

= Ba C?t =

Lê Quang Vinh ( 1923 ? 13 July 1956 ) , popularly known as Ba C?t ( " C?t " in Vietnamese is " severed " which refers to the finger he had partially severed and ' Ba ' , the number three in Vietnamese , refers to his being the family 's second born child ) was a military commander of the Hòa H?o religious sect , which operated from the Mekong Delta and controlled various parts of southern Vietnam during the 1940s and early 1950s .

Ba C?t and his forces fought the Vietnamese National Army ( VNA ) , the Vi?t Minh , and the Cao ?ài religious movement from 1943 until his capture in 1956 . Known for his idiosyncrasies , he was regarded as an erratic and cruel leader who fought with little ideological purpose . His sobriquet came from the self @-@ amputation of his left index finger ( although it was erroneously reported that it was his middle or " third cut finger " ) . He later swore not to cut his hair until the communist Vi?t Minh were defeated . Ba C?t frequently made alliances with various Vietnamese factions and the French . He invariably accepted the material support offered in return for his cooperation , and then broke the agreement ? nevertheless , the French made deals with him on five occasions . The French position was weak because their military forces had been depleted by World War II , and they had great difficulty in re @-@ establishing control over French Indochina , which had been left with a power vacuum after the defeat of Japan .

In mid @-@ 1955 , the tide turned against the various sects , as Prime Minister Ngô ?ình Di?m of the State of Vietnam and his VNA began to consolidate their grip on the south . Ba C?t and his allies were driven into the jungle , and their position was threatened by government offensives . After almost a year of fighting , Ba C?t was captured . He was sentenced to death and publicly beheaded in C?n Th? .

= = Early life and background = =

Ba C?t was born circa 1923 in Long Xuyên , a regional town in the Mekong Delta , in the far south of Vietnam . He was orphaned at an early age and adopted by a local peasant family . Ba C?t was illiterate and was known from childhood as a temperamental and fiery person . The family 's rice paddies were confiscated by a prominent landlord , the father of Nguy?n Ng?c Th? . Ba C?t 's bitter personal experience imbued him with a permanent and fanatical hatred towards landowners . Th? rose to become a leading politician in the 1950s and played a key role in Ba C?t 's eventual capture and execution . An aura of mystery surrounded Ba C?t during his life , and foreign journalists incorrectly reported that he had severed his finger as part of a vow to defeat the French . As Ba C?t became more fanatical in his religious beliefs and spent increasing time with local religious men , Ba C?t 's father demanded that he work more in the family 's rice fields . A defiant Ba C?t severed his index finger , which was necessary for work in the rice paddies .

Vietnam was a tumultuous place during Ba C?t 's youth , particularly in the Mekong Delta . In 1939 , Hu?nh Phú S? founded the Hòa H?o religious movement , and within a year had gained more than 100 @,@ 000 followers . He drew adherents for two reasons : the prophecies he made about the outbreak of World War II and the conquest of South @-@ East Asia by Japan , which proved to be correct ; and his work as a mystical healer ? his patients claimed to have been miraculously cured from all manner of serious illnesses after seeing him , when Western medicine had failed . S? 's cult @-@ like appeal greatly alarmed the French colonial authorities . During World War II , Imperial Japan invaded and seized control of Vietnam from France ; its defeat and withdrawal at the end of the war in 1945 left a power vacuum in the country .

The Hòa H?o formed their own army and administration during the war , and started a de facto state in their Mekong Delta stronghold . They came into conflict with the Cao ?ài , another new religious movement , which also boasted a private army and controlled a nearby region of southern Vietnam around Tây Ninh . Meanwhile , in Saigon , the Bình Xuyên organised crime syndicate ruled much of the city through its gangster militia . These three southern forces vied for control of southern Vietnam with the main protagonists : the French , who were attempting to re @-@ establish colonial control across the entire nation ; and the communist @-@ dominated Vi?t Minh , who sought

Vietnamese independence .

At the time , the many groups vying for power ? including their respective factions ? engaged in alliances of convenience that were frequently broken . Historian David Elliott wrote : " [ T ] he most important eventual cause of the French decline was the inherently unstable nature of the political alliances they had devised ... [ T ] he history of the French relations with the Hoa Hao sect is a telling illustration of the pitfalls of short @-@ term political deals between forces whose long @-@ term interests conflict . "

The Hòa H?o initially engaged in large @-@ scale clashes with the Vi?t Minh in 1945 , but by mid @-@ 1946 the two groups had agreed to stop fighting each other and fight the French instead . However , in June 1946 , S? became estranged from his military leaders and started the Dân Xã ( Social Democratic Party ) . Because of his charisma , the Vi?t Minh saw S? as a threat and assassinated him , leaving the Hòa H?o leaderless and causing S? 's military leaders to go their separate ways . The split caused an increase in violence as the various Hòa H?o factions engaged in conflicts among themselves .

= = Career = =

Ba C?t joined the Hòa H?o militia when it was formed in 1943 ? 44 , and became a commander within a year . He was feared by his enemies , and was described as " a sort of lean Rasputin " who claimed to be immortal . According to historian and writer Bernard Fall , " The hapless farmers who were under the rule of the maniacal Ba Cut fared worse [ than those under other military leaders ] , for the latter [ Ba C?t ] was given to fits of incredible cruelty and had no sense of public duty . " American journalist Joseph Alsop described Ba C?t as " war @-@ drunk " . Ba C?t was famous for inventing a torture contraption that drilled a steel nail through the victim 's ear , a device he used to extort villagers and wealthy landlords to fund his forces . He was said to have " arranged temporary marriages between his troops and village girls " . He raised a large amount of funds for the Hòa H?o and himself personally by charging traders and landlords high prices to stop pirates in the local area . The severed heads of the pirates were subsequently impaled on stakes and put on public display .

In 1947 , he led his own faction of the sect after its various military leaders pursued their own policies towards the French and H? Chí Minh 's Vi?t Minh in the wake of S? 's death . At the time , France was in a ruinous financial state following World War II and was experiencing great difficulty in its attempts to re @-@ establish control over its colonies . Ba C?t had only 1 @,@ 000 men in five battalions at the time , fewer than 5 % of Hòa H?o forces , whereas Tr?n V?n Soái had 15 @,@ 000 men . The French tried to maintain their hold with a divide and conquer strategy towards the Hòa H?o . They coaxed Soái into joining with them and recognised him as the leader of the Hòa H?o . In 1948 , Ba C?t rallied to the French and Soái , but broke away again soon after , relocating to ??ng Tháp Province and resuming his military activities against the French .

In 1950 , Ba C?t was involved in a battle with another Hòa H?o leader , Nguy?n Giác Ng? . He was defeated and driven from the district of Ch? M?i in February , provoking Soái to attack Ngo . Ba C?t then moved to Th?t N?t and began attacking the civilians and the French forces there . The French saw the disagreements as an opportunity to divide the Hòa H?o and gain an anti @-@ Vi?t Minh ally , and offered material aid , which Ba C?t accepted . Ba C?t repeatedly made treaties with the French colonial forces to fight the Vi?t Minh in return for arms and money , but he broke his end of the bargain and sometimes fought the Cao ?ài instead of the communists . He made five such deals with the French , but he abandoned his military responsibilities each time . It was said that Ba C?t sometimes broke away with the encouragement of Soái , who was still allied to the French , but nevertheless is believed to have given Ba C?t weapons to fight the French . The French continued to furnish him with supplies despite his disloyalty and unreliability because they lacked the personnel to patrol all of Vietnam but had spare equipment . Some historians have claimed Ba C?t 's anti @-@ French activities were not taken seriously as he was able to pass through French checkpoints without incident . There are also reports that he was accompanied by French intelligence agents during periods when he was nominally opposed to the French . The other Hòa H?o commanders generally had the same general outlook as Ba C?t ; they were stridently opposed to the Vi?t Minh

due to S? 's assassination , and sometimes fought alongside and received supplies from the French , but at times they lapsed into apathy and refused to attack .

The most notable instance of Ba C?t 's abandoning the fight against the Vi?t Minh came in mid @-@ 1953 . At that time , his forces had been helping to defend the regional Mekong Delta town of M? Tho , but the French decided to transfer more of the military power to their more mainstream allies , the Vietnamese National Army ( VNA ) . As the French tried to undermine his position , tensions with Ba C?t increased . On 25 June , the Hòa H?o leader ordered his men to evacuate their French @-@ supplied bases ; they took their weapons with them and razed the camps . Ba C?t then withdrew his forces from a string of military posts in the Plain of Reeds and retreated to Châu ??c in the extreme south of the country . As a result , the French @-@ aligned presence in the Mekong Delta was severely dented and the Vi?t Minh made substantial gains in the area . Eventually , the French defeat at ?i?n Biên Ph? in May 1954 signaled the end of French Indochina .

When the Geneva Conference in July 1954 ended the First Indochina War , it handed North Vietnam to H? Chí Minh 's Vi?t Minh , and the south to the State of Vietnam . To reunify the country , national elections were scheduled for 1956 , following which the French would withdraw from Indochina . The partition of Vietnam angered Ba C?t and he vowed not to cut his hair until the nation was reunified . Having fought against the Vi?t Minh since 1947 , Ba C?t 's principal criticism of Prime Minister Ngô ?ình Di?m 's State of Vietnam government stemmed from his belief that Di?m had been too passive in rejecting the partition , and that half of the country should not have been yielded to the communists .

In mid @-@ 1954 , General Nguy?n V?n Hinh , the head of the State of Vietnam 's VNA , announced that he did not respect the leadership of Prime Minister Di?m , and vowed to overthrow him . The coup never materialised and Hinh was forced into exile , but not before appointing Ba C?t to the rank of colonel in the VNA in an attempt to undermine Di?m , as the Hòa H?o warlord was openly contemptuous of the prime minister . In August , Ba C?t and his 3 @, @ 000 men broke from the VNA and left their Th?t N?t base for the jungle , and fought against those who had briefly been their comrades ; this put him at odds with most Hòa H?o leaders , who accepted government payments to integrate their forces into the VNA . Operation Ecaille , the initial military offensive by the VNA against Ba C?t was a failure , possibly because the details of the planned attack on his forces were leaked to him by Soái , a Hòa H?o member of the National Defence Committee .

During the transition period between the signing of the Geneva Accords and the planned reunification elections , South Vietnam remained in chaos as the VNA tried to subdue the remaining autonomous factions of the Hòa H?o , Cao ?ài , and Bình Xuyên militias . In early 1955 , during a battle with the Cao ?ài forces of Trình Minh Th? , after a dispute over control of the That Son region , Ba C?t was wounded in a disputed incident . Th? claimed to have tried initiating peace talks with Ba C?t , but received no reply , so he decided to try to capture his rival . He sent some of his militant disciples to infiltrate Ba C?t 's forces and try to capture the Hòa H?o leader . When they located Ba C?t and surrounded him , he refused to surrender but instead tried to shoot his way out . Ba C?t was severely wounded by a bullet that penetrated his chest . It seemed that he would die , but a French Air Force helicopter flew in and airlifted him to a colonial hospital . He recovered but in the interim the fighting stopped . Another account claims the two military leaders had been on good terms and exchanging diplomatic missions , but that the skirmish was caused by one of Ba C?t 's aides addressing the envoy in an abrasive and rude manner , and that the injuries were minor . Yet another account holds that the reaction by Th? 's envoy was premeditated and that the claim the firing was in response to rudeness was merely a cover for an assassination attempt . According to this theory , Th? , whose units were then being integrated into Di?m 's VNA , had given orders to target Ba C?t . This was allegedly done on the orders of CIA agent Edward Lansdale , who was trying to help secure Di?m in power at the time . Lansdale has been accused of failing in an earlier attempt to bribe Ba C?t to cease his activities .

By this time , with France preparing to withdraw from Indochina , senior French officers had begun to undermine Di?m 's leadership and his attempts to stabilise South Vietnam . The VNA later implicated the French in the organisation of weapons air drops to Ba C?t , prompting a protest from Di?m 's government . Di?m complained to a French general , alleging that Ba C?t 's men were using

French equipment that was of higher quality than that given to the VNA . The Hòa Hảo accused Diệm of treachery in his negotiations with various groups . They charged the prime minister with integrating Thieu's forces into the VNA in return for them being allowed to attack Ba Cụt with the aid of the VNA , and that this part of the deal had been kept secret . They warned that other Hòa Hảo leaders who had stopped fighting could join Ba Cụt , and appealed to Diệm 's U.S. sponsors . In response , Ba Cụt ambushed a VNA unit in Long Mỹ , killing three officers and injuring some thirty men .

= = Last stand against Diệm = =

In 1955 , Diệm tried to integrate the remaining Hòa Hảo armies into the VNA . Ba Cụt was one of four Hòa Hảo military leaders who refused the government offer on 23 April , and continued to operate autonomously . At one stage , the Cao Đài , Hòa Hảo and Bình Xuyên formed an alliance called the United Front , in an attempt to pressure Diệm into handing over power ; Ba Cụt was named senior military commander . However , this had little meaning as the various units were still autonomous of each other , and the United Front was more a showpiece than a means of facilitating coordinated action , and did not in any way strengthen any military threat to Diệm . The leaders were suspicious of one another and often sent subordinates to meetings . Initially , American and French representatives in Vietnam hoped that Diệm would take up a ceremonial role and allow the sect leaders – including Ba Cụt – to hold government positions . However , Diệm refused to share power and launched a sudden offensive against Ba Cụt in Thủ Đức on 12 March , shelling the area heavily . The battle was inconclusive and both sides blamed the other for causing instability and disrupting the situation . Diệm then attacked the Bình Xuyên 's Saigon headquarters in late April , quickly crushing them .

During the fighting , the Hòa Hảo attempted to help the Bình Xuyên by attacking towns and government forces in their Mekong Delta heartland . Ba Cụt 's men , who had also been angered by the recent arrest of some colleagues , blockaded the Mekong and Bassac rivers and laid siege to various towns , including Sa Húc , Long Xuyên and Châu Đốc , stifling the regional economy . The Hòa Hảo shut down several important regional roads and stopped the flow of agricultural produce from the nation 's most fertile region into the capital , causing food prices to rise by 50 % , as meat and vegetables became scarce . Ba Cụt then attacked a battalion of VNA troops south of Sa Húc . Soon after , they retreated to a Hòa Hảo citadel on the banks of the Bassac . After reinforcing their base , the Hòa Hảo proceeded to fire mortars across the water into the city of Cần Thơ , which stood on the opposite side of the river . During this period , the United Front publicly accused Diệm of trying to bribe Ba Cụt with 100 million piasters .

With the Bình Xuyên vanquished , Diệm turned his attention to conquering the Hòa Hảo . As a result , a battle between government troops led by General Dương Văn Minh and Ba Cụt 's men commenced in Cần Thơ on 5 June . Five Hòa Hảo battalions surrendered immediately ; Ba Cụt and three remaining leaders had fled to the Cambodian border by the end of the month . The soldiers of the three other leaders eventually surrendered , but Ba Cụt 's men continued to the end , claiming loyalty to the Emperor Bảo Đại . Diệm responded by replacing the officers of Bảo Đại 's personal regiments with his own men and used the royal units to attack Ba Cụt 's rebels near Hà Tiên and Rạch Giá , outnumbering the Hòa Hảo by at least a factor of five . Knowing that they could not defeat the government in open conventional warfare , Ba Cụt 's forces destroyed their own bases so that the VNA could not use their abandoned resources , and retreated into the jungle . Ba Cụt 's 30,000 men spent the rest of 1955 evading 200,000 VNA troops who had been deployed to quell them . A bounty of one million piasters was put on the head of Ba Cụt , who scattered trails of money in the jungle , hoping to distract his pursuers , but to no avail . The communists claimed in a history written decades later that Ba Cụt had tried to forge an alliance with them , but that talks broke down a few months later .

Despite his weak military situation , Ba Cụt sought to disrupt the staging of a fraudulent referendum that Diệm had scheduled to depose Bảo Đại as head of state . Ba Cụt distributed a pamphlet condemning Diệm as an American puppet , asserting that the prime minister was going to "

Catholicize " the country ; the referendum was partly funded by the U.S. government and various Roman Catholic organisations . Di?m had strong support from American Roman Catholic politicians and the powerful Cardinal Francis Spellman and his elder brother , Pierre Martin Ngô ?inh Th?c , was Archbishop of Hu? . Ba C?t presciently noted that the referendum was a means " for Diem to gather the people from all towns and force them to demonstrate one goal : to depose Bao Dai and proclaim the puppet Diem as the chief @-@ of @-@ state of Vietnam . " On the day of the poll , Ba C?t 's men prevented voting in the border regions which they controlled , and ventured out of the jungles to attack polling stations in C?n Th? . Despite that disruption , Di?m was fraudulently credited with more than 90 % of support in Hòa H?o @-@ controlled territory , and a near unanimous turnout was recorded in the area . These results were replicated across the nation , and Di?m deposed B?o ??i .

Eventually , Ba C?t was surrounded , and sought to make a peace deal with the Di?m government to avoid being taken prisoner . Ba C?t sent a message to Nguy?n Ng?c Th? , the public official who oversaw the civilian side of the campaign against the Hòa H?o , asking for negotiations so that his men could be integrated into mainstream society and the nation 's armed forces . Th? agreed to meet Ba C?t alone in the jungle , and despite fears that the meeting was a Hòa H?o trap , he was not ambushed . However , Ba C?t began asking for additional concessions and the meeting ended in a stalemate . According to historian Hue @-@ Tam Ho Tai , Ba C?t 's lifelong antipathy towards Th? 's family influenced his behaviour during his last stand . Ba C?t was arrested by a patrol on 13 April 1956 , and his remaining forces were defeated in battle .

= = Trial and execution = =

Di?m 's government put Ba C?t on trial . During the proceedings , Ba C?t theatrically removed his shirt so that the public gallery could see how many scars he had suffered while fighting the communists . This , according to him , demonstrated his devotion to Vietnamese nationalism . He challenged any other man to show as many scars . However , the Di?mist judge was unimpressed . Ba C?t was found guilty of multiple murders and sentenced to death . Di?m 's adviser , Colonel Edward Lansdale from the CIA , was one of many who protested against the decision . Lansdale felt that the execution would tarnish Di?m ? who had proclaimed the Republic of Vietnam ( commonly known as South Vietnam ) and declared himself President ? and antagonise Ba C?t 's followers . Ngô ?inh Nhu , Di?m 's younger brother and chief adviser , denied a reprieve as the army , particularly Minh , opposed any clemency . Some sections of the southern public , however , were sympathetic to Ba C?t .

Ba C?t was publicly guillotined on 13 July 1956 , in C?n Th? . His body was later diced into small pieces , which were then buried separately . Some followers , led by a deputy named B?y ??m , retreated to a small area beside the Cambodian border , where they vowed not to rest until Ba C?t was avenged . Many of his followers later joined the Vi?t C?ng ? the movement that succeeded the Vi?t Minh their leader had fought ? and took up arms against Di?m .