



James Godbolt. *Den norske vietnambevegelsen*. Oslo: Oslo Academic Press, 2010. 381 S. ISBN 978-82-7477-444-5.

Reviewed by Helge Pharo

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## J. Gobolt: Den norske vietnambevegelsen

James Godbolt has produced a most readable account of the Norwegian Vietnam movement. He expertly delineates its origins, its composition, and its organization and development. The factional struggles and the disparate ideologies of its component parts are presented with understanding and some sympathy. Godbolt situates the movement within many different contexts, as an international protest movement as well as a Norwegian grass roots movement, whose intent it was to change the structure of Norwegian politics or more modestly to change the course of Norwegian foreign policy. The book is a revised doctoral dissertation somewhat simplified in terminology and argument to reach a broader audience and basically covering the period from 1964 until 1975. The book is richly and expertly illustrated.

Godbolt starts his story in 1964/65 after having noted that until that point only the Foreign Ministry and the foreign policy opposition of the Labour left had paid much attention to the conflicts in Indochina. The main exception was the domestic uproar caused by Foreign Minister Halvard Lange's support for the 1952 NATO resolution on Indochina. Godbolt vividly describes the growth of the protest movement in the two years to 1967. The initial Solidarity Committee for Vietnam, founded in 1965, was a broadly based coalition of the young, the middle aged and the somewhat elderly, of properly attired men wearing coat and tie and women with appropriate hats on the one side, and on the other the young who were increasingly casually dressed and wore increasingly long hair. Politically the supporters ranged from the far left to the centre right, and in socio-economic terms their backgrounds were equally varied.

The main antecedents of the movement may be found in the organized protests against nuclear weapons and tests as well as in the 'No' to Norwegian Membership in the EEC that gained huge popular support in the early 1960s. The middle aged members of the movement who had honed their organizational skills in both the main and more insignificant protests of the 1950s and early 1960s constituted the backbone in the early phase. Some of the most prominent of the older members had a long history of criticizing Norwegian foreign policy, dating at least back to the 1949 decision to join NATO. They were key players when the Socialist People's Party was founded in 1961 by Labour Party members who were either thrown out of the Party for factional activities or left voluntarily as their comrades-in-arms were forced out. The core of the younger cadres came out of the youth movement of the Socialist People's Party. The nature of the American warfare in Vietnam was presented by an increasingly critical press led by the liberal *Dagbladet*, and the support for the movement grew. Yet, the core groups' interests went far beyond protesting against the war in front of the US embassy, and Godbolt is unambiguous that many of the oppositional groups used the Vietnam wars as an opportunity for intensifying their activities. The movement reached its first zenith in 1967. The number of supporters grew dramatically, the press turned increasingly critical of the US, and the Labour Party's biannual convention expressed its solidarity with the Vietnamese people and expressed support for dissenting voices in the US. Labour, after being turned out of power in the 1965 parliamentary elections, moved significantly to the left while out of office. Godbolt's explanation of the volte-face over Vietnam is based on the as-

sumption of a changing intellectual climate in Norway. Partly it amounted to a revulsion at the American way of war due to genuine humanitarian concerns, partly we must look to generational conflicts and the presumably rigid attitudes of the pro-American old guard leadership.

The analysis of the ideological foundations of the movement as well as the construction of the organizations and the factional struggles are significant additions to the Norwegian historiography of the 1960s and 1970s. The discussion of the split in the movement in 1967 into the Norwegian Solidarity Committee for Vietnam and the Vietnam movement in Norway, and the half-hearted convergence of the two organizations by 1972, represent particularly enlightening insights into ideological fervour and political scheming on the left during a period of political turmoil. By 1967 the two organizations entertained incompatible goals: The core cadres of the Vietnam Movement were still primarily concerned with the conflict in Vietnam while they also wanted to change the course of Norwegian foreign policy. Many of them wanted Norway out of NATO. But they were by no means committed Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries as were the leading lights of the Solidarity Committee (Solkom). The Committee was no longer a protest movement, but rather the anti-imperialist wing of the Workers Communist Party. Godbolt's rendition of the machinations of the opposing organizations towards the end of the war is a high point of the book. The movements are analyzed in a highly sophisticated way, as popular movements, as ideologies and as loosely, respectively tightly, organized political structures.

Godbolt's contextualization of the Vietnam movement, in terms of Norwegian politics and foreign policy is

less interesting and far less exhaustively narrated. While the movement is treated with subtlety and provides novel insights, the context is painted in simpler colours, as sympathies for the Vietnam protests carry the author away. For example, his claim that right wing populists dominated the streets of Norway (p. 38) in the spring of 1965 is unsubstantiated. When he touches on the relatively modest role of the Norwegian Communist Party in the protests he implies that the cause for its decline was McCarthyism (p. 43) rather than their own choice of policies from 1947. Godbolt's use of the term 'the right' and 'dark blue' are more likely to confuse than to enlighten readers. In conclusion he claims that once the war ended the right gained the moral upper hand in the new Vietnam debate. Internal problems in Indochina allowed 'the right to take a ferocious moral revenge by discontinuing Norwegian aid to Vietnam at the beginning of the 1980s' (p. 319). The relevant volumes of the histories of Norwegian foreign relations and foreign aid do not support such a conclusion. In presenting this conclusion Godbolt neglects to tell us that termination was a rather longish process mainly taking place in the late 1970s, and aid was brought to an end by Labour governments in power from the 1973 to the 1981 election.

The contextual weaknesses notwithstanding, and also taking into account rather sloppy copy editing such as allowing Senator Wayne Morse to be introduced as Morris (p. 143), and reducing the parliamentary caucus of the Socialist Peoples Party from two to one (p. 14), the book is a major contribution to the study of the Vietnam protests. While the context needs a very critical reading, the main substance is likely to remain the accepted version for quite some time.

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