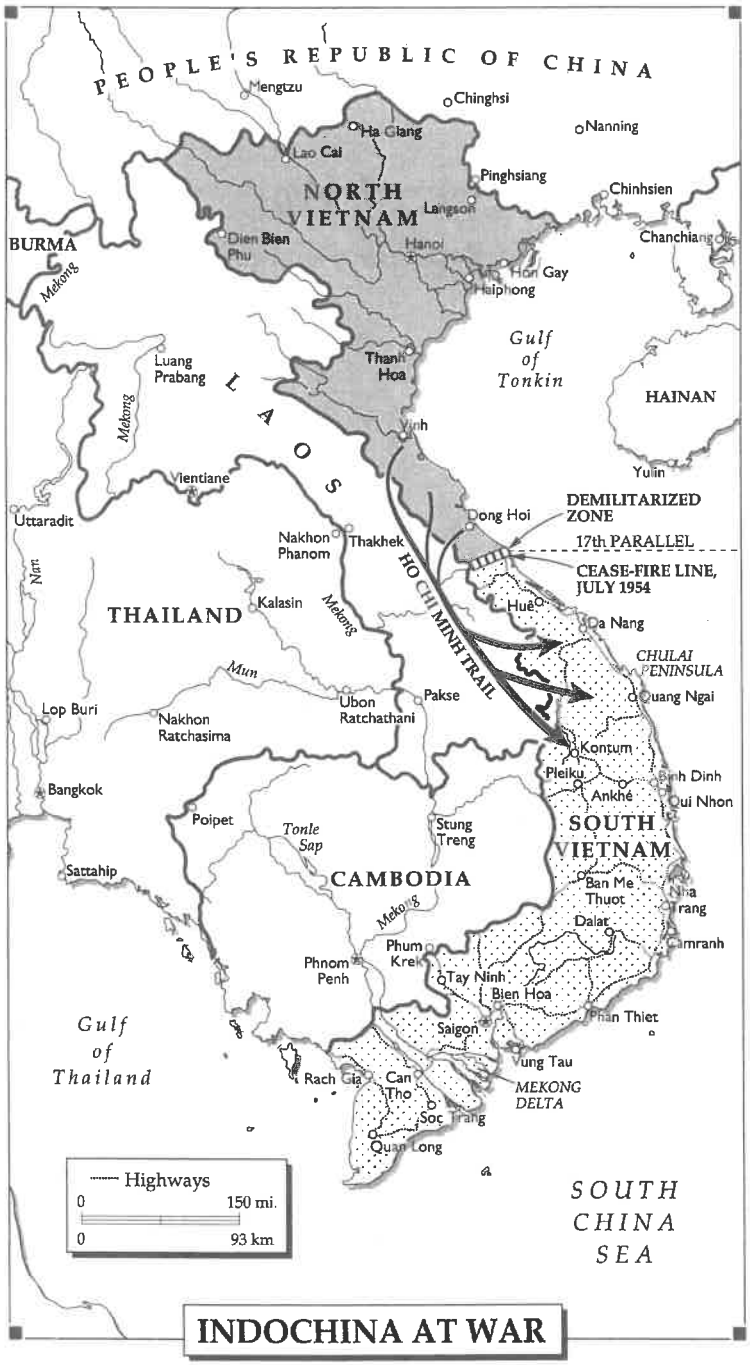

INDOCHINA AT WAR

Sacred War

Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam

William J. Duiker
The Pennsylvania State University

Boston, Massachusetts Burr Ridge, Illinois
Dubuque, Iowa Madison, Wisconsin New York, New York
San Francisco, California St. Louis, Missouri

Introduction

The vast majority of the historical accounts, novels, and films about the Vietnam War that have appeared in the English language during the past few years have dealt with the American side of the war. With a few notable exceptions, the Vietnamese people and the leaders of their governments in Hanoi and Saigon have been faceless and indistinct.

This tendency in the United States to view the war as an American experience is understandable. For a decade or more, Vietnam was a constant reality that brought sorrow to thousands of families across the country, undermined the spirit and self-confidence of the American people, and soured a generation of young Americans on the political system and institutions under which they had been raised.

But this perception of the war as an *American* tragedy has had some unfortunate consequences. It ignores the real hardship that the war inflicted on the Vietnamese people, who suffered more than 1 million casualties in dead and wounded throughout the northern and southern parts of the country. On a more practical plane, it also perpetuates the questionable assumption that there was an easy American solution to the problem. Americans often ask, for example, why the United States "lost" the war. Why, with its vaunted military power and technological superiority, was the United States unable to defeat a relatively small nation with a ragtag army of guerrillas and regular troops in a conflict that lasted nearly a decade? The usual answer is that the United States failed to apply its military force effectively and thus fought the war without a clear-cut strategy for victory. That argument was presented most recently by President George Bush, when he promised the American people that the Persian Gulf conflict would "not be another Vietnam." American

troops, he said, "will have the best possible support in the entire world, and they will not be asked to fight with one hand tied behind their back."

I do not mean to imply that the United States could not have totally destroyed North Vietnam if it so chose. But from a historical perspective, the most striking fact about the Vietnam War is probably not why the United States lost, but why the Communists won. After all, Vietnam was only one of several countries in Southeast Asia that won its independence from colonial rule after World War II. In all other instances, the political parties which took power at the moment of independence were noncommunist in their political orientation. But in Vietnam, it was the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), under the guidance of the revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh, that seized power in Hanoi from surrendering Japanese forces in August 1945. Then, having created an independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) later in the fall, the Communists were soon compelled to defend the fruits of their victory against the French, who sought to restore their authority in their former colonial empire of Indochina. After nearly a decade of war, during which time the United States assisted the French in the hope of stemming the advance of communism in Southeast Asia, a settlement was reached at Geneva in 1954 which divided Vietnam into two parts: the DRV, with its capital at Hanoi in the north, and a noncommunist regime, with its capital at Saigon in the south.

In the late 1950s, the struggle in Vietnam resumed, as Communist-led forces in the south attempted to overthrow the Saigon regime and bring about the reunification of the country under the DRV. Once again, the United States intervened, this time directly. Eventually, the size of the U.S. military presence reached a level of over 500,000 uniformed men and women, while U.S. planes dropped more than 15 million tons of explosives—equivalent to the power of 400 Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs—in an abortive effort to avert a Communist victory. Yet despite this massive commitment by the greatest military power in the history of the world, the Communists were able to bring about the withdrawal of U.S. troops and then, with the conquest of Saigon in the spring of 1975, complete their triumph and unify the entire country under communist rule. By any standard of measurement, it was a stunning achievement.

To understand the full implications of the war in Vietnam, then, we must go beyond decisions made in Washington and ask ourselves what it was about the Communist movement in Vietnam and

its frail leader with the wispy beard that enabled it to hold the greatest military power in the world to a standoff and eventually force its withdrawal in 1973. In the first place, why did the Indochinese Communist Party manage to best its rivals and achieve the dominant position in the regional anticolonial movement? How did party leaders organize and motivate their followers to wage a bloody and protracted thirty-year struggle against vastly superior odds? How did a handful of hard-bitten leaders in Hanoi outsmart the "best and the brightest" (to cite the famous phrase of author David Halberstam) in the American foreign policy establishment and compel them to accept a stunning defeat, with worldwide reverberations?

Our primary task in this book will be to answer these questions. To see more clearly the perspective from Hanoi, it is important to understand that the so-called American phase of the war was only a relatively brief if bitter interlude in a longer struggle of the Vietnamese people to free their homeland from foreign invaders and unify their country under a single independent government. That struggle began in the late nineteenth century, when the French conquest not only deprived the Vietnamese of their national independence but also threatened to undermine their traditional culture, a culture which had endured for more than 2000 years but which was now unable to withstand the shattering impact of modern Western values and institutions.

By the turn of the century a number of divergent political, socioeconomic, and intellectual currents had begun to eddy and swirl inside Vietnamese society. The most dominant was what might loosely be called a capitalist democratic current, influenced above all by the glittering achievements of the modern West. Further to the left was the ICP, influenced in the abstract by the views of radical European philosophers like Karl Marx, and more concretely by the results of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia. In the highly turbulent years following World War I, advocates of both approaches competed to fill the cultural vacuum left by the collapse of the traditional order while simultaneously seeking to mobilize their forces to evict the French and restore national independence.

This process was by no means unique to Vietnam. It was taking place in colonial societies throughout Asia, as well as in countries only partially under colonial domination like China. But unlike elsewhere in the region, radical currents quickly became a dominant force in the Vietnamese anticolonial movement, and by the end of

the 1930s, the ICP had become the primary actor in the struggle against colonial rule. In August 1945, when the wartime Japanese occupation of Indochina came to an abrupt end at the moment of Tokyo's surrender to the Allies, it was the ICP, and not its nationalist rivals, that took advantage of the opportunity by seizing power in Hanoi and declaring an independent republic.

By the late summer of 1945, then, the Vietnamese Communist movement had already won at least an initial victory in the struggle to define the future Vietnamese society. It remained to be seen, of course, whether the ICP would be able to maintain that advantage against its noncommunist rivals, not to speak of fending off the returning French.

At first, officials in Washington did not view the events in Indochina as a threat to U.S. national security. While not especially sympathetic to the Communist movement and its enigmatic leader, Ho Chi Minh, the Truman administration viewed the conflict essentially as a product of the colonial era and urged the French to reach a settlement with the leaders of the DRV. By 1949, however, the perspective from the White House had radically changed. As the wartime alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union was gradually replaced by the Cold War, Ho Chi Minh was transformed in the American mind from an enigmatic but essentially nonthreatening figure into a dangerous agent of international communism. His movement ceased to be interpreted as a legitimate product of French colonial oppression and was increasingly viewed as a tool of the Kremlin, to be opposed and defeated at all costs.

Why the United States became committed to thwarting a Communist victory in Vietnam is an essential part of this story and will merit our attention later in the book. But it is important to keep in mind that U.S. officials would not have turned their anxious eyes to Indochina had not Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues already raised the specter of a dynamic new Communist outpost in that vital part of the world. To investigate in more detail the factors that contributed to the striking success of the Communists in the immediate aftermath of World War II, an achievement which established the context for a generation of Cold War conflict in Indochina, let us turn briefly to the conditions that brought it about. Only if we learn more about the reasons for Communist success will we be able to understand why the United States lost in Vietnam.

CHAPTER 1

Roots of Revolution

In the winter of 1945–1946, Brigadier General Philip E. Gallagher returned from Hanoi, where he had served as chief of the U.S. liaison team with Chinese occupation forces in northern Indochina, and briefed U.S. officials in Washington on conditions in Vietnam. At that time, less than six months after the end of the war in the Pacific, the northern part of Vietnam had just come under a new provisional republican government led by the veteran Vietnamese revolutionary Ho Chi Minh. The southern part of the country was temporarily occupied by the British, who were in the process of returning the area to French colonial administration.

In his comments to U.S. officials at the briefing, General Gallagher was not unsympathetic to Ho Chi Minh and other leaders of his new government. The general remarked that he was impressed by their enthusiasm and their dedication, as well as by their native ability. But he was skeptical of the capacity of the new government to carry out its responsibilities in the unstable conditions of the immediate postwar period. Noting that the new leaders in Hanoi were naive and inexperienced, he predicted that, in competition with other governments in the area, they would "lose their shirts."[1]

General Gallagher's comments about the naiveté and inexperience of the Vietnamese people and their new leaders were not unusual. In fact, they reflected a view that was characteristic of the attitude of many Western observers at the time—that the Vietnamese did not yet possess the capacity to govern themselves. President

[1] *United States-Viet-Nam Relations, 1945–1967* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1967), 8, pt. B.II, pp. 53–55. Hereafter *USVN*. Others were more impressed with Vietnamese military capabilities than General Gallagher and predicted that they would be able to use guerrilla warfare successfully against the French.

Franklin Roosevelt himself, certainly an outspoken advocate of the concept of self-determination for all peoples, had assumed that after the end of World War II, Vietnam would require a period of tutelage before receiving its full national independence.

BIRTH OF A CIVILIZATION

What is striking about that assumption is not merely its condescending tone, in keeping with the "white man's burden" mentality of the time. But it also reflected a general ignorance of Vietnam, which had existed as an independent state for over 1000 years prior to the French conquest, fully 900 years before the signing of the American Declaration of Independence.

In fact, the history of Vietnam as an organized society goes back considerably further. First emerging as a coherent community in the Red River Valley sometime during the first millennium B.C., this embryonic Vietnamese state was conquered by the Chinese Empire in 111 B.C. and did not regain its independence until the tenth century A.D. From that date, with the exception of a brief period of Chinese occupation in the fifteenth century, the Vietnamese state grew into one of the more powerful and dynamic empires in Southeast Asia until it was subjugated by the French in the late nineteenth century. While the current generation of Vietnamese leaders may have lacked personal experience in administering an independent state, their forebears were hardly novices at the art of statecraft.

Vietnam's relationship with its larger neighbor to the north was a complicated one, and even today it exerts a major impact on the national psyche. On the one hand, ten centuries of Chinese rule did not erase memories of Vietnamese independence. If anything, the sense of national identity appears to have been sharpened by the experience. The collective memory of the long struggle against Chinese domination forms a powerful theme in Vietnamese history, and most of the nation's heroic figures—from the famous Trung sisters, who led a rebellion against the Chinese occupation in the first century A.D. to Le Loi and his chief adviser, the Confucian statesman Nguyen Trai, who drove out Chinese invaders centuries later—are identified with the national effort to protect Vietnam against invasion from the north.

On the other hand, Vietnamese society was significantly altered

The Trung Sisters, who led a Vietnamese rebellion against Chinese rule in the first century A.D.

by its long and direct acquaintance with Chinese civilization, generally considered to be the most advanced in Asia. During the many centuries when it was an integral part of the Chinese empire, Vietnam was introduced to Chinese political and social institutions, religion and philosophy, art, literature, music, and the Chinese language. The educated Vietnamese elite wrote to each other in literary Chinese, and Chinese characters were adopted as the written script for Vietnamese.

Even after the restoration of independence in the tenth century A.D., Vietnamese institutions were patterned after the Chinese model. Vietnamese monarchs discovered that Chinese political mores and rituals provided a sense of majesty and legitimacy to the state, while Confucian social ethics, imported from the north, helped

to shape industrious, docile, and loyal subjects. In civil service examinations patterned after those offered in China, aspiring young Vietnamese eagerly displayed their knowledge of the Confucian classics in the competition for positions in the bureaucracy. To the uninitiated, Vietnam must have seemed like a smaller copy of the Chinese imperial model, and indeed, elite culture in Vietnam was deeply impregnated with Chinese influence. But under that veneer, Vietnamese society retained many distinctive features, while its ruling elite and the monarchy—although accepting a patron-client relationship with the "elder brother" to the north—remained fiercely determined to protect the state from Chinese domination.

MARCH TO THE SOUTH

After the tenth century, the Vietnamese state, known at the time as Dai Viet, or "Great Viet," gained steadily in wealth and power. While the country did not possess abundant natural resources, the Vietnamese people, most of whom were rice farmers living in the fertile delta of the Red River, were hard-working and talented. As the population increased, pressure intensified to find new land for cultivation. Blocked to the north and west by forest-covered mountains, the Vietnamese began to expand southward along the coast of the South China Sea. During several centuries of intermittent conflict with the neighboring state of Champa, located directly to the south along the central coast, the Vietnamese carried out their historic March to the South. The Cham, a trading people unrelated in ethnic origin and language to the Vietnamese, had had little contact with China, and had been more strongly influenced by Indian civilization. After Muslim merchants became increasingly active in the regional spice trade in the fourteenth century, the Cham converted to Islam.

For several hundred years, the rivalry between Dai Viet and Champa continued without decisive advantage on either side. By the sixteenth century, however, Dai Viet had not only conquered Champa but had also seized the vast Mekong River delta from the nearly defunct kingdom of Angkor, the once-glorious predecessor of Cambodia. By 1700, Vietnamese authority extended from the Chinese border in the north to the tip of the Camau peninsula on the Gulf of Siam. Like the United States in the nineteenth century, the Vietnamese state had realized its "manifest destiny." While the Vietnamese monarch continued to declare a tributary relationship to his "elder brother," the emperor of China, he adopted similar imperial pretensions in his dealings with neighboring rulers in Southeast Asia.

Unfortunately for the Vietnamese, territorial expansion had its price. Shaped like a giant letter S along the eastern rim of the Southeast Asian mainland, the expanded Vietnamese state lacked the territorial cohesion that it had possessed when it was concentrated in the Red River delta. Factionalism among princely families at court led to civil war in 1613 and the division of the kingdom into two separate warring states in the north and the south. Vietnam would remain divided for two centuries.

The southward march and consequent division of the country exerted a lasting impact on Vietnamese society. As Dai Viet expanded southward, thousands of Vietnamese peasants from densely populated villages in the Red River delta migrated from their original villages and established new communities in virgin farmlands scattered throughout the spacious but marshy delta of the Mekong River. Nourished by the ready availability of land in their new surroundings, as well as by the favorable climate, these migrants gradually developed a new frontier spirit far removed from the traditional ways practiced in their ancestral villages far to the north. Where northerners were conservative in their social attitudes, cautious in their economic behavior, and inclined to accept the primacy of the community over the interests of the individual, southerners tended to be more independent-minded, more entrepreneurial in spirit, and more fractious and individualistic in their social relations. A cultural divide had opened up that was destined to have profound effects on the later course of Vietnamese history, and indeed has not healed to this day.

In the early nineteenth century, an energetic member of the ruling house in southern Vietnam successfully reunited the country under his rule and declared the founding of the Nguyen dynasty. As a demonstration of unity, he moved the imperial capital from its traditional location at Hanoi, in the Red River valley, to Hue, on the central coast halfway between the Mekong and Red River deltas. Such cosmetic actions, however, were not sufficient to heal the breach that had opened up during the two centuries of civil strife, and tensions between the northern and southern provinces continued to plague the Nguyen court throughout the next decades.

To make matters even more difficult, the new state (now called Vietnam, or "Southern Viet"), simultaneously faced a new challenge from abroad. European traders and missionaries had been active in Vietnam since the early seventeenth century, but the country lacked many of the spices that had generated profits in the Indonesian islands further to the south, and by 1700, when the Vietnamese court began to restrict foreign commercial and missionary activities, most European merchants had already abandoned the area, although French missionary interests continued to cater to the needs of the country's numerous Christian converts. In the early nineteenth century, however, the needs of the Industrial Revolution provoked the capitalist states of the West to turn once again to Asia, this time in search of cheap raw materials and consumer markets for their manufactured goods. With the Dutch in firm control of the East Indies, and the British newly entrenched in Burma and the Malay peninsula, the French turned to Vietnam as a toehold on the Southeast Asian mainland and a base of possible future expansion into southern China.

The first French effort to create its own "balcony on the Pacific" (to use a popular French phrase at the time) was only modestly successful. For years, the imperial court at Hue attempted to prohibit Christian missionary activities inside the country. In 1858, on the pretext of avenging the arrest of a French missionary by imperial authorities, a French fleet sailed into Da Nang harbor, along the central coast, in the hope of capturing the imperial capital of Hue, about 80 miles to the north. But when the attack stalled because of disease and unexpectedly strong resistance from the local population, the commander of the French expedition abandoned the effort. Shortly after, the French launched a new attack in the region of the Mekong River delta and rapidly seized control of several provinces near the commercial center of Saigon (present-day Ho Chi Minh City). In 1862, an emissary of the Vietnamese court signed a peace treaty which ceded several provinces in the area to the French. The latter thereupon transformed their new acquisition into the colony of Cochin China, with its capital at Saigon.

Prodded insistently by merchant and missionary interests, the French government hoped to use its control over the estuary of the Mekong River as a means of seeking a water route into southern China, thus gaining access to the vast Chinese market. In 1863, to facilitate the exploration of the river, the French established a protectorate over neighboring Cambodia, which had already fallen under the joint suzerainty of Vietnam and the kingdom of Thailand, to the west. But when French explorers discovered that the Mekong was not navigable as far as the Chinese border, French imperialist interests turned to northern Vietnam. In the early 1880s, having found another pretext to justify military action, the French conquered the remainder of the country and divided it into two separate protectorates: Tonkin, comprising the area of the Red River delta, and Annam, consisting of the provinces along the central coast. The Vietnamese monarch in Hue was permitted to retain a nominal degree of sovereignty, but actual power resided with the French. A few years later, the French established a fourth protectorate over the neighboring kingdom of Laos to serve as a buffer zone against British advances into northern Burma. By the end of the century, all five territories—one colony and four protectorates—were united into a single Indochinese Union and placed under French administration.

THE FRENCH CIVILIZING MISSION IN INDOCHINA

In justifying their conquest, official sources in Paris claimed that France was carrying out a "civilizing mission" (*mission civilisatrice*) in Indochina. France would introduce the fruits of advanced Western civilization—democratic institutions, capitalist economics, modern technology, and French culture—to its subject peoples in Indochina, thus enabling them to compete in a social-Darwinist world of "survival of the fittest." No one expressed French objectives more eloquently than Governor General Albert Sarraut, who remarked to a Vietnamese audience in France before departing for his new post in Indochina in 1917: "I want to give you the instrument of liberation which will gradually lead you toward those superior spheres to which you aspire."[2]

In actuality, French motives were much more self-serving than Sarraut had implied. Certainly those "superior spheres" did not include the restoration of full national independence. The original impulse for French expansion into the region was, above all, the

[2] Quoted in Georges Garros, *Forceries humaines* (Paris: André Delpeuch, 1926), p. 51.

desire for economic profit. For the French, as for most capitalist nations in the West, colonies served as a source for cheap raw materials and a consumer market for manufactured goods produced in European factories.

But in the nineteenth century, as in our own day, economics often has political implications. Colonies were not only a hedge against the disastrous vicissitudes of the capitalist economic cycle; they were also a potential source of military power and a symbol of national wealth and grandeur. The pursuit of colonial possessions became a national pastime throughout the Western world, and at the end of the century culminated in a frenzy of territorial acquisitions (in Africa in the mid-1890s, for example, and in China a few years later), when European governments seized territories simply to prevent them from falling into rival hands. The French themselves were provoked into seizing Indochina partly out of fear that it would otherwise be occupied by the Germans, the Japanese, or the United States.

Unfortunately, the desire for financial profit and national grandeur all too often collided with the "civilizing mission" officially proclaimed in Paris. Anxious to preserve their colonial possessions as a market for manufactured goods produced in their own factories, the French discouraged the emergence of an indigenous industrial and commercial sector in Indochina that could compete with French imports. Determined to keep the price of imported raw materials as low as possible, French colonial entrepreneurs kept wages low for workers on rubber plantations or in coal mines along the coast of Tonkin. Although a small industrial sector did take shape, it was primarily oriented toward the export market and dominated by European interests or by Indian and Chinese entrepreneurs whose ancestors had operated in the area for centuries.

Nor did the colonial regime encourage the development of political institutions that were capable of reflecting the aspirations of the indigenous peoples of Indochina. All too aware that the creation of popular legislative assemblies would lead to demands for greater autonomy, or even for the restoration of national independence, French authorities were reluctant to introduce representative government or grant the franchise to the mass of the population. The first elected political bodies in Indochina, consisting of municipal councils in the major cities and assemblies at the provincial level,

had only limited advisory powers and were composed almost exclusively of Europeans or of wealthy local elites willing to collaborate with the colonial regime. One prominent French politician admitted in an unguarded moment that the provincial assemblies had been established solely "for form's sake."

Defenders of the colonial regime stoutly maintained that French rule brought a number of benefits to the peoples of Indochina. The promotion of export crops such as rubber, coffee, tea, and rice helped to integrate Indochina into the global capitalist economy. The draining of the marshy lands in the Mekong River delta opened new fields for the cultivation of rice, and the French built modern roads and a railway that ran from Saigon to the Chinese border. Technological improvements such as these did provide material benefits to a small and privileged class of Vietnamese entrepreneurs, government officials, professionals, and landowners.

For the mass of the population, however, the consequences of colonial rule were generally unfortunate and often disastrous. For every urban merchant or landowner who profited from increased economic opportunities in the capitalist marketplace, there were dozens of rice farmers whose livelihood was threatened by the vicissitudes of that same market. As land became commercialized, peasants lost the security on the land that they had possessed under the traditional system, and those unable to pay rising taxes were forced to sell their land to moneylenders or to wealthy landowners. Even the new lands opened in the Mekong River delta, a development pointed to with pride by French officials, were a mixed blessing. These lands were sold to the highest bidder. Most plots were purchased by absentee landlords from Saigon, who rented the land out in small parcels to tenants at high annual rates of interest. Many could not pay the high rents and taxes and were forced to abandon the fields to seek jobs as landless laborers.[3]

Those who migrated to the cities were often little better off. Since the French did not actively encourage the development of a modern industrial sector, little employment was available for unskilled laborers except for low-paid factory workers, rickshaw pullers, or dockworkers in the port cities of Da Nang, Haiphong, and Saigon. On their meager earnings, most were forced to live in squatter settlements outside the main urban areas. Others sought work in the coal mines along the coast northeast of Hanoi or in the rubber plantations along the Cambodian border.

[3] For a dramatic fictionalized account of the problem of poor peasants dealing with avaricious village power holders, see the excerpt from Nguyen Cong Hoan's novel *Buoc Dung Cung* [Dead End], in Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants under the French*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), pp. 179–194.

As in most European colonies, there were a few lucky ones. Well-meaning colonial administrators established a school system based on the stated objective of providing basic education for all and advanced learning to the small native elite. In actuality, only a minority of school-age children received more than the rudiments of education. There was a chronic lack of funds to establish schools throughout the union, but there was also the growing conviction among some French officials that exposure to Western ideas only encouraged hostility to the French colonial regime. Higher education, as one senior official sententiously observed, created "not one coolie less, but one rebel more." During the 1930s, only about 1 percent of the school-age population in Vietnam was enrolled in a school above the elementary level.[4]

The situation in Laos and Cambodia was somewhat different. Although both protectorates had come under varying degrees of Vietnamese influence during the precolonial period, they were culturally, ethnically, and linguistically quite distinct, both from Vietnam and from each other. Although all three were primarily Buddhist societies, neither Cambodia nor Laos had ever been occupied by China, and the primary cultural influence in both countries had come from India. These differences were accentuated rather than diminished under colonial rule. Lacking an abundance of available natural resources, both countries had come under French tutelage somewhat as an afterthought and served primarily as a buffer zone against Thailand, or British-controlled Burma. Having only limited economic and political interests in the two protectorates, the French simply established a skeleton administrative structure to preserve their colonial presence and then left them to their own devices.

[4] The speaker was French Governor General Martial Merlin. Statistics on education can be found in Nguyen Anh, "Vai net ve giao duc o Viet Nam tu sau dai chien the gioi lan thu I den truoc cach mang thang tam" [Education in Vietnam from the end of World War I to the August Revolution], *Nghien Cuu Lich Su* [Historical Research] 102 (September 1967):40. Hereafter *NCLS*.

A NATION IN PERIL

The imposition of colonial rule was a particularly traumatic event for the Vietnamese ruling elite. As French pressure intensified during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the imperial court at Hue became bitterly divided over how to respond to the threat from abroad. Some wanted to retreat to the hills and use traditional tactics of guerrilla warfare, previously applied against invaders from China, to fight the enemy to the bitter end. Others, fearful of the "fine ships and big guns" of the invaders, wanted to appease the French while attempting to introduce political and economic reforms to enable the empire to resist the enemy more effectively. As Nguyen Truong To, a member of the appeasement faction, remarked, to resist would simply be like pouring oil on a fire. Not only would it fail to put out the fire, but the blaze would burn more fiercely.[5]

The factionalism at court impeded any effective response to the problem and was ultimately disastrous. Emperor Tu Duc was well-meaning but indecisive, and when the French launched their first attack in 1858, he vacillated and temporized. After an unsuccessful effort to defeat French troops in the area of modern Saigon, the emperor had agreed to humiliating peace terms that ceded several provinces in the Mekong delta to the French in the hope of later persuading them to return the lost territories to imperial rule. But Tu Duc had miscalculated. The French had no intention of abandoning their foothold on the Southeast Asian mainland, as their later efforts to extend their influence northward graphically demonstrated.

The failure of the court to take the lead in resisting the French conquest placed patriotic Vietnamese in a dilemma. Should they follow imperial orders and refrain from active resistance to continuing French advances, or should they resist on their own initiative? That debate climaxed during the mid-1880s, when the French completed their takeover by establishing a protectorate over the northern provinces of the country. Although the court had agreed to the French terms, some leading civilian and military officials, led by the

[5] Nguyen Truong To, *Thien Ha Dai The Luan*, cited in Dang Huy Van, "Cuoc dau tranh giua phai 'chu chien' va phai 'chu hoa' trong cuoc khang chien chong Phap o cuoi the ky XIX" [The struggle between the resistance and appeasement factions in the struggle against the French at the end of the nineteenth century], *NCLS* 94 (1967):33.

Confucian scholar-official Phan Dinh Phung, decided to place patriotism before loyalty to the monarchy and took to the hills to organize resistance efforts. For the next several years, Phung and his followers carried on a bitter guerrilla struggle against the French colonial regime. To provide an aura of legitimacy to the movement, they persuaded the young emperor Ham Nghi, who had been placed on the throne by the French in the hope that he would serve their interests, to join them in their mountain headquarters and serve as a symbol of resistance for the movement, which adopted the symbolic title Can Vuong, meaning "Save the King."

Not all of the Vietnamese elite, however, opted to resist the French. Some bureaucrats resigned from office and retreated into private life, while others, whether out of political conviction or political expediency, decided to collaborate with the French. The disagreement between resistors and collaborators led to a celebrated exchange of letters between Can Vuong leader Phan Dinh Phung and Hoang Cao Khai, an old childhood acquaintance from his home village. Hoang Cao Khai wrote that although he understood his friend's motivation in taking up arms, continued fighting would only produce more hardship for the people.

> The subject I should now like to introduce is the suffering imposed upon our country. . . . Until now, your actions have undoubtedly accorded with your loyalty [to the king]. May I ask, however, what sin our people have committed to deserve so much hardship? I would understand your resistance, did you involve but your family for the benefit of a large number! As of now, hundreds of families are subject to grief; how do you have the heart to fight on? I venture to predict that, should you pursue your struggle, not only will the population of our village be destroyed but our entire country will be transformed into a sea of blood and a mountain of bones. It is my hope that men of your superior morality and honesty will pause a while to appraise the situation.

Hoang Cao Khai's words had no effect. While referring with fondness to their lifelong friendship, Phan Dinh Phung declared that his decision to resist the French was based on the traditions of the nation's glorious past. In his response, he lectured Khai on Confucian morality:

> I have concluded that if our country has survived these past thousand years when its territory was not large, its wealth not great, it was because the relationships between king and subjects, fathers

> and children, have always been regulated by the five moral obligations. In the past, the Han, the Sung, the Yuan, the Ming [four of the great imperial dynasties in China] time and again dreamt of annexing our country and of dividing it up into prefectures and districts within the Chinese administrative system. But never were they able to realize their dream. Ah! If even China, which shares a common border with our territory and is a thousand times more powerful than Vietnam, could not rely upon her strength to swallow us, it was surely because the destiny of our country had been willed by Heaven itself.[6]

However laudable his intentions, Phan Dinh Phung's efforts to repeat the achievements of Le Loi and Nguyen Trai ended in tragedy and failure. His followers were driven into the hills, and by the time he died of dysentery in 1896, the movement had already begun to disintegrate. The French disinterred his body and scattered his bones in a gesture of contempt.

But the failure of Can Vuong movement did not spell the end of resistance to French rule, but only the end of its first phase. Shortly after the turn of the century, a new stage in the anti-French movement began, characterized by the abandonment of traditional ways and the adoption of Western ideas. The new stage was inaugurated by Phan Boi Chau, a well-known and widely respected Confucian scholar from central Vietnam. As a boy, Chau had been inspired by the activities of Phan Dinh Phung and his stalwart supporters to organize the youth in his home village into a local militia armed with sticks and bamboo spears. To his humiliation, the unit scattered when exposed to attack by a French military unit in the vicinity, and Phan Boi Chau was forced to flee amid a crowd of refugees. Later he would remark that the incident made him feel like "a boy building a tree house."[7]

After the defeat of the Can Vuong, Phan Boi Chau gradually realized that traditional methods could not deliver the Vietnamese people from their conquerors, and he became convinced that his country must adopt Western technology as well as political and economic institutions in order to resume its rightful role as an independent nation. In 1904 he organized the Modernization Society

[6] Cited in Truong Buu Lam, *Vietnamese Resistance against the French, 1858–1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 121–128.
[7] Phan Boi Chau, *Doi Cach Menh Phan Boi Chau* [The revolutionary career of Phan Boi Chau] (Saigon, n.d.), p. 11.

Phan Boi Chau, Vietnam's first nationalist leader.

(Duy Tan Hoi), with the objective of driving the French from Vietnam. Phan Boi Chau might be considered the first modern nationalist in Vietnam, since he focused clearly on the nation rather than the ruling monarchy as the prime source of loyalty for the Vietnamese people, and he appealed to all Vietnamese regardless of age, sex,

class, or religious preferences to unite in common struggle against the invader.

In pamphlet after pamphlet, in prose and in verse written in exile from Japan, Phan Boi Chau called on the Vietnamese people to rise up in a national effort to throw out the French. In *Viet Nam Vong Quoc Su* ("A History of the Downfall of Vietnam"), written in 1905 for publication in a journal in southern China, he appealed to his compatriots to live up to the glorious traditions of the past. In a shorter pamphlet entitled *Tan Viet Nam* ("New Vietnam"), he described a new society that would be based on the Western model. Deploring the "slave mentality" that was the consequence of 2000 years of Chinese cultural domination, he argued that only violent struggle promised the realization of success. "In a world of snakes," he lamented, "who speaks with the tongue of Buddha?"

Yet Phan Boi Chau's message was filled with ambiguities. Although a supporter of westernization, he was also convinced that the Vietnamese were a deeply conservative people, and he therefore selected a dissident member of the royal family to serve as a figurehead for his organization and the chief of a state in a projected constitutional monarchy. Moreover, although his basic appeal was for the spirit of self-reliance, "like a tiger protecting her cubs," Phan Boi Chau recognized that under existing conditions, Vietnam could not achieve national liberation without the assistance of a powerful foreign sponsor. He first sought aid from Japan. Then, when that appeal was rejected, he turned to Sun Yat-sen's Revolutionary Party in China. When Sun's movement appeared to have won a major victory by overthrowing the Manchu dynasty in October 1911, Chau changed his party's program from advocating a constitutional monarchy to advocating a democratic republic.[8]

Despite his efforts, Phan Boi Chau's approach, like that of his great predecessor Phan Dinh Phung, did not win universal acceptance among his compatriots. Although Chau contended that only violent resistance could successfully evict the French, some of his contemporaries argued that the real enemy of the Vietnamese people

[8] Phan Boi Chau, *Tan Viet Nam* [New Vietnam], reproduced in *NCLS* 78 (September 1965). The comment about a tiger protecting her cubs is from his *Viet Nam Vong Quoc Su*, printed in its original Chinese version in *Chung-Fa Chan-cheng* [The Sino-French War], vol. 7 (Shanghai: Jen-min ch'u-pan she, 1957), p. 537.

was not the French but their own outworn traditions. A prominent exponent of his view was Phan Boi Chau's friend and namesake, Phan Chu Trinh. Like Chau a respected Confucian scholar from central Vietnam, Trinh was convinced that the Vietnamese should exploit the presence of the French by allowing them to carry out their civilizing mission and then to withdraw. Trinh felt that Chau's reliance on the traditional monarchy and its supporters could not succeed. In a letter to the French governor general, Paul Beau, in 1906, Trinh conceded that colonial rule had brought many benefits to Vietnam, such as roads, bridges, and railways. But it had also given rise to government corruption, and French officials treated the people with contempt. He appealed to Beau to introduce Western political institutions, education, and modern technology and then transfer power to an independent Vietnamese government. If so, he stated, France would possess the everlasting gratitude of the Vietnamese people.[9]

In the eyes of his friend Chau, Trinh's expectation that the French would live up to their civilizing mission was naive. To Trinh's criticism that he was relying on the past to build the future, Chau retorted that trying to establish a democracy with the people's current level of ignorance would be like urging a child to run before the bones in his legs had been solidly formed. "First," he wrote to his friend, "we must unite to achieve national liberation. Then, if in ten years you bring up your reformist ideas, I will be the first to applaud.[10]

The ongoing debate between Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh is worth discussing here because it symbolized one of the most fundamental dilemmas faced by patriotic individuals living under colonial rule, not only in Vietnam but throughout the region. What was more important, national independence or institutional reform? Could colonial powers be compelled to live up to their civilizing mission? Could patriotic forces achieve liberation without first carrying out basic changes in their societies? Such questions led

[9] Letter to Paul Beau (*Thu gui Toan Quyen Beau*) is located in a Vietnamese-language version in *NCLS* 66 (September 1964). For the original French version, see *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extreme Orient* (March-June 1907):166–175.

[10] Chau's letter to Phan Chu Trinh is quoted in Dang Thai Mai, *Van Tho Phan Boi Chau* [Essays and Poems of Phan Boi Chau] (Hanoi: Van Hoa, 1960), pp. 156–157.

to acrimonious debates and sometimes to splits within nationalist organizations throughout the region. They would plague the nationalist movement in Vietnam for three generations.

As far as Chau and Trinh were concerned, the dilemma was not resolved in their lifetime, although certain facts became clear. Chau discovered that more than dedication and love of country were needed to create an effective movement to oppose colonial power. After years of fruitless activities, in 1925 Chau was arrested by the French while living in China. Tried and convicted of sedition in Hanoi, he was placed under house arrest in Hue until his death in 1940. In the meantime, Phan Chu Trinh learned that persuasion and reason had little impact on the French. In 1908 he was arrested for taking part in a peasant demonstration against high taxes and, after a brief period of imprisonment in Vietnam, was forced to live in exile in France. He did not return to Vietnam until 1925, only a few months before he died of cancer. His funeral in Saigon was the occasion of mass mourning and popular demonstrations throughout the country.

FRENCH COLONIALISM ON TRIAL

During his travels throughout Vietnam to recruit supporters for the Modernization Society, Phan Boi Chau had made the acquaintance of a scholar-official from Nghe-Tinh province in central Vietnam by the name of Nguyen Sinh Sac. An official of the imperial government who resigned his position in protest against the creation of the French protectorate, Sac invited Chau to visit his home in Kim Lien village, not far from the provincial capital of Vinh, to discuss the means of liberating Vietnam from colonial rule. In the course of their discussions, Chau invited the son of his host, a young man by the name of Nguyen Tat Thanh, to join his movement, which at that time still had its headquarters in Japan.

The young Thanh, who would later be known to the world as Ho Chi Minh, was ambitious and fiercely patriotic, but he refused Chau's offer. Later a biographer would cite Ho as remarking that seeking assistance from Japan would be like driving the tiger out the front door while welcoming the wolf in the back. In 1908, while attending high school in the imperial capital of Hue, the young man took part in peasant antitax riots in central Vietnam. Dismissed from

school for such activities, he taught briefly and then took employment with a French steamship company as a cook's assistant. Leaving Saigon in 1911, he spent the next several years at sea. He would not return to his native land for a generation.[11]

During the next several years, Nguyen Tat Thanh traveled throughout the world. He spent several months in the United States, where he worked in Boston and New York City and apparently made a short visit to the South, a trip which provoked his anger at the treatment of African Americans. When World War I broke out in 1914, he abandoned his career as a seaman and settled in Great Britain. It may have been there that he first became aware of the ideas of Karl Marx. At war's end he was in France, where he lived with Phan Chu Trinh in Paris and worked as a photo retoucher.

In France he soon became involved in political activities. In 1919, under the assumed name of Nguyen Ai Quoc ("Nguyen the Patriot"), he appealed to Allied leaders gathered at the peace conference in Versailles, demanding self-determination for colonial peoples in accordance with U.S. president Woodrow Wilson's famous Fourteen Points, which called for the building of a postwar world that would be safe for democracy. The appeal was ignored by the Allied leaders, but it caused a stir in the Vietnamese exile community in Paris and brought Nguyen Ai Quoc (as he would henceforth be known) to the attention of his contemporaries as a figure to be reckoned with in the Vietnamese nationalist movement.

In that same year, Nguyen Ai Quoc joined the Parti Socialiste de France (PSF). But he was disturbed by the lack of concern displayed by many of his French comrades for the problems of the colonies. He was also initially confused by the debates that were taking place within the party over the radical message of Soviet leader V.I. Lenin, who in 1917 had led his Bolshevik Party to victory in the October Revolution in Russia. Lenin had just formed a new organization called the Communist International (generally known as the Comintern) to promote the cause of world revolution. During the summer of 1920, Nguyen Ai Quoc read a tract entitled *Theses on the National and Colonial Questions* that Lenin had just presented to the Second Comintern Congress in Moscow. Lenin proposed a strategy calling for future communist parties in colonial areas to ally

[11] Truong Chinh, *President Ho Chi Minh: Beloved Leader of the Vietnamese people* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Press, 1966), p. iii.

with local middle-class nationalist elements in a common struggle against the ruling colonial regimes.

Lenin's goal was to link the class struggle in Western industrial societies with the anticolonial struggle in preindustrial colonial and semicolonial areas in Asia and North Africa. In classical Marxism, such economically backward societies would not be ripe for a socialist revolution until they had passed through the Industrial Revolution and entered the stage of capitalism, at which time a domestic working class (the proletariat in Marxist terminology) would become a significant proportion of the local population. According to Karl Marx, it was the proletariat, as the most alienated and oppressed class in a capitalist society, that would lead the socialist revolution against the capitalist ruling clique.

Such ideas had little relevance in the preindustrial societies of early twentieth-century Asia. But after coming to power in Russia, Lenin and some of his more prescient colleagues realized that rising anticolonial sentiment among Asian peoples could make them a worthy ally against world capitalism; in Lenin's view, without access to the markets and resources of their colonies, which guaranteed profits to the industrialists, the capitalist regimes of Europe were bound to collapse.

To link his beleaguered state with the rising force of anticolonialism in the East, Lenin thus proposed that communist parties based on the small local working class and radical intellectuals be formed in colonial territories. Although such parties would necessarily lack the experience and the mass support necessary to triumph on their own over the entrenched power of colonial regimes, with the support of angry peasants and patriotic elements within the urban middle class, they might hope to overthrow colonial governments and the decrepit traditional cliques that sometimes ruled in their name. Once that "first stage" of the revolution had been completed, Lenin argued, the local communist parties could then mobilize progressive elements, break with their erstwhile middle-class allies, and attempt to seize power on their own.

To the young Nguyen Ai Quoc, Lenin's program presented a persuasive strategy to assist the colonial peoples liberate themselves from foreign domination. In the summer of 1920, he joined other radical members of the PSF to create the Parti Communiste de France (PCF), which then joined the Comintern. During the next three years, Nguyen Ai Quoc became a respected and active member of the PCF,

Nguyen Ai Quoc at the Conference of Tours, which created the French Communist Party in 1920.

with a particular interest in promoting revolution in the colonies. To provide an organizational focus for Marxist revolutionary activities among colonial subjects living in France, he created a multinational organization called the Intercolonial Union and published a journal known as *Le Paria* ("the Pariah") to publicize the problems of colonial areas and the need for active efforts to seek their liberation. He published a number of articles in left-wing newspapers and wrote a scarifying attack on French colonial policies entitled *Le Procès du colonialisme français* ("French Colonialism on Trial").

Nguyen Ai Quoc with colleagues in Moscow during the 1920s.

In 1923, having become the most articulate advocate of colonial causes in the PCF, Nguyen Ai Quoc was invited to the USSR to study Marxist ideology and work at Comintern headquarters. Traveling in disguise as a rich Vietnamese tourist, he arrived in Moscow sometime during the summer and enrolled in the newly opened School for the Oppressed Peoples of the East (popularly known as the Stalin School), where he studied Marxism-Leninism. He also served as a delegate to the Peasant International (Krestintern), an organization sponsored by the Comintern to carry out Lenin's strategy of promoting revolutionary activity among the rural masses. Few in Moscow, however, apparently took Lenin's idea seriously. Many probably argued with Karl Marx himself, who had felt that the peasant was a naturally acquisitive being whose desire for land would always overcome his revolutionary instincts. In a speech at a conference of the Peasant International in 1924, Nguyen Ai Quoc

appealed in vain to his listeners to take seriously the revolutionary potential of agrarian societies in Asia. In a later comment to a colleague, he laughingly referred to himself as a "voice crying in the wilderness."[12]

Still, Nguyen Ai Quoc must have made an impression on key members of the Comintern. In the fall of 1924 he was instructed to report to Guangzhou (Canton) to serve as an interpreter on the staff of the Comintern headquarters attached to Sun Yat-sen's government in southern China. Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Party, or Guomindang, had just established a territorial base in Guangdong province, China. Although he was not a communist, Sun had agreed to the suggestion of the Comintern to ally his party with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which had been formed by radical intellectuals in Shanghai in the summer of 1921.

Arriving in Guangzhou in December 1924, Nguyen Ai Quoc immediately set out to accomplish his real task: the formation of the first genuinely Marxist revolutionary organization in Indochina. He had arrived at a propitious moment, for it was a time of rising political ferment, not only in Indochina but throughout the region. Sun Yat-sen's government was preparing to launch a military expedition to attack the warlords still in power elsewhere in the country. Meanwhile, inside Indochina a new wave of anticolonialist unrest was on the rise throughout many segments of Vietnamese society.

THE FATAL FLAW

The most visible manifestation of unrest was in Saigon and Hanoi, where radical intellectuals, students, and merchants, disillusioned by the failure of the French to carry out their "civilizing mission" in Indochina, had begun to organize political parties and groups. Their goal was to force the colonial regime to adopt reforms or, in the view of some, to grant independence to the country. The trial of Phan Boi Chau in Hanoi and the death of Phan Chu Trinh in Saigon set off emotional outbursts throughout Vietnam. At Trinh's funeral

[12] The most detailed account of this period of Ho's life in the English language is Yevgeny Kobelev, *Ho Chi Minh* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989), pp. 60–76.

in April 1926, an estimated 140,000 people lined the route from Saigon to the burial ground near Tan Son Nhut Airport.[13]

More ominous for the French was the unrest that was beginning to spread from the educated elite to the general population. Factory workers, coal miners, and rubber tappers on the plantations along the Cambodian border were becoming increasingly restive at poor working conditions and low wages, while peasants were being whipsawed by rising taxes, official corruption, prohibitions on the manufacture of salt and alcohol, and land seizures by wealthy landowners. During the late 1920s workers' strikes began to increase, while unrest in rural areas was becoming more and more commonplace.

Had the emerging anticolonial forces in the big cities been able to tap into the latent discontent among the masses, they might have been able to mobilize a nationwide protest movement involving broad sectors of the Vietnamese population such as the uprising envisioned by veteran revolutionary Phan Boi Chau half a generation earlier. Unfortunately, urban nationalists encountered serious difficulties in formulating their message and articulating it effectively to their rural compatriots.

One reason for their problem was the continuing disagreement within the movement over tactics and ultimate goals. Some were willing to seek change by reformist methods and were reconciled, to one degree or another, to a French presence into the indefinite future. The most visible manifestation of this point of view was the Constitutionalist Party, which was made up of a small number of affluent professionals in Cochin China. They argued in favor of efforts to improve economic conditions and increase Vietnamese participation in the political process, while transforming the French colonial empire into a broader body of autonomous states similar to the British Commonwealth.

If some sought a peaceful road to national liberation or a new and more equitable relationship with France, others agreed with Phan Boi Chau that only violent struggle would bring about true national liberation. Best known among the parties that adopted such an approach was the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD), or Vietnamese National Party, formed by a number of discontented intellectuals in Hanoi in 1927. The ideology of the VNQDD, like that of the Guomindang in China, emphasized the establishment of an independent republic on the Western model. It was highly nationalist and generally progressive in its political and economic views, but anticommunist in its ideological orientation. Its leaders were convinced that the French could only be evicted by force of arms.

[13] Tran Huy Lieu, *Tai Lieu Tham Khao Lich Su Viet Nam: Cach Mang Can Dai Viet Nam* [Research Materials on Vietnamese History: The Modern Revolution in Vietnam], vol. 4 (Hanoi: Van Su Dia, 1958), p. 99.

Disagreements over means and ends, of course, existed in anticolonial movements throughout Asia. In the more successful cases, such as the Congress Party in British India, and the Indonesian Nationalist Party in the Dutch East Indies, leading figures were able to reconcile such differences while maintaining the semblance of a unified front against the common enemy. In colonial Vietnam, such differences could not be overcome. Members of the VNQDD contemptuously dismissed supporters of the Constitutionalist Party as collaborators, while the latter haughtily disapproved of the political and social radicalism of their more militant critics. Until the final French soldier and colonial bureaucrat departed from Indochina thirty years later, noncommunist nationalism would be unable to face the colonial regime with a solid front. It was a fatal flaw.

The nationalists also had problems in articulating their message to the Vietnamese people. Most of the active members of the anticolonial movement in the 1920s were members of the educated urban minority. Many were students and journalists. Some had studied abroad. A substantial number were descended from the traditional ruling elite. While sympathetic to the needs and aspirations of the poor, relatively few had a deep understanding of rural problems, and their message understandably tended to focus on their own concerns, such as freedom of speech and assembly, equal pay for equal work (a serious source of complaint among Vietnamese serving in the colonial bureaucracy), and greater native representation in the governing process.

For Nguyen Ai Quoc, such conditions represented both a challenge and an opportunity. From his base of operations in Canton (he was already well known to French security officials and could not risk returning to Indochina), he began to seek support within the Vietnamese exile community in southern China, where thousands of Vietnamese were studying, working on the railroad between Yunnan province and the Red River delta, or simply hiding from the French security services, the dreaded Sureté. Some had

crossed the border to serve under the banner of the old patriot Phan Boi Chau, but the latter, even prior to his arrest by the French, had aged visibly. Although he was still viewed with respect by many of his compatriots, he had now lost much of his energy and more of his following, and young radicals increasingly branched out on their own to seek the overthrow of the French regime.[14]

Such was the case for the small radical group of Vietnamese exiles who called their organization the Tam Tam Xa (Association of Like Minds). The group had originally owed a general allegiance to Phan Boi Chau, but was now operating on its own. The association lacked any specific ideology; it was simply dedicated to the violent overthrow of French rule. In 1924, one of the members of the group, the young militant Pham Hong Thai, attempted to assassinate the French governor general of Indochina while he was visiting Guangzhou to seek the extradition of Vietnamese radicals to Indochina. The attempt failed, and Pham Hong Thai drowned in the river while attempting to escape. But the news of the abortive assassination swept through the region. The movement had its first martyr.

THE REVOLUTIONARY PATH

Shortly after his own arrival in Guangzhou, Nguyen Ai Quoc established contact with surviving members of the group and persuaded them to join his own new organization, the Viet Nam Thanh Nien Cach Mang Dong Chi Hoi, or Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League. The RYL was not a formal communist party as such. In his own writings during the early 1920s, Nguyen Ai Quoc had recognized that the Vietnamese people still lacked political sophistication, while the local proletariat was too small and disorganized to form the basis for a sophisticated party based on the principles of Marxism-Leninism. He would need time to organize and teach his followers the complexities of Marxist doctrine and practice. The program of the RYL therefore avoided specifics and espoused in very general terms to the twin goals of national independence and a vague commitment to creating a future egalitarian society. In preparation for

[14] Many of these young radicals respected Phan Boi Chau but thought he was naive. For example, see Tran Huy Lieu, "Nho lai ong Gia Ben Ngu" [In memory of Phan Boi Chau], *NCLS* 47 (February 1963).

the formation of a formal communist party in the near future, Nguyen Ai Quoc introduced six of the most active and dedicated of his followers into a small subgroup called the Communist League to serve as the nucleus of a future communist party.

While in the process of forming the RYL, Nguyen Ai Quoc had resumed his acquaintance with the veteran patriot Phan Boi Chau. While on a visit to Beijing, Chau had met Leo Karakhan, the Soviet ambassador to China, and expressed a general interest in Marxist socialism. After returning to his residence in Hangzhou in central China, Chau met with Nguyen Ai Quoc and apparently agreed to serve as a symbolic leader for the latter's new revolutionary organization. But while en route to Guangzhou to confer with him on the details, he was suddenly arrested by French police in the railway station in Shanghai, and thenceforth returned to Indochina for trial. Accusations have since been made that Nguyen Ai Quoc betrayed Phan Boi Chau in return for the ransom money, but there is no persuasive evidence to support the charge. Chau himself believed that he had been turned in by one of his followers.[15]

For the next two years, Nguyen Ai Quoc attempted to build up the RYL, while introducing his followers to the intricacies of Marxist doctrine and practice. Members were given ideological and practical training at a training institute in a small rented building in downtown Guangzhou. Nguyen Ai Quoc was one of the regular lecturers, along with leading members of the CCP such as Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi. Nguyen Ai Quoc wrote a short pamphlet entitled *Duong Kach Menh* ("The Revolutionary Path"), which provided a simplified interpretation of the coming world revolution and its relationship to the revolution in Vietnam and was used as a textbook for the class on Marxism. In the pamphlet, the author declared that national liberation could not be realized simply through isolated acts of heroism and self-sacrifice (a clear reference to the activities of the Association of Like Minds), but required an ideology and a plan. Such a program, he contended, was offered by the ideas of Marx and Lenin.[16]

[15] The charge is repeated in Robert F. Turner, *Vietnamese Communism: Its Origins and Development* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institute Press, 1975). For Phan Boi Chau's view of the matter, see his *Phan Boi Chau Nien Bieu* [A chronological biography of Phan Boi Chau] (Hanoi: Van Su Dia, 1957), pp. 189–190.

[16] A complete version of *The Revolutionary Path* is contained in *Ho Chi Minh Toan Tap* [Complete Works of Ho Chi Minh], vol. 2 (Hanoi: Su That, 1981). Hereafter *Toan Tap*.

After the completion of their training program at the institute, graduates were taken to the gravesite of the martyred Pham Hong Thai, where they took an oath of loyalty to the cause of Vietnamese national liberation. Most then returned to Indochina to recruit new members for the RYL. A select few were sent to Moscow for additional training.

The RYL was an immediate success and gained wide support from radical youths in all three regions of the country. Most of the early members came from families belonging to the educated elite, although some inroads were made into recruiting from factories, plantations, and farm villages. The RYL leadership made an effort to establish cooperative arrangements with other nationalist parties such as the VNQDD, but for the most part it competed with such organizations for followers. By the late 1920s, it had over 1000 members and was viewed by the Sureté as the most serious threat to French rule in Indochina.

Why was the RYL so successful? In the first place, it was better organized than its rivals. It artfully combined the appeal of patriotism and social reform in a manner that could appeal to wide sectors of the populace, moderates as well as radicals, the affluent as well as the poor. In this respect, it undoubtedly benefited from the sophisticated strategy that had been formulated by Lenin several years before. Secondly, the RYL made a greater attempt than other parties to transcend regional differences and organized branches in all areas of the country, although the bulk of the leadership came from Nguyen Ai Quoc's native province of Nghe-Tinh. Finally, in Nguyen Ai Quoc it possessed a highly charismatic leader who could inspire trust and devotion from his followers and appeal to moderates and radicals alike. Nguyen Ai Quoc was also a gifted strategist who had the ability to articulate his message in a way that appeared to sum up the aspirations of the vast majority of his compatriots.

Sun Yat-sen died of cancer in 1925, and the alliance between the CCP and the Guomindang came to an abrupt end when Sun's successor, Chiang Kai-shek, slaughtered thousands of communist supporters in Shanghai in April 1927. Chiang cracked down on communist activities throughout southern China, and Nguyen Ai Quoc fled to Moscow. In his absence, the RYL began to experience the problem of internal fragmentation that had plagued its rivals. The chief source of dispute was ideological. Some members became increasingly critical of the tendency of the leadership to emphasize

national over economic concerns and argued for a policy that placed more stress on class struggle than on national independence. They also called for heightened efforts to increase enrollment in the organization among workers and poor peasants.

Such proposals had been provoked in part by a change of approach in Moscow. The Leninist strategy of encouraging alliances between communist parties and local bourgeois nationalist groups had clearly backfired in China. The Comintern reacted by instructing communist parties to build new, more narrowly based alliances with only the most revolutionary elements among the peasantry and radical intellectuals. Communist parties were themselves to be "proletarianized" by being purged of their bourgeois elements and enriched by new members recruited from the local working class.

In the spring of 1929, the RYL broke up into contending factions, each claiming to represent the official policy of the Comintern. Early the following year, Nguyen Ai Quoc, who had been organizing Vietnamese residents in nearby Siam (now Thailand) went to Hong Kong to unite the squabbling factions into a single communist party. But he had by no means changed his views on the correct course of the Vietnamese revolution. Although the program drafted under his guidance at the meeting held in early February 1930 attempted to conform to Comintern guidelines for a "party of the working class," it also called for the formation of a common front that would include both middle-class intellectuals and middle peasants and rich peasants, small landlords, and capitalist elements as well. The so-called unity conference also directed the new party to make use of patriotic slogans aimed at the creation of an independent Vietnam, while at the same time attempting to establish contact with oppressed and working-class elements throughout the world. As a clear symbol of the underlying patriotic character of its message, the new organization was named the Dang Cong San Viet Nam (Vietnamese Communist Party, or VCP). A provisional Central Committee was appointed until formal elections could take place.[17]

If Nguyen Ai Quoc was attempting to reconcile existing Comintern strategy with his own views on the proper course of the Vietnamese revolution, he did not succeed. A few months after the

[17] Nguyen Ai Quoc had already decided on the name before the conference was convened. See Note by Nguyen Ai Quoc, January 6, 1930, in the Ho Chi Minh Museum in Hanoi.

unity conference, two members of the RYL who had been studying at the Stalin School in Moscow returned to Hong Kong with clear guidelines from the Comintern on the proper organization and line of the new party. At a meeting of the Central Committee in October, a new program was adopted which essentially reversed the decisions of the February conference and placed a clear priority on the issue of class struggle. Nguyen Ai Quoc's plan to seek support from middle-class and progressive-landlord elements was rejected, and his ideas were denounced as "mistaken and dangerous" by colleagues in party publications. Such ideas, they wrote, placed emphasis on the struggle for national independence at the expense of social revolution. To dramatize the new line, at Moscow's direction the October conference changed the name of the organization to Dang Cong San Dong Duong—the Indochinese Communist Party, or ICP.[18]

After the meeting, the leadership of the new party was turned over to the new Moscow-trained leadership, while Nguyen Ai Quoc remained in Hong Kong as a representative of the Comintern. The new party had appeared at a fateful moment. While the Central Committee was wrestling with the problem of establishing a proper ideological focus, a major revolt broke out in Vietnam. Angry workers and peasants rioted against declining economic conditions brought on by the advent of the Great Depression. In Nghe-Tinh province, desperate peasants, supported by local communist organizers, unseated the local authorities and formed peasant associations (called "soviets" in imitation of the workers' committees formed during the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution), which reduced land rents and in some cases divided up the land of wealthy landlords among the poor.

Party operatives had been active in the central coast region since earlier in the year, preparing for an anticipated revolutionary upsurge throughout Indochina. Faced with the quickening tempo of

[18] Full details of the October conference are not yet available to historians. But it seems clear that it rejected Nguyen Ai Quoc's program and adopted one more in conformity with the decisions reached at the Comintern congress in 1928. For a recent discussion by a Vietnamese historian in Hanoi, see Le Mau Han, "Ho Chi Minh voi ngon co doc lap dan toc trong cuong linh dau tien cua Dang" [Ho Chi Minh and the standard of national independence in the first program of the party], *Tap Chi Lich Su Dang* [Journal of Party History] 33 (May 1990):18–33.

unrest, they attempted to provide guidance and leadership to the peasant movement. But the French reacted swiftly and ruthlessly to the revolt, and by the spring of 1931 the agitation had been suppressed. The Nghe-Tinh revolt had confirmed Nguyen Ai Quoc's contention of the revolutionary potential of the rural populace, but it also demonstrated the need for careful preparation and the mobilization of support on a nationwide basis. Although there were scattered outbreaks of violence in factories and plantations elsewhere in the country, in general farmers and workers in Tonkin and Cochin China did not rise in support of their compatriots in the central provinces.

The lesson in the art of revolution was an expensive one. In the French crackdown that followed, most of the party leadership and many of its most active members were executed or sentenced to lengthy terms in prison. In June 1931, Nguyen Ai Quoc himself was arrested by British authorities in a general roundup of radical elements in Hong Kong.

For the next several years, the party was in a state of disarray. Unable to hold a meeting of the Central Committee inside Indochina, the party's few surviving leaders assigned direction of the party to two temporary committees based in China and Thailand. Because the party's internal apparatus had been shattered, the new committees were staffed primarily by students returning from the Stalin School in Moscow. For the time being, party strategy continued to reflect the hard-line approach that had been adopted at the October 1930 conference. Articles published in party journals criticized the "nationalist" tendencies of Nguyen Ai Quoc and other members of his faction and called for a narrowly defined line based on working-class leadership.

It was a change of mood in Moscow that brought this sectarian phase of the Vietnamese revolution to an end. By 1935 Soviet policymakers had begun to react to Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany, and at an August Comintern congress all member communist parties were ordered to adopt a broader view of the united front. Not only should they begin to seek greater support from peasant and middle-class elements; they should also join forces with ruling authorities in colonial areas against the common danger of world fascism.

At first, some members of the ICP were reluctant to follow the new guidelines, which appeared to them to betray the cause of world

revolution. But eventually the party closed ranks around the new approach and soon tasted its benefits when the colonial government in Indochina, under instructions from Paris, permitted the ICP and other nationalist organizations to function on a semilegal basis, so long as they did not promote violence. Communists were elected to the office on the Saigon Muncipal Council and published a newspaper called *La Lutte* ("The Struggle") without hindrance from the government. In succeeding years the ICP began to spread its popular base by forming self-help associations among the urban working class and organizing among the rural peasantry. Once again, the party had begun to play a prominent role in the Vietnamese nationalist movement.

Nguyen Ai Quoc had observed these events from Moscow, where he had gone after his release from prison in Hong Kong in 1933. There is little doubt that he would have liked to return to Asia to help protect his party from disintegration, but he was under suspicion by Stalin for his independent views on Marxist doctrine, and his activities were restricted to menial administrative chores and writing occasional articles on topics of general concern. Certainly he must have approved the new approach to the united front that was adopted at the 1935 Comintern congress, although he was permitted to attend the meeting only as an observer.

In 1939, he wrote an open letter to the ICP leadership explaining the new policy. What was needed, he said, was a comprehensive Indochinese Democratic Front that embraced not only workers and peasants but the middle class and progressive French citizens as well. If such elements were left out of the united front, they could be pushed into the hands of the Japanese fascists, who had invaded China in 1931, thus strengthening the influence of reactionary elements throughout the world. The ICP, he concluded, "must not demand that the front accept its leadership, but must show itself to be its most loyal, active and sincere member." Only when the broad masses of the population began to recognize the correct policy and leadership of the ICP could it claim leadership over the movement. By the time he wrote those words, Nguyen Ai Quoc had already returned to China to prepare for the next stage of the Vietnamese revolution.[19]

[19] Nguyen Ai Quoc's report is presented in an English-language translation in Bernard B. Fall, *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1967), pp. 131–132.

CALL TO ARMS

As the decade of the 1930s came to an end, the ICP had begun to return to the program that had originally been adopted by Nguyen Ai Quoc during the 1920s. It was just in time, because the world was clearly on the verge of a new era of widespread instability. In August 1939, the Soviet Union signed a nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany. The sudden move provoked a crackdown on Communist activities in Indochina by the French colonial authorities, and party leaders were forced to flee from their base of operations in the outskirts of Saigon. To the north, China and Japan were now at war. At a meeting of the reconstituted Central Committee held in a secret location near Saigon in November, party leaders called for a general uprising to achieve national liberation from colonial rule.

> All comrades must close ranks! Unite one thousand as one! Rise to realize the anti-imperialist national united front! Rise to overthrow the imperialist yoke! Seize independence, liberty, freedom, equality, peace, and happiness! The future is ours![20]

But within weeks of the meeting, most of the members of the Central Committee had been arrested by the French, and party members in the three regions were forced to act on their own.

In the summer of 1940, Japan demanded that the French close the border between China and Indochina to prevent the shipment of goods to the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek, which was now headquartered in Chongqing in central China. In September, Tokyo demanded the right to station troops in northern Indochina and punctuated its demand with a sudden attack on French forces along the Sino-Vietnamese border. The new French government at Vichy capitulated to the Japanese demands.

Communist leaders along the frontier organized guerrilla units who briefly resisted the invaders and then faded into the mountains to preserve their strength and consolidate a liberated base area. Shortly after, the ICP's regional Committee for the South, taking

[20] Only recently has the 1939 meeting received credit for having been the first to raise the standard of national liberation. Previously the honor had gone to the Central Committee meeting held at Pac Bo in May 1941. The full resolution of the 1939 meeting is not available in English. For a Vietnamese-language version, see *Van Kien Dang* [Party Documents], vol. 2 (Hanoi: Institute of History on the Party, 1978), pp. 26–88.

advantage of rising popular discontent in both urban and rural areas of Cochin China, launched an uprising against French rule in Saigon and the neighboring Mekong River delta. The uprising was ruthlessly suppressed, and several key leaders from the Central Committee were seized and executed.

By now the party organization was in a state of considerable disarray. The regional committee in Tonkin had convened a meeting in October to consult with a delegate from the Committee for the South and evaluate the latter's proposal for the uprising in Cochin China. Members of the Tonkin regional committee opposed the plan on the grounds that it was too risky, but the visiting delegate from the south was arrested by the French before he could report back to his colleagues in Saigon. Now the regional committee in Tonkin decided to constitute itself as a temporary Central Committee until formal party elections could be held. Truong Chinh, a leading member of the Tonkin regional committee who had been active in party affairs since the early 1930s, was selected as provisional general secretary, the most influential position in the party.[21]

While ICP leaders inside Indochina struggled desperately to keep abreast of the rapidly changing situation, Nguyen Ai Quoc was in China, serving in various capacities with Chinese Communist Party units in different parts of the country while awaiting an opportunity to resume contacts with his colleagues in the Central Committee. He had left the USSR in the summer of 1938, having finally received approval from the Comintern to return to Asia to resume direction of the party. After stopping briefly at CCP headquarters in Yenan, he went on to southern China, where he worked at a club run by the Communist Party's Eighth Route Army in Guilin and published articles in a local newspaper extolling the virtues of the most recent united front between the Nationalists and the Communists against Japan. In the spring of 1940 he was finally able to establish contact with Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap, two promising young ICP members who had been sent to China by the Central Committee to organize a party base in the area. At first,

[21] The events surrounding the Saigon uprising and the formation of the new Central Committee in Tonkin are poorly known and are only now being discussed and analyzed by Vietnamese historians in Hanoi. For a general overview, see *Histoire de la Révolution d'Août* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), pp. 19–22. Descended from a prestigious scholar-gentry family in Tonkin, Truong Chinh (real name Dang Xuan Khu) had joined the RYL in the 1920s. After a term in prison, he was released in 1936 and became active in journalistic activities on behalf of the party.

Nguyen Ai Quoc planned to send them to Yenan to serve as a liaison with CCP headquarters, but as events in Indochina evolved, he changed his mind and instructed them to remain in southern China to reorganize the party's activities in the area.

Nguyen Ai Quoc's most immediate concern was to establish cooperative arrangements with the leading members of other Vietnamese anticolonial organizations operating in China. He took up the challenge on two levels. On the one hand, he sought alliances with all nationalist groups opposed to French rule and the Japanese occupation of Indochina, even though they might not agree to the party's ultimate goal of a communist society. As a vehicle for such activities, he arranged for members of the ICP to take part in the Vietnamese Liberation League, formed by Chinese authorities to assist them in undermining the Japanese occupation of Indochina. In conformity with the strategy that he had outlined in his article in 1939, Nguyen Ai Quoc did not insist that the ICP play a leading role in the Liberation League. But he did initiate plans for a separate united front of anti-Japanese groups in which the party would play a leading part, although its dominant position would be disguised in order to maximize its appeal to moderates. This second organization was eventually to be known as the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh, or League for the Independence of Vietnam, but was popularly known as the Vietminh.

The Vietminh was formally established in May 1941 at a meeting of the ICP Central Committee in the small mountain village of Pac Bo, near the Chinese border. Like its prototype, the Revolutionary Youth League, the Vietminh sought to win the support of both moderate and radical elements by espousing the dual goals of national independence and social reform. But in line with Nguyen Ai Quoc's firm belief that national liberation was the most crucial problem currently facing the Vietnamese people, he placed primary emphasis on the former goal. This overriding focus on patriotic themes was reflected in the name of the organization, which not only stressed the issue of independence but replaced the term *Indochina*, used in the name of the party, with the more emotionally charged word *Vietnam* in the united front. In a proclamation issued to the Vietnamese people after the close of the meeting, Nguyen Ai Quoc attempted to evoke the image of past glories.

> Dear fellow-countrymen! A few hundred years ago, in the reign of the Tran, when our country faced the great danger of invasion by

> Yuan armies, the elders ardently called on their sons and daughters throughout the country to stand up as one to kill the enemy. Finally they saved their people, and their glorious memory will live forever. Let our elders and patriotic personalities follow the illustrious example set by our forefathers. . . .

At present national liberation stands above everything. Let us unite and overthrow the Japanese, the French, and their lackeys in order to save our people from their present dire straits.[22]

As had been the case with the RYL, the program of the Vietminh did not entirely ignore economic issues. But the appeal to land-hungry peasants was deliberately muted in order to avoid alienating wealthy landowners and other affluent members of Vietnamese society. The previous party program, which had called for the confiscation of land from big property owners, was replaced by the more limited one of reducing land rents and seizing the property of French imperialists and their Vietnamese collaborators. But the policy shift was only tactical. According to the resolution issued at the close of the meeting, the problem of class struggle would continue to exist. At the present time, however, "the nation has prime importance, and all demands which are of benefit to a specific class but which are harmful to the national interests must be subordinated to the survival of the nation and the race."[23]

The immediate goal of the front was thus to build a movement for national independence that could not only earn the support of the Vietnamese people but also the sympathy of the Allied powers. Victory would symbolize the triumph of the first stage of the revolution and usher in a broad-based government composed of several classes but dominated by the ICP. There would then be ample time to move toward the proletarian or socialist stage of the revolution. In the meantime, Nguyen Ai Quoc gambled that broad elements within the population would enthusiastically support the cause.

The ultimate goal of the new united front, of course, was to

[22] An English-language version of the appeal is in *Ho Chi Minh: Selected Writings* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), pp. 45–46. The original Vietnamese version is in *Toan Tap*, vol. 3, pp. 147–149. Nguyen Ai Quoc's appeal to patriotic sentiment is reminiscent of Stalin's effort to mobilize the Russian people against the German invasion in June 1941.

[23] Tran Huy Lieu, *Lich Su Tam Muoi Nam Chong Phap* [A History of the Eighty-Year Struggle against the French], vol. 2 (Hanoi: Van Su Dia, 1958), p. 71.

assist the ICP in its struggle for power. During its meeting in November 1939, the party Central Committee had set the stage by calling for an armed uprising to seize power and restore national independence. As we have seen, party operatives along the Sino-Vietnamese border had already initiated steps to create a liberated area in the mountains of northern Vietnam—known in Vietnamese as the Viet Bac, or "northern Viet"—as a base of operations against the French. At the same time, a number of leading party members had begun to discuss the tactics that should be applied in the coming struggle for independence. One such was the promising young party activist Vo Nguyen Giap. Born to a scholar-gentry family in northern Vietnam in 1908, Giap had been educated at the University of Hanoi and joined the party during the mid-1930s while employed as a history teacher at a lycée in Hanoi. Like several of his colleagues, Giap had read Mao Zedong's works on the use of guerrilla tactics against Japanese occupation forces in China, and he became convinced of the relevance of such a "people's war" approach in Vietnam.

Nguyen Ai Quoc had been an advocate of guerilla warfare since the 1920s, when he had observed CCP units using such tactics against the Chinese warlords. After his return to China in 1938, he had ample opportunity to assess Mao Zedong's strategy against the Japanese, and later translated a number of Chinese tracts on guerilla tactics into Vietnamese for use in training Vietminh cadres. Mao Zedong's use of liberated areas as a base of operations to build up the strength of insurgent forces also caught his attention, and he undoubtedly noted its potential relevance to conditions in Vietnam.[24]

As important to Nguyen Ai Quoc as the kind of strategy to adopt was the question of when to put it into effect. Vietnam was a small country occupied by two powerful enemies. It did not possess the advantage of size that had enabled the Chinese Communists to set up a large base area in northern China and then maintain it for years against a powerful adversary. A similar area inside Vietnam would be too exposed to military attacks either by the Japanese or by the French, and could therefore only be established during the final stage of the struggle. At the same time, a premature uprising

[24] Ho Chi Minh, "Cach danh du kich" [Tactics of guerrilla warfare], *Toan Tap*, vol. 3, pp. 163–209.

could lead to severe repression by the enemy, which could destroy the movement just as the promise of national liberation had grown bright. Nguyen Ai Quoc frequently cautioned his headstrong colleagues against excessive haste and argued that the best time to strike would be at the point when Japan was on the verge of defeat by the Allied powers. In the meantime, the party could strengthen its political base by building a Vietminh network throughout the country while simultaneously creating armed units that, in due time, would launch local insurrections in preparation for the final seizure of power in the major cities. Thus appeared an element in Vietnamese Communist strategic thinking that played a key role in revolutionary planning down to the final uprising in Saigon in 1975—the concept of *thoi co*, seizing the right opportunity.

In the months following the Pac Bo meeting, the party began to form guerrilla detachments in the mountains of northern Vietnam. Much of the population in the region of the Viet Bac was composed of mountain peoples who had always resented efforts by the lowland Vietnamese to dominate them. By displaying a sensitive concern for the local customs and traditions of the indigenous people, the Vietminh were able to win support in many minority regions. A number of leading members of the movement were of minority extraction. Others married women of minority extraction and adopted the dress and customs of the local population.

Nguyen Ai Quoc returned to China to set up training camps for his followers and pull together the fragile alliance between the Vietminh and other anti-Japanese groups operating in the area. It was on one of those visits that he was arrested by local Chinese authorities and placed in prison once more. For several months he was out of contact with party leadership, and reports reached Vietnam that he had died in captivity. But he was able to inform his closest colleagues that he was still alive by means of secret letters written with disappearing ink.

In August 1943, Nguyen Ai Quoc was released from captivity by order of the Chinese commander Zhang Fakui. The circumstances of his release have always been somewhat mysterious, but there is some evidence that General Zhang, although fully aware of Nguyen Ai Quoc's communist affiliation, hoped to take advantage of his popular appeal in the Vietnamese exile community to mobilize the Vietnamese against the Japanese occupation forces in Indochina. Shortly after his release, Nguyen Ai Quoc resumed his efforts to form a broad united front to drive the Japanese and French from

Indochina. He now began increasingly to use a name that later became familiar to the entire world: Ho Chi Minh.[25]

A key element in Ho Chi Minh's evolving strategy was to win the support and recognition of the Allied powers for his movement when the war came to an end. A directive issued to all units two weeks after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor declared that Vietminh policy would be to cooperate with China and to establish relations with Great Britain and the United States. If the latter agreed to assist the revolution in Indochina, the directive declared, the Vietminh front should be willing to offer them concessions and unite with them on a conditional basis. If the Allies decided to assist in the return of the French, the Vietminh should be prepared to fight alone.[26]

It was in that spirit that in 1943 Ho Chi Minh first initiated contacts with U.S. military intelligence units in southern China. He offered the assistance of his own organization in providing intelligence information on Japanese troop movements in Indochina, as well as helping to rescue Allied fliers shot down during missions over the area. In letters written to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Ho requested in return U.S. recognition of the Vietminh as the legitimate representative of the Vietnamese people. American officials forwarded his letters to Washington without comment.

In Washington, U.S. intelligence analysts were initially somewhat confused about the plethora of Vietnamese antifascist and anticolonial organizations operating in southern China. That, of course, accorded with Ho Chi Minh's strategy. Although he was hopeful that "progressive forces" in the United States would be sympathetic to Vietnamese demands for independence, he was well aware that the United States was a capitalist country and hoped to avoid unnecessarily alienating the Roosevelt administration in the delicate period ahead.

Ho Chi Minh's shell-game tactics had only limited success, for

[25] Nguyen Ai Quoc had apparently first used the name Ho Chi Minh to establish an alias during his trips across the Sino-Vietnamese border prior to his arrest. According to Zhang Fakui, he was identified by that name while he was in prison in China. Zhang contends that he knew Ho Chi Minh was a Communist, but released him because he felt he could be useful in building up an anti-Japanese organization of Vietnamese exiles living in south China. See Zhang Fakui's oral interview held in the Columbia University Library.

[26] "Cuoc chien tranh Thai binh duong va trach niem cua kip cua Dang" [The Pacific war and the tasks of the party], in *Van Kien Dang*, vol. 3, pp. 292–293.

knowledgeable U.S. observers were well aware that the mysterious Ho Chi Minh was in fact none other than the veteran revolutionary Nguyen Ai Quoc. Whether that had any effect on U.S. policy is not clear. President Roosevelt was sympathetic to the desire of the Vietnamese people for independence and had frequently expressed his opposition to the restoration of French colonial rule in Indochina. But both the British and the French had resisted FDR's plans to set up trusteeships in former colonies, and by early 1945 Roosevelt had begun to weaken in his resolve. In any event, he had no intention of becoming politically involved in the region until the end of the Pacific war. Ho Chi Minh's letters to the White House were therefore not answered. But Ho did succeed in establishing a cooperative arrangement with local U.S. intelligence units in China and the Vietminh received a limited number of weapons and communications equipment for their clandestine operations inside Vietnam. Major Archimedes Patti of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS, the predecessor of the CIA) was assigned as liaison to the Vietminh forces as the war came to an end. He and other U.S. officers helped to train a small Vietminh military force, known as "armed propaganda detachments" and placed under the command of Vo Nguyen Giap.[27]

THE AUGUST REVOLUTION

As the final months of the war gradually unfolded, events worked both in favor of and against the Vietminh. By early 1945, increasing numbers of French civilian and military personnel in Indochina were beginning to sympathize with Colonel Charles de Gaulle's Free French movement, which had just dispatched an official to southern China to represent its interests in the area. In March, the Japanese responded by abruptly abolishing the Vichy French colonial administration in Indochina and offering to restore independence to Vietnam under the puppet emperor Bao Dai. Despite the fact that the potential authority of his new government would be limited in key respects, and would not extend to Cochin China (Japanese officials

[27] For indications that U.S. analysts were aware that Nguyen Ai Quoc and Ho Chi Minh were the same person and that the Vietminh Front was dominated by the ICP, see Memo FE (Ballantine) to WE/EUR, dated August 23, 1945, in the *U.S. State Department Central Files*. Hereafter *Central Files*.

explained that Tokyo needed to maintain its control over the French colony for strategical reasons), Bao Dai accepted the offer. Some French civilian and military officials were able to escape abroad to serve with the Free French. The remainder were placed in detention.[28]

The abolition of the remnants of French colonial authority by Japan operated to the advantage of the Vietminh, since Japanese administrative control in Indochina was essentially limited to urban areas, while the French presence in the countryside quickly evaporated. This left a political and military vacuum which Ho Chi Minh's forces were quick to fill. Shortly after the Japanese coup d'état, key ICP leaders met under the direction of General Secretary Truong Chinh to make preparations for a general uprising designed to seize power at the end of the Pacific war. Their efforts to broaden the support for the movement were undoubtedly assisted by a widespread famine, which led to the death by starvation of thousands of Vietnamese in rural areas throughout the northern and central parts of the country. The original cause of the famine was bad weather, but its effects were exacerbated by the refusal of Japanese authorities to release grain stocks to the local population. During the next several months, Vietminh forces operating in the mountains surrounding the Red River delta began to intensify their efforts to seize control over rural areas and recruit followers from villages in regions under their control. Vo Nguyen Giap's tiny elite forces were now combined with other units in the country into a new Vietnamese Liberation Army (Viet Nam Giai Phong Quan).

In Cochin China, far removed from Vietminh headquarters in the mountains north of Hanoi, party operatives were forced to adopt a more political approach. The main base of Vietminh power was the Vanguard Youth (Thanh Nien Tien Phong), a broad popular organization with over 200,000 members that had been established under Japanese sponsorship but was actually under the secret guidance of the ICP through the clandestine communist Pham Ngoc Thach.

In one respect, world events operated to the disadvantage of the movement. In anticipation of an Allied invasion of Indochina during the final weeks of the war, Ho Chi Minh readied his forces to seize

[28] Bao Dai explained his decision to accept the Japanese offer in his *Dragon d'Annam* (Paris: Plon, 1980), pp. 103–104.

The First Armed Propaganda Brigades. Vo Nguyen Giap is at the left.

power in areas occupied by the Allies and then to seek recognition from them as the true representative of the Vietnamese people.[29] Unfortunately, the invasion never took place, as Allied forces bypassed the Southeast Asian mainland and struck directly across the Pacific toward the Japanese home islands. The Vietminh would be compelled to face the French alone.

The end of the war came with breathtaking swiftness. The first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6. Two days later, by prearrangement with the Allies, the USSR declared war on Japan, while Soviet forces invaded Manchuria. The following day, a second atom bomb was dropped on the southern Japanese city of

[29] "Cuoc chien tranh . . . ," p. 292.

The Conference Hall at Tan Trao, where the Vietminh Front issued its call for revolution in August 1945.

Nagasaki. On August 14, the imperial government accepted Allied peace terms. The Pacific war was finally over.

The sudden collapse of Japan undoubtedly caught Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues by surprise. The anticipated Allied attack on Indochina had never taken place. Instead, Allied leaders meeting at Potsdam in late July agreed that Indochina would be occupied by British and Nationalist Chinese expeditionary forces: the British to the south of the sixteenth parallel, the Chinese to the north. Their task would be twofold—to accept the surrender of Japanese military forces and to maintain law and order until a postwar administration in the area had been secured.

To their good fortune, ICP leaders were holding a major strategy session at Tan Trao, a small village in the mountains north of Hanoi, just when the news of the Japanese surrender reached Indochina. That meeting was to be followed by a conference of Vietminh representatives from all over the country. Confronted with this new situation, the Central Committee called for an immediate insurrection of all Vietminh forces throughout the country to fill the vacuum caused by the end of the war and bring into being an independent republic under the leadership of the Vietminh Front. Using the name Nguyen Ai Quoc for the last time, Ho Chi Minh issued a public appeal for a general uprising to the Vietnamese people.

> Dear fellow countrymen! The decisive hour has struck for the destiny of our people. Let all of us stand up and rely on our own strength to free ourselves. Many oppressed peoples the world over are vying with each other in wresting back independence. We should not lag behind.
>
> Forward! Forward! Under the banner of the Viet Minh, let us valiantly march forward![30]

During the next few days, Vietminh forces seized power in villages and towns throughout the northern and central provinces of the country. In most cases, the insurgents met with little or no resistance, and local authorities simply handed over the seal of office on the demand of resistance leaders. In Hanoi, however, the situation was somewhat more complicated. A provisional government loyal to Emperor Bao Dai had been formed a few days before the Japanese surrender; it hoped to make the case with the Allies for recognition as the legitimate government of the country. To compel this government to resign, Vietminh cadres disrupted government-sponsored meetings held in the baroque National Theater in downtown Hanoi, while demanding a transfer of power to the Vietminh Front as the representative of the victorious Allies. On August 18, militia units from neighboring villages marched into the center of the city and joined forces with urban shock troops under the command of the ICP. In a bloodless coup they seized control of government offices from Japanese authorities.

It remained to remove the last tattered remnants of legitimacy from the old regime. In late August, a Vietminh delegation arrived in the imperial capital of Hue to demand the abdication of Emperor Bao Dai in favor of the new republic. Bao Dai was reluctant to accede but, according to one Vietminh source, he was informed bluntly that he could either lose his throne or lose his head. Bao Dai stepped out of the imperial palace and formally announced his abdication.[31]

On September 2, leading members of the new Provisional Republic of Vietnam gathered in Ba Dinh Square, a spacious wooded park near the governor general's palace in Hanoi. On a platform erected for the occasion and dressed in a simple khaki uniform, his feet shod in rubber thongs made from bicycle tires, President Ho Chi Minh presented a short speech to the thousands of people gathered in the square. To the few Americans in the audience, his opening words were startling.

[30] For an English-language version of the call for the general uprising, see *Ho Chi Minh: Selected Writings*, p. 50.

[31] Bao Dai's version of the event is in *Dragon d'Annam*, pp. 120–123.

Ho Chi Minh, on the raised platform in the background, declares Vietnamese independence at Ba Dinh Square in early September 1945.

> "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." This immortal statement appeared in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In a broader sense, it means: All the peoples on the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live and to be happy and free.

These, Ho announced, are "undeniable truths" and have been accepted as such by the French people themselves.

> Yet for eighty years, the French government has abused them by violating our Fatherland and oppressing our fellow citizens. Today we are determined to oppose the wicked schemes of the French imperialists, and we call upon the victorious Allies to recognize our freedom and independence. Vietnam has the right to enjoy freedom and independence and in fact has become a free and independent country. The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their freedom and independence.[32]

[32] For an English-language version of the speech, see *Ho Chi Minh: Selected Writings*, pp. 53–56.

The Vietminh had struck with lightning swiftness to take advantage of the disarray of the Japanese and the absence of the French. But their triumph was only a limited one. In Cochin China, the party apparatus had been virtually destroyed by the French after the abortive revolt in the fall of 1940 and had staged only a partial recovery during the war years. While Pham Ngoc Thach's Vanguard Youth provided the Vietminh Front with a firm political base of operations, competition from other nationalist parties was strong. The Vietminh also encountered problems in winning support from adherents of two prominent religious sects, the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, that had won popularity in various parts of Cochin China since the prewar period. The Cao Dai (meaning "high tower"), a syncretic faith containing elements of several major religions, had originated in the 1920s among civil servants in Saigon and later spread to rural areas near the Cambodian border. The Hoa Hao was an offshoot of Buddhism and the brainchild of the "mad monk" Huynh Phu So, who founded the new faith in the late 1930s in the lower reaches of the Mekong River delta. Both sects flourished in the frontier village environment of colonial Cochin China, while its leaders staunchly resisted all forms of external domination, whether by the French or by the Vietminh.

To maximize their influence in the region, Vietminh operatives in Cochin China joined forces with anti-French groups to form a provisional Committee of the South (Uy Ban Nam Bo) to negotiate with the British expeditionary forces on a transfer of power to local authority. But the commander of the arriving British troops, General Douglas Gracey, interpreted his instructions as calling upon him to return power to the French. Gracey ignored the demands made by the Committee of the South, and after bloody riots broke out in Saigon between Vietnamese and European residents, his expeditionary forces, beefed up by French troops just released from Japanese prisons, drove Vietnamese resistance forces out of Saigon. The Committee of the South established a new headquarters in the countryside and began to wage a guerrilla struggle against the French. Rivalry with the religious sects plagued Vietminh efforts in rural areas, a problem that was compounded when Huynh Phu So was assassinated, apparently at the hands of Vietminh operatives.

In the meantime, the French presence was augmented by the arrival of new units beginning in October, while Ho Chi Minh's new government in Hanoi provided assistance to the insurrection by

infiltrating military units from the north. By the end of the year, Vietnam was divided into a communist north and a noncommunist south, with French forces trying to restore control over all of Indochina. It was an eerie preview of the war to come.[33]

THE MANDATE OF HEAVEN

To Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues, the August Revolution (as their sudden ascent to power is now described in official histories of the party) confirmed their conviction that the Vietminh Front had been accepted by the majority of the Vietnamese people as the legitimate representative of their national aspirations. The seizure of power in Hanoi was legitimized by the abdication of the emperor in Hue to the new representatives of the people. In the words of one sympathetic French historian, the Vietminh had earned the Mandate of Heaven, the traditional Confucian concept which served to legitimize imperial rule over Vietnamese society. It now remained only to obtain the consent of the Allied powers.[34]

To many outside observers, however, the issue was not quite so clear-cut. The Vietminh victory was a triumph in a vacuum, achieved in the chaotic conditions at the end of the war. The Vietminh Front claimed to represent all patriotic forces in the country, yet many of the nationalist parties operating in southern China during the war had refused to cooperate with the Vietminh and were about to arrive with Chinese occupation forces to stake their own claim to power. Moreover, the Vietminh had yet to prove their case by winning recognition from the Allies and defeating the French. Appeals by Ho Chi Minh to solicit recognition from the leading Allied powers remained unanswered.

In addition, some might point out, it was a triumph under false

[33] The attitude of the British government in these affairs has never been totally revealed. Some sources have charged that the British commander of the Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) in Ceylon, Lord Louis Mountbatten, had ordered Gracey to restore French colonial authority. One British Embassy officer remarked to U.S. officials at the time that London hoped for negotiations between the French and moderate Vietnamese elements.

[34] That French historian was Paul Mus. For a discussion, see John T. McAlister Jr. and Paul Mus, *The Vietnamese and Their Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 17–18.

pretenses. The program that had been announced by the Vietminh congress in mid-August had called for moderate political and economic policies that could appeal to a wide constituency. Yet party documents make it clear that this was meant to be only a transitional stage until such time as the ICP leadership decided to embark on the next phase of socialist transformation. Although many Vietnamese might be expected to approve of the published program, the party had not divulged its full intentions to the people.[35]

Still, the Vietminh Front had made a case that it was the best organized movement in Vietnam and would do its utmost to meet the immediate needs of the people. It moved swiftly to deal with the widespread famine that still stalked the land since the previous winter. It had won approval from the masses in the northern and central provinces on the widespread assumption that it had the support of the Allies, an impression that Ho Chi Minh assiduously sought to foster. In the meantime, the party's Vietnamese rivals, as always, were divided and appeared to lack a concrete plan to deal with the challenges of the moment. The French had been discredited by their past performance and their failure to protect the area from Japanese conquest. If any organization appeared to possess the right to represent the Vietnamese people in the postwar era, it was the new government proclaimed by the mysterious figure named Ho Chi Minh in Ba Dinh Square.

[35] For the Front's new domestic program, see King C. Chen, *Vietnam and China, 1938–1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

CHAPTER 2

The War of Resistance against the French

Ho Chi Minh's decision to seize power in Hanoi prior to the return of the French was based on the expectation that the victorious Allied powers, and especially the United States and the Soviet Union, would prevent the restoration of French colonial rule in Indochina. But for once, the veteran revolutionary had miscalculated: none of the Allied leaders replied to his appeals, and none stepped forward to prevent the return of the French. In the early fall, Washington announced that it had no objection to the restoration of French sovereignty in Indochina so long as the French government undertook to respect and carry out the provisions of the UN Charter regarding dependent territories. Moscow made no comment.

What had happened to dash Ho's hopes? Some historians have said that President Truman was more afraid of the expansion of communism than his predecessor, and in the long view, that contention is undoubtedly correct. Roosevelt was convinced that the evil of colonialism was one of the underlying causes of the war in the Pacific, and he had frequently remarked that after the restoration of peace, the peoples of Indochina should be placed under an international trusteeship until such time as they were prepared to become fully independent. Under pressure from the British and the French, as well as from European specialists in the State Department, he had weakened in his opposition to the return of the French, and at the Yalta Conference in February 1945 he had grudgingly agreed that colonial territories should be placed under UN trusteeship only at the voluntary decision of the colonial power that had controlled the country prior to World War II. But he confided to intimates that he would insist that the French promise ultimate independence for the peoples of Indochina. His successor, lacking FDR's visceral dislike of European colonialism and undoubtedly more concerned about