting cross-fertilisation. It might not have been predicted that the Oxford school of philosophy would take an activist position on anything much - Ernest Gellner's remark about 'the Narodniks of North Oxford' being, in many minds, the summation of a school of thought. However, when the Patocka University appealed to the philosophers of the world for support, Oxford was the first (and so far the only) faculty to respond.

Julius Tomin had written, in May of 1978, to Oxford, Harvard, the Free University of West Berlin and the University of Heidelberg. Perhaps characteristically, Oxford mislaid the letter, and the subfaculty of philosophy did not see it until January of 1979. However, at that meeting it was unanimously resolved to send three faculty members to Prague in the spring and summer. The programme of visits since then has included speakers from London, from Regensburg and from the Australian National University. But in Prague, whatever the nationality or language of the guest, he or she is always known as 'the Oxford visitor'.

Tomin's own work as a philosopher has aroused considerable interest in the West. He has been invited to give the Vaughan Memorial Lectures at Balliol College, Oxford (last delivered by Jurgen Habermas) and has been elected a member of the Aristotelian Society. In a Czechoslovakia without 'normalisation', he might have risen to the eminence of a Patocka. Indeed, he deliberately gave up a secure job in an American university in order to

return to his home country after the 1968 invasion. The party hack who denounced him in a Prague newspaper - referring throughout to one 'Julian Bobin, parasite and pseudo-philosopher' and attacking him as 'a psychopath' - was certainly less patriotic than Tomin.

THE CZECH authorities have also exposed their bad faith in other ways. They may denounce Tomin now as a corrupter of youth, but there was a time when they offered him 50,000 crowns to translate Greek philosophy into Czech - if he gave up his seminars. Never was hemlock refused so firmly.

The hard/soft routine has been sustained by threats of psychiatric detention (on one occasion, and to the eternal credit of the doctor concerned, a request for the internment of Tomin was refused) and by the sort of physical pressure detailed in the NS two weeks ago. The fact that Tomin's flat has been under a five-month siege speaks for itself. So does the bullying of his children and the illegal maltreatment of foreign visitors.

The strength of bureaucracy is also its weakness. When Tomin first wrote to Oxford he mentioned that there was nothing illegal, even in the Czech 'constitution', about people visiting him to discuss philosophy. He also pointed out drily that:

Our country needs foreign currency (the living standards of the representatives and executors of state power cannot these days be maintained without Western goods) and so foreigners are welcome. You thus have an opportunity to come to Czechoslovakia and to visit us.

Since that invitation, philosophers as varied in their outlook as Professor Charles Taylor and Roger Scruton (reading, as it were, from Left to Right) have taken up the offer. So have Alan Montefiore and, as he reported after his illegal deportation, Dr William Newton-Smith. Others no less distinguished have also made the trip but, in the present abysmal circumstances, prefer to remain anonymous.

This is partly because they want to go again. All the guests concur in the view that Tomin's class has an exceptionally high standard of discussion and interest. This is partly because of the book famine in Czechoslovakia (a famine, he it said, that is man-made). One visitor came from West Germany with eight copies of the works of Berkeley; Oxford sent ten copies of the writing of David Hume; the Patocka students themselves unearthed a few editions of William James.

The result of this amateur but highly concentrated effort is an extraordinary freshness and originality in discussion. Visiting speakers find that no assumption is taken for granted, and no premises established without debate. The mere fact that

young people will take such risks to attend is proof enough of the vitality of the proceedings. (These are, incidentally, open to anybody including the secret police. No invitation or introduction is required.)

ONE STRESSES these points in order to emphasise that nobody is patronising Tomin. Kathy Wilkes, a philosophy tutor at St Hilda's College, Oxford, re-wrote an article on Plato for the *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* after one conversation with him about the first draft. The fact that he had written a book on Descartes only came to light after a long acquaintance between him and his supporters.

The brutal disruption of two weeks ago is more ominous than it might sound to those who are used to news of police-state tactics from Prague. Until recently, very few of Tomin's visitors had been interfered with - though they were undoubtedly under surveillance. It is feared by some who are close to the exchange that Tomin will be charged with subversion or 'parasitism' (the delightful charge which the Czechoslovak state reserves for those it has made unemployed just as it charges rent for prison cells from those awaiting trial). Even so, there is some evidence that victims with international support fare better than those without. In the meantime, and whatever opinion may be held about some of Tomin's particular theses, we have to defend the work of the free intelligence and bear in mind, as someone said, that 'the imagination, like certain wild animals, will not breed in captivity'.

Donations for the Patocka University should be sent to The Secretary, Sub-Faculty of Philosophy, 10 Merton Street, Oxford.

THE RELIGION OF TRUTH

Truth is that which is. Our being aware more fully of this reality is a matter of the development of the relevant but normally dormant faculties. We can know much more about the inner and spiritual realms of nature than is generally realised. The religion of truth is a matter of direct experience rather than adherence to dogma and belief.

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