

**Prison Islands in the Making of Modern Indonesia and Vietnam: 1862-1979**

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**Dissertation Abstract:**

“Prison Islands in the Making of Modern Indonesia and Vietnam: 1862-1979” examines the history of prison islands in Southeast Asia from the late colonial era through the Cold War. Informed by methodologies from social, legal, and environmental history, as well as human geography, this dissertation investigates five prison islands in Indonesia and Vietnam connected to one another as part of a global carceral archipelago. This dissertation argues that prison islands, existing as legally exceptional spaces at the contested margins of empires, have played an outsized role in the development of colonial legal regimes that were inherited by the independent nation-states succeeding them. Moreover, in analyzing prison islands not as isolated phenomena, but as products of global processes unfolding over long periods of time, this dissertation demonstrates how islands came to undergird a global colonial carceral paradigm that has continuously evolved to fit the context of the Cold War as well as the contemporary era. Besides showing how prison islands operate at global, imperial, national, and local scales, this dissertation also looks at how they interact with individuals, arguing that prison islands have played a central role in framing the idea of the political prisoner in Vietnamese and Indonesian society. Each chapter of this dissertation focuses on a particular prison island, using a close, detailed historical study to illuminate how prison islands operate at the individual, national, and/or global scales. In doing so, this dissertation provides a framework for understanding prison islands as a distinct historical phenomenon inextricably linked with modern imperialism. Furthermore, by studying prison islands within a historical continuum spanning the colonial and Cold War eras, this dissertation offers global historical contexts for contemporary phenomena such as mass incarceration, the extraordinary rendition of “War on Terror” prisoners to Guantánamo Bay, and Australia’s offshore incarceration of asylum seekers.

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## Abbreviations

AFFECON	Affaires économiques
ANOM	Archives nationales d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France
AP	Associated Press
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
Bapreru	Badan Pelaksana Resettlement dan Rehabilitasi Buru
CAT	Civil Air Transport
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPC	Communist Party of China
Dan	Komandan
DPRK	Democratic Republic of Korea
DRVN	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FMAF	Fonds ministerielles, ancien fonds
FMNF	Fonds ministerielles, nouveau fonds
FO	Foreign Office Correspondence
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
FTSV	Forces terrestres du Sud-Vietnam
GCC	Gouverneur de la Cochinchine
GGI	Gouvernement général de l’Indochine
GGIC	Gouverneur général de l’Indochine
GGICM	Gouvernement général de l’Indochine, cabinet militaire
H COL	H Colonies
HCI	Haute commissaire pour France à l’Indochine
HCI SPCE	Haute commissaire pour France à l’Indochine – Service pour la protection des corps expéditionnaires
ICP	Indochina Communist Party
IISG	Instituut Internationaal voor het Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam
Inrehab	Instalasi Rehabilitasi
KITLV	Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde
KMT	Kuomintang
Kopkamtib	Komando Operasi Pemulihan Keamanan dan Ketertiban
Lekra	Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat
LGCC	Lieutenant Gouverneur de la Cochinchine
Mako	Markas Komando
Min. Col.	Minister des colonies
NAC	National Archives of Cambodia
NEFIS/CMI	Netherlands Forces Intelligence Service/Centraal Militaire Inlichtingdienst
NEI	Netherlands East Indies
NLF	National Liberation Front
NYPD	New York Police Department
NYT	<i>New York Times</i>
NXB	Nhà xuất Bản
PAVN	People’s Army of Vietnam
PKI	Partai Komunis Indonesia

PLA	People's Liberation Army
PID	Politieke Inlichtingsdienst
POW	Prisoner of War
PRC	People's Republic of China
Pusbintal	Pusat Pembinaan Mental
PVA	People's Volunteer Army
Res. Sup.	Résident supérieur
RMS	Republik Maluku Selatan
ROC	Republic of China
ROK	Republic of Korea
RSC	Résidence supérieure du Cambodge
RSTNF	Résidence supérieure du Tonkin, Neufonds
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
SAPQ	Société anonyme pour l'exploitation de Phu-Quoc
SLOTFOM	Service de liaison des originaires des territoires français d'Outre-Mer
Tefaaf Buru	Tempat Manfaat Buru
Tapol	Tahanan Politik
Tonwal	Pelaton Pengawal
TĐNK	Thống đốc Nam kỳ
TNI	Tentara Nasional Indonesia
TTLLTQGII	Trung tâm Tài liệu Lưu trữ Quốc gia II, Ho Chi Minh City
UKNA	The National Archives at Kew, United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
USD	United States Dollars
VAMG	Voorlopige Arrestanten Militair Gezag
VNQĐĐ	Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng
VOC	Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie

## **Introduction**

Prison islands have existed since the onset of the modern age, always among the least visible spaces of modern societies, yet they are among spaces where a state's coercive and violent power are most concentrated. While national capitals with monument-lined boulevards may display and symbolize national power, it is behind the opaque walls of prison islands that that power is trained upon individuals. Few pedestrians traversing the streets Paris at the turn of the twentieth century would have, upon casting their gaze towards the Eiffel Tower, immediately been confronted with mental images of Alfred Dreyfus languishing on Devil's Island. Yet, both the Eiffel Tower and Devil's Island existed at the same moment within the boundaries of the same empire. Even fewer pedestrians' minds would wander to any of the French Empire's many other prison islands, such as New Caledonia, the Îles du Salut, Phú Quốc, or Pulo-Condore, the latter two which will be discussed in great detail in the chapters to follow.

This dissertation contends that prison islands constitute a distinct global feature of modern empires that arose in the mid-nineteenth century and continue to exist into the present. Prison islands tend to arise on the margins of empires and states where sovereign power is weak and contested. Under these circumstances, prison islands embody legal exceptionality, creating conditions in which states can exercise power with few constraints. In this way, prison islands have often enabled states to easily excise and isolate perceived foes from mainstream society or provide legal cover for situations that flout the rule of law, such as indefinite detention without trial or the use of torture. By examining particular prison islands across borders and spanning historical eras, this dissertation demonstrates how prison islands have been an important feature of the legal and carceral regimes of modern states and empires rather than isolated exceptions.

In order to demonstrate how prison islands operate across empires and eras, I look at cases in Vietnam and Indonesia from 1862 to 1979. In this way, it becomes possible to understand, for instance, how prison islands became important features of the Netherlands East Indies' and French Indochina's colonial legal regimes within a broader imperial context. It also becomes possible to understand how newly independent nation-states inherited colonial prison islands along with the legal regimes built around them while adapting their use to new Cold War imperial formations based on superpower competition for influence over nominally independent states. It moreover becomes possible to understand how the processes that have formed these colonial and Cold War prison islands continues into the present, manifesting in new sites such as the US prison facilities at Guantánamo Bay and Australia's offshore immigration detention camps on Manus, Nauru, and Christmas Island.

This dissertation chooses to examine prison islands in Indonesia and Vietnam because both countries have numerous prison islands that were used throughout the late colonial era and Cold War, both experienced anti-colonial unrest with similar ideological undertones during the 1920s and 1930s, both immediately experienced wars of independence waged against their former colonizers upon the conclusion of WWII, and finally, both experienced periods of military dictatorship that made wide use of prison islands as a means of mass repression. Besides these striking similarities, a comparison between Vietnam and Indonesia is informative because both were parts of different empires during the colonial era, allowing for a cross-imperial comparison of prison islands.

Prison islands represent not only a space of legal exceptionality where states can exercise their power with few restraints, but they also present unique conditions for prisoners who face not only more common penal methods such as transportation, exile, incarceration, and forced

labor, but also complete severance from their home societies. Especially before the development of wireless telegraphs and other forms of telecommunication, infrequent seaborne connections were often the only line connecting prisoners to broader society. Into the 1920s and 1930s, however, literate prisoners in Vietnam and Indonesia found more means of participating in their home societies through consuming, and sometimes writing in, vernacular language presses read by an increasingly literate colonial population. As what Benedict Anderson calls vernacular language print capital expanded, the isolating effect of prison islands slightly diminished as the boundary between the prison island and prisoners' home societies softened. Still, even into the Cold War the sense of isolation far outweighed any feeling of connection prisoners may have felt to their home societies through print media or radio, especially as prison authorities found increasingly effective ways to restrict prisoners' access to these conduits of information.

### **Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding the Prison Island**

The prison island is a unique carceral form that exists at the confluence of Michel Foucault's prison and Giorgio Agamben's camp.<sup>1</sup> In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that the prison is a space where time and space are strictly compartmentalized to maximize the application of state power on individual prisoners in order to integrate them into a society's matrix of power, and as a space that allows a state to exercise sovereign power upon individuals to the maximum extent without harming their bodies, the prison disciplines non-normative individuals into submission. And so the prison is Foucault's paradigmatic space of modernity. Agamben, however, turns to the concentration camp as the modern paradigm, a paradoxical space where law and life become indistinguishable, therefore within the camp sovereign power can be exercised over life without legal constraints. While in Foucault's prison it is important

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<sup>1</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), and Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan, (New York, NY: Vintage, 1977).

that sovereign power should not transform the body, in Agamben's camp that same power may do as it pleases. The camp is not intended to rehabilitate prisoners like Foucault's prison, but instead includes prisoners within the state through their very exclusion from legal rights and protections, meaning that sovereign power may be exercised outside of those bounds, as well. Modern methods of spatial distribution and categorization are taken to their maximum threshold in the camp, used concertedly to strip prisoners of all of the traits that define them as modern persons. While Foucault's and Agamben's interventions have led to a wide body of scholarship on prisons and camps, few scholars have considered the prison island as a distinct mode of punishment.<sup>2</sup>

In *Île Prison: Bagne et Deportation* [*Prison Island: Bagne and Deportation*], Éric Fougere has also noted the importance of understanding prison islands as a distinct carceral form. He further points out how histories of prisons inspired by Foucault's work have tended to focus on metropolitan central prisons, ignoring the colonial landscape where most prison islands are located, inhabited by political prisoners and unreformable [incorrigible] criminals. In his own formulation of the prison island, he argues that it constitutes the most perfect carceral form because its own insularity guarantees its perfect isolation. Furthermore, when located in unexploited colonial lands, prisoners sent to prison islands perform the grunt work of colonization – clearing forests, draining wetlands, establishing agriculture and road networks, etc. In perfect isolation from metropolitan society, prisoners considered the most dangerous become its colonizers, standard bearers for the very society that imprisons them.<sup>3</sup> While Fougere

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<sup>2</sup> The only work that examines prison islands conceptually is Éric Fougere, *Île prison: Bagne et deportation: Les murs de la mer éloigner et punir* [*Prison Island, Bagne, and Deportation: The Walls of the Ocean Secluding and Punishing*], (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003).

<sup>3</sup>Fougere, *Île prison*, 10.

considers the particularity of prison islands and their difference from metropolitan prisons, he does not consider how they operate in relation to other elements of a carceral regime.

Other scholars, such as Laleh Khalili and Ann Foster, briefly mention prison islands as a feature of repression within global carceral networks, yet they do not unpack it as a concept, exposing a lacuna between Fougeré's conceptual prison island and the global carceral regimes examined by Khalili and Foster.<sup>4</sup> Fougeré further conflates the idea of perfect carcerality with perfect isolation; while individual isolation is indeed an important element of prison islands, it is not the defining feature. The prison island's carceral effectiveness lies rather in its capacity to excise an individual from a society while maintaining, even intensifying, the degree to which they are subjected to a state's power – and in relation to this aim isolation is not the goal, but rather a means to it.

All prison islands are points located within a global carceral archipelago whose form has waxed and waned with the tectonic movements of geopolitics over the last two centuries. Conceptually, the prison island is any carceral space removed from the society of the incarcerated in terms of physical geography and communication. In this sense, prison islands can be genuine islands, that is, land surrounded by a body of water, or functional islands, such as a prison located on land but surrounded by an inhospitable environment (such as Russian gulags) or an unfamiliar society (such as Japanese penal colonies in Hokkaido).<sup>5</sup> In the former case, the vast chill of the Siberian tundra would have rendered almost any escape unsuccessful, whereas in

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<sup>4</sup> Laleh Khalili, *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012)

Ann Laura Foster, *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Minako Sakata, "Japan in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries," in *A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies*, ed. Clare Anderson, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

the latter, Japanese prisoners would have encountered difficulty interacting with and blending in with their Ainu neighbors.

This dissertation also draws engages with a small but very substantive academic literatures on some of the prison islands examined in this dissertation, most notably Côn Đảo and Digul. Peter Zinoman's monograph on Indochina's prison system discusses Côn Đảo extensively and as such has provided invaluable context for my research on and analysis of the island.<sup>6</sup> As Côn Đảo is more of a focal point for this dissertation, it introduces new sources that introduce new angles of analysis informed by a different set of research questions that delve into how Côn Đảo explains the nature of prison islands from a transnational perspective.

It is also important to note that while prison islands are always carceral, not all are punitive. In other words, while all prison islands are sites of incarceration, that incarceration is only a form of punishment if the prisoner has been convicted of a crime, and often prison islands hold people unfreely who have not been convicted by a justice system, and often they are not convicts per se, but go under various names including "administrative internee," "civilian detainee," or "enemy combatant," various nomenclatures that are merely a form of doublespeak to explain the situation of people imprisoned for no other reason than a state's will to do so. Even if they are not convicts, they are most definitely prisoners. Similarly, such prisoners may be held in "detention camps," "humanitarian rehabilitation zones," "reeducation centers," or "off-shore processing centers," but all of these are, in fact, prisons. If there is one distinction that must be made among prisoners, it is that between the "common prisoner" and "political prisoner," which will be discussed in length in chapter three.

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Zinoman, *Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in French Indochina, 1862-1940*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

Prison islands are not exclusive to specific kinds of regimes or historical periods within modernity, but are rather an indicator of a carceral regime which only exist within the confines of the modern state. While Fugere indicates that prison islands arose as a form of incarceration representing perfect isolation, they also act as spaces of exceptionality. A group of geographers represented by Mountz et al. have attempted to apply Agamben's ideas to geography by defining spaces of exception as territory that falls within the geographic boundaries of sovereignty, but outside the jurisdiction of that same state's justice system.<sup>7</sup> Insular and isolated spaces not only excise prisoners from outside society, but the island itself must first exist outside the juridical bounds of a society, tethered only to metropolitan society by the bureaucratic channels of the carceral regime and the flow of new people inwards in the form of prisoners and personnel. In most cases, individuals are sent to prison islands as the result of gross social contradiction so pronounced that their exclusion from a society is the only means of inclusion. The categories of prisoners that justice systems tend to select for prison islands – usually political prisoners, habitual criminals, and detainees – all arise from unresolvable contradictions within a penal system: the existence of political prisoners in societies that have based their political organizations on enlightenment conceptions of individual rights and rule of law, the existence of irredeemable prisoners within a modern penal system that is rehabilitative in definition, and the existence of prisoners who are incarcerated without recourse to the normal judicial process (often due to a legal status that does not exist within existing parameters or retroactive justifications for extra-legal arrest).

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<sup>7</sup> Alison Mountz, "Political Geography I: Reconfiguring Geographies of Sovereignty," *Progress in Human Geography*, 37, no. 6, (2013): 829-841.

## **Geographic Scales and Prison Islands**

The exceptionality of prison islands can only be understood vis-à-vis their unique position within carceral regimes, which exist within a global carceral archipelago. Viewing prison islands merely as one form of prison among others risks presenting them two-dimensionally; in reality a prison island exists on one scalar stratum within a carceral regime that can be further broken down into nested sub-scales that include camps, blocks, cells, and even individual prisoners. And superseding the prison are more strata according ascending in scale from provincial, to colonial, national, imperial prison systems, etc., then the entire carceral regime (i.e. all prisons contained within a sovereign state at the highest level, including all bodies that govern and administer them), and finally, the global carceral archipelago which comprises all existing carceral regimes. While strata below the prison are relatively consistent from place to place, those scales above the prison vary considerably from state to state depending on the organization of the penal system in relation to administrative organization. And the organization of carceral systems at various levels need not be purely territorial. For instance, while in French Indochina, each province had its own prison service, prisons in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI), prison tended instead to be administered thematically rather than territorially as prisons were divided by their function – penitentiaries, forced labor prisons, women’s penitentiaries, etc.

If we examine the scales that are contained within a prison which are accordingly divided into camps or buildings, cellblocks, cells, and finally, individual prisoners, it becomes easier to understand how the nested scales within a carceral regime work in concert to exert the maximum amount of coercive sovereign power upon individual prisoners. Foucault observes how the deliberate distribution of prisoners within surveilled spaces allows for the prison to exercise a

great degree of discipline.<sup>8</sup> The cell as an instrument of power is indubiously a product of scale – a partitioning of space to match the individual so that state power can be exercised over them at a great and precise degree, rendering them entirely legible to a state.<sup>9</sup> While Foucault details how the cell and surveillance act as a conduit for this power, the sovereign power contained within carceral geography at each super-scale also comes down upon the prisoner who bares the crushing weight of an entire carceral regime.

Although a carceral regime can generally be equated with the prison system of a given sovereign state, this is not always the case – especially in empires as colonies often had penal systems that were modeled after metropolitan ones, yet maintained separate penal and justice systems. France’s system of penal colonies, however, presents an example of a carceral regime whose existence depended on convicts sent from both the colonies and the metropole, yet was administered separately. Another more contemporary example of a carceral regime that does not coincide with the boundaries of a sovereign state is the system of extraordinary rendition and detention that has been used by the US since 2001. While the main prisons are administered by the US (Abu Gharaib and Guantánamo Bay) and US agencies oversee the movement of prisoners, the system exists entirely separately from metropole’s prison system while many prisoners are moved through prisons administered by other sovereign states where interrogations, often with torture, are carried out on the US’ behalf.

While understanding carceral regimes in terms of geographies of scale is a useful conceptual tool for understanding the relationship among various aspects of a carceral regime and especially for explaining the unique positionality of prison islands as well as prisoners confined within those spaces, the scales presented must not be understood as universalizing. De

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<sup>8</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

<sup>9</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

Vito, Anderson, and Bosma emphasize that the relationship between the carceral systems of metropolises and peripheries are not always hierarchically dependent nor unidirectional, and that each colonial government sets up systems of punishment and imprisonment that, though inspired by metropolitan models, ultimately must respond to local social and physical environments.<sup>10</sup> Thus, a number of scholars have called for more collaborative studies of non-Western prison histories to challenge, modify, and contextualize Foucault's theory.<sup>11</sup>

### **Prison Islands and the Written Word**

Prison islands have been important features of carceral regimes, especially those of modern empires, and have been used as a means for excising individuals who prove contradictory to these societies. Particularly within colonial empires and states, prison islands transform outcasts that challenge social and political order into bodies that contribute to the expansion of the state through acts of colonization. How could this doubly beneficial arrangement ever work against a state?

While prison islands have fulfilled a particular functional role within modern carceral regimes and occupy spaces that are intentionally obfuscated, they have featured much differently in the modern literary imagination. Fugere acknowledges the existence of a clear literary imaginaire surrounding the prison island, noting that it exists at the intersection of shipwreck novels in which the desert island serves simultaneously as a utopia and natural prison (as reflected in *Robinson Crusoe*), and the militaro-carceral reality of obsolete island fortresses-

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<sup>10</sup> Christian G. De Vito, Clare Anderson, and Ulbe Bosma, "Transportation, Deportation and Exile: Perspectives from the Colonies in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *International Review of Social History*, 63, no. S26, (June 2018): 1-24.

<sup>11</sup> See a special issue of the *International Review of Social History* (cited in previous footnote) and an edited volume that followed, Anderson, *A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies*. Other notable studies have included Peter Zinoman's *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), which remarks on the "ill-disciplined prison" (pp.13-37) as a commentary on the lack of applicability of Foucault's theory of the prison to colonial Vietnam, and the colonial world in general.

turned-prisons such as the Chateau d'If and Ile de Ste Marguerite.<sup>12</sup> The mismatch of utopian imaginaire and carceral reality lead to the production of escape narratives.

The concept of the imaginaire has been widely applied in Buddhist studies to describe the transmission of religious ideas. Steve Collins has described this complex concept most succinctly as “a corpus of texts produced and circulated ...which survives as a resource for Buddhists in the vastly changed conditions of the modern, globalized world.”<sup>13</sup> The concept of a shared imagination mediated through a body of texts maps well onto the way in which various societies have made sense of prison islands through literature. In the Vietnamese context, a shared cultural construct of the prison island exists and is mediated through a shared amalgam of familiar traditions that draw from, on the one hand, Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian thought, and on the other hand, narratives circulated and recirculated through western literature and film. In the Indonesian context, a similar prison island imaginaire exists rooted in Javanese wayang narratives as well as western literature.

The classic prison island narrative is *The Count of Montecristo*,<sup>14</sup> a work which has left a lasting mark on western literature. Undoubtedly, the prison island narrative epitomized by *The Count of Montecristo* not only created a template for fictive prison narratives, but provided prisoners a framework with which they could understand their own predicament, especially in

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<sup>12</sup> Fugere, *Île prison*.

<sup>13</sup> Steven Collins, “Pali Buddhist Ideas about the Future,” *MANUSYA Journal of Humanities*, v. 11, no. 1, (2008): 17-22.

While this article provides a simple and accessible definition of the concept, Steven Collins addresses the concept with much greater depth and complexity in *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Montecristo*, tr. Robin Buss, (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 1997). While this work has undergone many modifications since its original publication in French between 1844 and 1846, it suffices to cite this more recent and widely-printed translation whose introduction provides a more in-depth overview of the work's publication history.

Europe – and doubly so in France. Even the narrative arc of a semi-autobiographical account such as *Papillon* essentially adopts the same narrative arc as *The Count of Montecristo*.<sup>15</sup>

But what of this prison island narrative in the colonial world and the Third World that replaced it? Multi-lingual colonial elites were undoubtedly familiar with *The Count of Montecristo*, but they were aware of local imaginaires of islands and narratives of confinement that Western readers would not have known, and these narratives presented another layer of script through which these prisoners could understand their experiences.

The dual familiarity with both Western and local literary imaginaires translated into a dual cultural capital that allowed them to communicate in a way that could resonate with both colonizers and the colonized. When these same multi-lingual colonial elites began to agitate against colonial rule, they often landed in prisons, many of which were prison islands. In addition to fluencies in both Western and local literary imaginaires, these elites also had access to what Benedict Anderson calls print capital – print material produced for distribution within a capitalist market, inclusive of newspapers, journals, novels, etc. Newspapers and novels especially created a shared sense of identity and time among a linguistic community. Both newspapers and novels operate on the principle of homogenous empty time; newspapers are published at regular intervals and read by a large readership, providing a shared experience of the passage of time on the calendar and linguistic identity.<sup>16</sup> For novels, it is the narrative structure that allows for the simultaneity of events that mark the regimented passage of time on a clock.

As much as they could, multi-lingual colonial elites who found themselves in prison for their political views and actions continued to produce print capital in the form of novels, memoirs, treatises, and newspaper articles. Although prison conditions and regulations often

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<sup>15</sup> Henri Charrière, *Papillon*, (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1969).

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

posed barriers to writing and publication, strong personal political networks that included prominent publishers and editors, as well as corrupt prison personnel usually presented opportunities for the production of print capital from prisons. This production of print capital from within colonial prison lifted a layer of obfuscation that had always separated the public from the most infamous prisons. Before, prison populations had been predominately illiterate, but the new set of elites had through their cultural and political capital access to a new space that cut through prison walls that was not physical but discursive.

While homogenous empty time is regulated by synchronic devices such as clocks and calendars, the population of this empty space with various events and happenings mark differentiate otherwise identical units of time. Prisons not only control prisoners by distributing them spatially, but also by regimenting their time to an extreme degree, producing a significantly altered experience of temporality; although the passage of time in prison is still empty homogenous time regulated by the clock, there is little in a prison to differentiate the experience of different units of time, the rhythm of a day in a cell punctuated only by routine events – and in the case of solitary confinement, not even that. In the temporal regimentation of the prison, the over-rigorous adherence to the passage of the empty homogenous time of the clock and calendar erase their own significance, presenting a prisoner with a temporality which is empty but no longer homogenous. After all, the dominant unit of punishment in most modern penal systems is time, defined by sentences in terms of months, years, or lifetimes.

The passage from a modern society to a prison is often a moment of temporal rupture, causing a sense of disorientation, for empty homogenous time possesses a social regulatory function, providing a means of coordination for various actors within a society with various roles. In prisons, empty homogenous time becomes a tool of punishment through its disconnection

from the social relations that it was invented to regulate and coordinate. The further a prisoner is removed – both temporally and spatially - from the web of social relations that constitute modern society, the greater the prisoner’s isolation and disorientation. It marks the prisoner’s passage from social being to species being, from bios to zoe.

Prisoners invent mechanisms to cope with their disorientation; knowing that they cannot reestablish their connection to the physical spaces of modern society, they dwell on time. Tally marks scratched onto a wall to keep track of days, observing the minute daily change in the angle of light entering a cell from the outside – all of these are methods of reestablishing a sense of connection to time as it flows outside of the prison.

For literate prisoners, correspondence, scraps of newspapers, and books also provide a sense of connection to a modern society, indicators that they are part of a temporality that is not only empty and homogenous, but also populated with events that continue to unfold outside the prison walls, unwitnessed by the prisoner. Accordingly, these written mediums are also the common subject of censorship, restriction, and sanction within prisons. Even greater is the sense of connectivity for the prisoner who can write, especially when that writing can be shared with the outside world. The act of prison writing disrupts the march of time towards its own obliteration within the prison’s walls, while the act of disseminating those writings reestablishes a spatial connection with the outside world. The prisoner jumps scale, no longer confined to the isolated cellular space and meaningless passage of time.<sup>17</sup> Instead, through writing, a prisoner enters the market space occupied by print capital, and as readers consume the print capital, the prisoner’s experiences and ideas become integrated into a shared literary space, the imaginaire,

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<sup>17</sup> Willem van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 20 (2002): 647-668.

that can have a national or even global reach. Through the act of writing, the prisoner is able to reclaim their existence as a social being.

Prison writing and memoirs rarely follow the structure and conventions of the modern novel, subject to the rules of empty homogenous time, for writing often contains inflections of the space where it was produced. This opens new pathways for achronological narratives and a sense of simultaneity. From within the prison, a space that exercises the full force of the spatial and temporal regimes of modernity, the act of writing offers an escape through jumping scale, and the act of escape is an act of conquest; the prisoner who can escape gains a special understanding of the limits of a regime's power as its own past, present, and future collapse into one moment. Thus prison writing can hold a tremendous political weight outside of the walls, and through the prison island of the collective imagination, the prisoner of a prison island transforms into the image of the idealized prisoner, like a real-life Edmund Dantes. Writing produced from prison islands have special potency since prisoners of these places have the greatest degree of social exclusion to overcome. Consequently, prisoners who survive prison islands frequently rise to positions of social and political import. One can see, for instance, how Alfred Dreyfus' captivity on Devil's Island catapulted France into a flurry of political contestation and change, how after Robben Island Nelson Mandela became a leading figure of the anti-apartheid movement and eventual president, and how after Buru Pramoedya Ananta Toer not only transformed Indonesian literature but also brought it global recognition.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the experiences of prisoners whose writings and/or political personalities elevated them to cause célèbres are exceptional as many more prisoners suffered in silence, or even perished. Those considered political prisoners returning to societies still ruled by the government that imprisoned them faced special barriers, including

constant surveillance and restrictions on movement, being officially barred from many forms of work or public services, censorship, and social stigma. The most poignant example discussed in this dissertation is that of the Indonesian political prisoners who, upon their release from Buru Island in 1979, were forced to carry a stamp on their id cards indicating their status as a former political prisoner that prevented them or their families from obtaining access to government jobs or public schools.<sup>18</sup>

### **Political Prisoners**

Before proceeding, it is necessary to address a term which has already been used in this introduction and continues to appear throughout this dissertation: political prisoner. While almost every language has a term for political prisoner which is readily recognizable and readily used, this was not the case before the twentieth century. According to Padraic Kenney, the term only entered common usage in the English language around the mid-nineteenth century with the struggle for women's suffrage in Britain. Similar terms had also come to use among other European countries, such as France and Russia, but the largest tension always appeared when a term first used by authorities to describe certain prisoner populations came to be appropriated by the general public or prisoners themselves as a term with positive, empowering connotations.<sup>19</sup>

By the time major nationalist and communist movements took hold in Southeast from the 1910s onwards, France and the Netherlands had already come to understand the troubles that could arise from using the term "political prisoner" in an official capacity, while dissident indigenous intelligentsias had come to understand the term in its empowering sense. Thus, in French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies (alongside many other colonial regimes),

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<sup>18</sup> Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, tr. Willem Samuels, (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Padraic Kenney, *Dance in Chains: Political Imprisonment in the Modern World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

politically active prisoners frequently petitioned and agitated for official recognition as political prisoner, while colonial administrations did everything in their power to avoid using the term.

Absent from many discussions of the term political prisoner are reflections on who the term excludes. The oft contested boundary between political prisoner and common convict has oft been, after all, a malleable one. To accept the term political prisoner at face value risks ignoring an important discussion of the political nature of prisons themselves. If we consider the fact that prisons and courts are political institutions who operate according to political legislation that determines which acts are criminal and which are not, then it becomes apparent that the condition of imprisonment itself is a political conditions. Under such circumstances, the ability to claim the status of political prisoner is predicated upon access to education, a luxury in colonial societies often reserved for the upper echelons of colonial society. In this sense all prisoners may be considered political prisoners.

While it is necessary to problematize the idea of the political prisoner and understand that frequently the assertion of political prisoner status came at the expense of further demeaning so-called “common convicts,” variations of the term “political prisoner” are used so frequently in sources and in contemporary discourse that using an alternate term throughout this dissertation is not feasible. Instead, let this discussion that serves to problematize the term “political prisoner” be a disclaimer to readers that its use throughout this dissertation is a reflection of the worldviews of the voices populating the sources of this dissertation.

Throughout this dissertation, it is also important to note that multiple terms, euphemisms, acronyms, and doublespeak crop up that basically mean political prisoner, often with contextual connotations. In French Indochina, terms that are a more-or-less direct translation of the English term “political prisoner” into French and Vietnamese frequently appear, both as an official

designation and a term employed informally by the public and prisoners themselves. Towards the 1920s, prison authorities began illegally employing the term “semi-political prisoner” as a means of denying designated political prisoners special privileges to which they were entitled according to law.

### **Terms for Political Prisoners in Indonesia and Vietnam**

The term political prisoner continued to carry weight with the Vietnamese public after WWII, but the French administration successfully avoided it, using instead terms such as “civilian” or “military detainee. In the case of the internment camps on Phú Quốc discussed in chapter six, the French officially used the terms “internee” to refer to Kuomintang (KMT) soldiers interned in the camps and “refugee” to refer to civilians who accompanied them.

In the Netherlands East Indies, the term “political prisoner” was widely used, though the colonial administration did not officially recognize it. In Indonesian, the term “Digulist” was coined to refer specifically to political prisoners who had been exiled to Boven Digul in the center of Papua. The term “exile” was also commonly used by the Indonesian public and prisoners themselves as it had positive connotations while also avoiding mention of criminality or imprisonment. During the Indonesian National Revolution that commenced upon the conclusion of WWII, Indonesians continued to use terms similarly, applying the term “political prisoner” more broadly to include prisoners-of-war. Towards the final months of the war, the Dutch military introduced its own catchall term for Indonesian combatants and civilians alike arrested by the military: *Voorlopige Arrestanten Militair Gezag*, or VAMG which translates to the innocuous term “Provisional Detainee under Military Authority.”

With Suharto’s bloody rise to power in 1965, his military dictatorship introduced a rich vocabulary of doublespeak to the Indonesian language, many which referred to political

prisoners. The most widely-used of these terms was *tapol*, which stood for *tahanan politik*, or “political detainee.” The term was initially used by the administration, but many prisoners eventually came to embrace the term, especially as it became popularized among international activist circles through the *Tapol* organization founded in the UK by Carmel Budiarjo who was herself imprisoned by Suharto’s regime.<sup>20</sup> Still, until the fall of Suharto’s regime, the term continued to carry stigma among many members of the public, so it was understandably not readily embraced by released political prisoners. Other than *tapol*, the term *napol* for *narapidana politik*, or political convict, was used as well, almost exclusively by the administration and in more formal writing. While the term *tapol* itself could carry positive, negative, or neutral connotations based on the context of its use, it (along with *napol*) always became pejorative when G30S, an acronym for the failed leftwing coup on September 30, 1965, was attached. First of all, an overwhelming majority of *tapol* had no foreknowledge of the coup, did not participate in it, and did not express their support for it. Therefore, the term attempted to directly associate *tapol* with the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) who vilification was Suharto’s regime’s *raison d’être*. As during the colonial era, however, the term “exile” could be used to describe many of the political prisoners not only in a positive light, but in a way that implicitly connected them to the Digulists of the colonial era.

### **The Continuity of Prison Islands amidst Geopolitical Change in the Colonial and Postcolonial World**

Between 1945 and 1965 much of the world’s political boundaries were redrawn as the empires that had dominated much of Africa and Asia for the last century gave way to independent nation-states in processes that ranged from peaceful transfers of power to prolonged violent struggles. And in almost every case, new nation-states inherited many of the

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<sup>20</sup> Carmel Budiarjo, *Surviving Indonesia’s Gulag: A Western Woman Tells her Story*, (London: Cassell, 1996).

infrastructures and institutions of the preceding colonial states, including their carceral regimes. Prison islands in particular had been a poignant mechanism of colonial repression, common destinations for political prisoners as well as sites of their struggles. While some prison islands, such as the Andaman islands in India, were dissolved after independence, many colonial prison islands continued to operate after independence, such as Con Dao in Vietnam, Nusakambangan in Indonesia, and Robben Island in South Africa.

Most importantly, many postcolonial carceral regimes adopted the same logic as their colonial precedents. Nusakambangan was founded as a forced labor prison for Acehnese prisoners in 1908 and through the seventies continued to be a prison where penal labor was particularly significant and had held Communist and Nationalist prisoners during the Revolution as well as many *tapol* in the wake of 1965.<sup>21</sup> In French Indochina, Poulo-Condore (Côn Đảo) had long been the destination for the most notorious criminals, including political dissidents. The Republic of Vietnam (RVN) continued to use Côn Đảo as a prison for political opponents and the penal code even included a specific sentence of “deportation” that was synonymous to being sent to Côn Đảo.<sup>22</sup> In Indonesia, the NEI established the Digul Internment camp for Communists and Nationalists in the center of Papua in 1926, a veritable island in a sea of impenetrable rainforest. In an attempt to separate the prisoners from the center of NEI society after their release, the colonial government attempted to convince them to remain at Digul as “special

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<sup>21</sup> “Verslag over de Strafgevangenissen op Noesa Kambangan over 1930 [Report on the Penitentiaries on Nusakambangan for 1930],” KITLV Collections, H 1675, Leiden Universiteitsbibliotheek  
I.G. Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik di Pulau Buru: 1969-1979 [Political Prisoners on Buru Island: 1969-1979]*, (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2001)

The term “*tapol*” is an Indonesian acronym for “*tahanan politik*,” or “political detainee” that was used for political prisoners of the New Order from 1965-1998. I use the term *tapol* throughout this dissertation because it carries special connotations that emphasize the specificity of their experience as survivors of the 1965-66 mass killings, indefinite detention without charge, and systemic discrimination after their release that they continue to face to this day.

<sup>22</sup> Holmes Brown and Don Luce, *Hostages of War: Saigon's Political Prisoners*, (US: Indochina Mobile Education Project, 1973).

transmigrants;”<sup>23</sup> the camp was closed during the Second World War to keep the prisoners out of Japanese hands and only reopened briefly as a prison for common criminals in the short-lived Netherlands New Guinea.<sup>24</sup> Buru was established as a prison island in 1969, its prisoners figures that Suharto’s government had associated with the left who had been arrested in the aftermath of his 1965 seizure of power. Like Digul, Buru was considered a “special transmigration project.”

Both Indonesia and Vietnam present ample examples of how colonial carceral regimes were adopted and continued by postcolonial governments. Prison islands in particular were key features of both carceral regimes that continued to function in the context of postcolonial states. Prison islands are not figments of the past, but examples continue to persist globally. Nusakambangan, for instance, is still a prison island, though now its inmates are primarily convicted on drug trafficking or terrorism charges.

Since the end of the Cold War, new prison islands have emerged within new carceral frameworks, most notably Nauru and Manus Island which Australia has used to imprison asylum seekers since 2001 in a program it calls the Pacific Solution, and Guantánamo Bay which the US established in 2001 to imprison high-profile “enemy combatants” as part of the War on Terror. Both represent a new form of carceral regime that is operated by a government primarily outside the boundaries of its own judicial system to hold non-citizens without charge. Both operate outside of the juridical bounds of the states that run them, and both feature prison islands at their apex. Although many scholars and pundits have only been able to describe these islands as historical anomalies, placed within historical context, specters of the Vietnamese prison islands

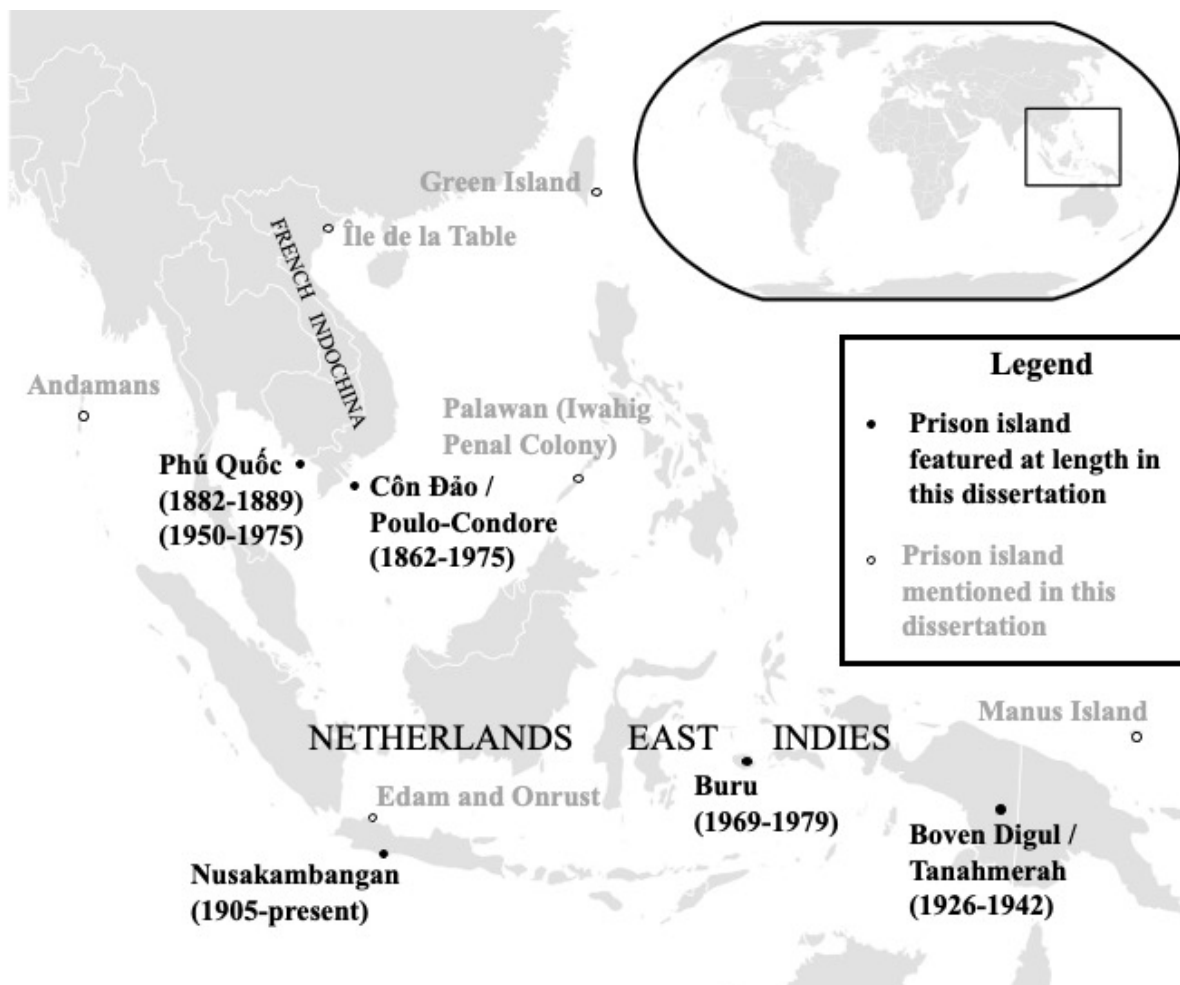
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<sup>23</sup> Transmigration refers to a development policy started by the NEI government and continued by the Republic of Indonesia whereby the government would facilitate large-scale migrations of people living in densely-populated rural regions to locations in the outer islands characterized by low population density, undeveloped land, and cultural difference.

<sup>24</sup> C.H. Stefels, “Aanvullende Memorie van overgave van de Onderafdeelingchef van Boven-Digoel [Additional Memorandum of Resignation of the Sub-Department Chief of Boven Digul],” April 25, 1959, Folder 1427, box K23048, 2.10.39, Nationaal Archief, The Hague.

Côn Đảo and Phú Quốc, both which the US had a hand in running, become visible in Guantanamo Bay, and ghosts of the camps that Australia used during the war for Indonesian detainees show their faces on Manus and Nauru.

### Scope and Organization of the Dissertation



*Fig. 0.1.* Southeast Asian prison islands represented by black dots are the focal point of chapters in this dissertation, while other prison islands shown are mentioned briefly. Please note that there are other Southeast Asian prison islands not shown on the map, and there are prison islands mentioned in this dissertation beyond the boundaries of the map.

This dissertation argues that, on the one hand, prison islands have been a key repressive mechanism of the modern state that constitutes a unique mode of punishment, and on the other hand, a space of resistance which can elevate political prisoners to positions of special power

within their societies, allowing them to challenge the very power that confines them. The five sites that this study focuses on have been mentioned earlier and can be found in present-day Indonesia and Vietnam, spanning the age of high imperialism and the Cold War: Nusakambangan (1908-present), Boven Digul (1926-1942),<sup>25</sup> and Buru (1969-1979) in present-day Indonesia, and Côn Đảo (1862-1975)<sup>26</sup> and Phú Quốc (1951-1975) in present day Vietnam. Together, these prisons represent a cross-section of colonial carceral experiences that demonstrate the continuity of prison islands as colonial carceral regimes became integrated into postcolonial independent states.

The conceptual frameworks laid out in the previous sections of this chapter – geographic scale, empty homogenous time, and the literary imaginaire and print capital – inform the analysis within each chapter. Thus, while the research presented in this dissertation is grounded in historical methods based on archival research, it is also informed by theories of space and scale from geography as well as methods of literary analysis drawn from comparative literature.

Archival sources used in this dissertation are drawn from the National Archives Center II and National Library in Vietnam, the Archives National d'Outremere in France, the National Archives, British Library, Cambridge University special collections, and SOAS special collections in the UK, the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia, and the Nationaal Archief, Bibliotheek Nationaal, KITLV special collections, and International Institute of Social History in the Netherlands. In addition to traditional archival material, I incorporate analyses of novels and memoirs written by and about prisoners and analyses of museums and historical sites.

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<sup>25</sup> While Boven Digul is not an island in the traditional sense as land surrounded by a body of water, it is geographically an island because it is surrounded by hundreds of miles of impenetrable jungle, isolating prisoners just as an island in the sea would. While Boven Digul (Upper Digul) refers to the name of the river on which the camp was located, it is also often referred to as Tanah Merah (the name of the residency and closest town).

<sup>26</sup> Côn Đảo was called Poulo-Condore during French rule and was frequently referred to as Côn Sơn, the name of the largest island in the archipelago, during the RVN period.

In the course of conducting research for this dissertation, archives, libraries, ongoing current events, and even some of the former prison islands themselves revealed surprises with every turn of the page and excursion. Those sources which have been the most informative about the prison islands discussed in this dissertation have tended to be the unexpected, from encounters with the pilgrimage to Võ Thị Sáu's grave on Côn Đảo, to the discovery of torture scandals covered up so well they have remained buried in the archives for more than 100 years, to the uncovering of fraudulent artifacts and fabricated memoirs. It is through immersion in both the islands themselves and the textual sources themselves that the research for each chapter developed. Each chapter is therefore markedly different in character, reflecting a need to balance analytical consistency with the responsibility to communicate new findings on historical injustices that have never seen the light of day as well as correct histories long falsified for nefarious purposes.

The first two chapters of this dissertation deal with the history of Côn Đảo. The first chapter, "Prison Islands and Penal Transportation in French Indochina's Carceral System," discusses how Côn Đảo came to exist in a vacuous legal boundary between the French Empire and French Indochina and, furthermore, how the colonial state attempted to consign individuals it sent there to a state of social extinction. Besides situating Côn Đảo spatially on the boundary on colony and empire, the first chapter also discusses how some of the first identifiable prison industrial complexes have emerged on colonial prison islands such as Côn Đảo as spaces caught between colonial and imperial carceral political economies that created a demand for prisoners for the sake of little more than maintaining the prison.

Chapter two, "A Case Study of Võ Thị Sáu: Poulo-Condore in Vietnamese Historical Memory," examines the life of Võ Thị Sáu who was executed on Côn Đảo for guerrilla acts she

had committed at seventeen who became a national hero, powerful spirit, and martyr in her death. This chapter offers a deep intertextual reading of archival sources and literature on the heroine to examine how her death on Côn Đảo elevated her to a figure of national prominence, and immortality, who outlasted and inverted the power of the colonial state.

Chapter three, “Prison Islands of the Netherlands East Indies: Nusakambangan and Digul,” looks at how the concept of the “political prisoner” in Indonesian society formed in relation to the prison islands of Nusakambangan and Boven Digul over the course of the colonial era. In the Indonesian context, the idea of the political prisoner was inseparably bound to exile. By tracing the development of writing by and about Indonesian political prisoners, this chapter examines how prisoners’ access to an emergent national forum mediated by Indonesian-language print media allowed them to escape the state of social extinction imposed on them by the Dutch colonial state. As a result, Digul became inextricably linked to the concept of exile, while Nusakambangan remained associated with criminality in general.

Chapter four, “Political Prisoners of Buru: Indonesia’s Cold War Prison Island,” examines the complex relationship between political prisoners exiled to Buru and the Indigenous peoples on the island. This chapter examines how political prisoners fundamentally altered indigenous society on Buru through four realms of interaction: the economy, the environment, sexuality, and culture, contending that these transformations together reoriented Burunese people’s lives towards a broader Indonesian national society.

Chapter five, “Imprisonment and Colonial Political Integration on Phú Quốc Island,” asks how the island went from a colonial backwater to eventually become the site of the largest prison camp in Vietnam by the 1970s. This chapter connects the history of a failed prison farm in the 1880s to a continuous history of plantations managed with a carceral logic until the

reestablishment of prison facilities during World War II by looking at the colonial state's blurry boundary between penal and contract labor. This chapter also takes a moment to address an atrocity known as the "Genevoix Affair" that had been covered up by the French colonial administration until this day.

Chapter six, "Phú Quốc and the Cold War: Chinese Nationalist Internment Camps," looks at the unrecognized role prison islands have played in global geopolitics by examining the internment of an entire KMT division on Phú Quốc from 1949-1953. It analyzes how competing political interests in the region resulted in their prolonged incarceration. As regional powers fought to control the prisoners' fates, generals and officers within conducted espionage and plotted to take part in political intrigue in Taiwan and Burma. For regional powers, the prisoners on Phú Quốc meant the difference between a limited war in Korea and an Asian war that could have easily boiled over into a global conflict, demonstrating how seemingly isolated prison islands during the Cold War could, in fact, play an important role in the complex global geopolitical chessboard.

In the conclusion, I look towards contemporary prison islands, reflecting on the ways in which the colonial and Cold War prisons of the past survive and find echoes in modern carceral apparatuses including cash bail, solitary confinement, immigrant detention, and the nexus of torture and indefinite detention represented by Guantánamo Bay.



grow beyond the borders of his own village, nor his court beyond a handful of mandarins, before French and local authorities learned of the plot and arrested everyone involved.<sup>2</sup>

Five individuals, including Lê Thuận Thiên, were tried by mixed tribunal for having accepted his titles or promoted him. The trial resulted in two sentences of death and three of exile, all which were immediately commuted to eight to twenty years of forced labor, sentences which by law had to be served in a designated penal colony such as New Caledonia or Guiana, or in the infamous *bagne* on Côn Đảo, known by the French as Poulo-Condore. In this case, the convicts were ordered to Poulo-Condore.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, one of the convicts, Trần Ngọc Cú, escaped this fate when the French administration discovered, after the proceedings, that he had French citizenship, meaning that he was not under the jurisdiction of a mixed tribunal, therefore his conviction and sentence were invalid. In fact, his citizenship also prevented him from serving any sentence on Poulo-Condore, and since the crime for which he was tried – accepting a title from a pretender to the throne – was not recognized by French law, he was immune to any criminal charges.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the invalidity of Cú’s conviction meant that the proceedings against his four co-defendants were likewise void, so to ensure their punishment, the Governor General’s council issued a decree for their administrative detention on Poulo-Condore, this time for two to ten years. Thus, while the monk Lê Thuận Thiên and his co-conspirators were doomed to years of hard labor on Poulo-Condore,

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<sup>2</sup> GGIC to Min Col, “Minute on the Internment on Poulo-Condore of several Natives implicated in Seditious Threats,” 31 Oct. 1905, GGI 20131, ANOM.

<sup>3</sup> Res. Sup. of Tonkin to GGIC, 27 July 1904, GGI 20131, ANOM.

Throughout this paper, I will refer to the islands by the name used during the corresponding historical period:

Before 1954 (French Indochina) – Poulo-Condore; 1954-1975 (RVN) – Côn Sơn; 1975-present (DRVN) – Côn Đảo

<sup>4</sup> “Extract of the Proceedings of the Session of the Permanent Commission of the Superior Council of Indochina,” Oct. 3, 1905, GGI 20131, ANOM.

Cú's only punishment was the revocation his yearly pension of 240 piasters which he had received alongside his citizenship for service in the colonial military.<sup>5</sup>

In Trần Ngọc Cú's case, it is the reasons that he was *not* sent to Poulo-Condore that are the most revealing and provocative. His case highlights, first of all, the racialized nature of French Indochina's judicial and penal systems. Prisoners and prison personnel alike were subjected to a matrix of official and informal racial and ethnic differentiation that determined the contours of their experiences. French Indochina's complex legal system possessed many racial jurisdictions, but generally the legal regime reserved for Europeans and French citizens was more similar to that of the metropole,<sup>6</sup> while all those who fell outside of these categories were subjected to courts and penal regimes strikingly more arbitrary and authoritarian in nature.

Poulo-Condore was simultaneously the apex of the judicial system to which most Asians in Indochina were subjected, as well as a legal black hole within the French Empire. That is, Poulo-Condore was simultaneously written into the legal codes of French Indochina, yet it operated outside of the legal framework established throughout the empire that was enforced by the Ministry of Colonies in the metropole. Thus, Poulo-Condore's existence as a space of legal exceptionality allowed French Indochina's legal system to maintain authoritarian and arbitrary elements that in other colonies were more readily suppressed by the metropole.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the archipelago's isolation from the mainland meant that whoever was in charge of the penitentiary was necessarily delegated considerable authority and power with little oversight, circumstances that easily breed abuses of power.

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<sup>5</sup> Resident Superior of Tonkin to GGIC, Oct. 24, 1905, GGI 20131, ANOM.

<sup>6</sup> Other than Europeans and French citizens, non-French subjects, and non-Indochinese French colonial subjects were subject to these jurisdictions. This principal does not seem to have been applied evenly, however, especially regarding Chinese subjects who were frequently in practice tried through the *indigénat*.

<sup>7</sup> This is especially in colonies where no *indigénat* or indigenous governance was exercised, such as Guadeloupe or Réunion.

During French colonial rule, Poulo-Condore was not only unique within the French Empire, but the world, for it represents the first appearance of a true prison industrial complex. While the term prison industrial complex has been used almost exclusively in reference to the US context, the concept can also aptly describe many colonial penal systems that relocated convicts across empires to feed plantations' demands for labor, especially after the abolition of slavery.<sup>8</sup> The journalist/scholar Mike Davis first used the term "prison industrial complex" to describe how prison development in early 1990s California produced an industry whose continued viability and profitability depended upon a constant influx of state funds and convicts.<sup>9</sup> Other scholars developed this concept as a means of explaining mass incarceration more broadly in the US, notably Angela Y. Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore. These scholars of the US prison system have emphasized the importance of private industries in the prison industrial complex, both as providers of services and beneficiaries of prison labor – an element absent in Poulo-Condore, as was profitability as the penitentiary's budget ran a deficit for each year of its existence. Poulo-Condore, however, represents the first realization of a true prison industrial complex in that the penitentiary's existence depended upon a constant influx of prisoners to perform the necessary labor.

Angela Davis in particular has situated the prison industrial complex as a contemporary global phenomenon, and understanding Poulo-Condore allows us to further understand one of the originary moments of this phenomenon globally. In order to understand Poulo-Condore as a prison industrial complex, it is also necessary to differentiate it from its contemporary incarnation, i.e. mass incarceration in the US, which is symptomatic of the neoliberal moment. Therefore, the contemporary prison industrial complex which relies on partnerships between

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<sup>8</sup> Besides plantations, numerous Vietnamese convicts were also sent to the nickel mines of New Caledonia.

<sup>9</sup> Mike Davis, "Hell Factories in the Field: A Prison Industrial Complex," *The Nation*, Feb. 20, 1995.

politicians and private interests must be qualified as a “neoliberal prison industrial complex” while the phenomenon that was realized on Poulo-Condore must be qualified as a “high imperial prison industrial complex.”<sup>10</sup>

Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s political geography of California’s prison industrial complex heeds special attention to the socio-spatial relationships produced and reproduced by prison development, noting that the “prisons sit on the edge — at the margins of social spaces, economic regions, political territories, and fights for rights,” but that “edges are also interfaces.”<sup>11</sup> While French colonials saw Poulo-Condore’s coastline and the turbulent waters engulfing it as an insurmountable boundary, it is true that the penitentiary was an interface as well, bringing together at different times guards from Corsica, the Philippines, and French India, Senegalese soldiers, Chinese and Japanese prisoners of war, and convicts from all corners of French Indochina to produce unique social formations that allowed all of the aforementioned actors to understand their ethnic, national, and political identities and worldviews in new and transformative ways.

The nuanced understanding of the prison industrial complex adopted in this chapter rejects the notion that the involvement of private industry is a requisite factor while maintaining its core features: first, that the prison itself must create a constant demand for prisoners which leads to an expansion in incarceration and definitions of criminality throughout society, and second, that this expansion of incarceration and criminality is racialized.<sup>12</sup> During the era of high imperialism, the colonial state itself sought to profit from various monopolies, therefore in this

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<sup>10</sup> “High imperialism” refers to the period from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century during which empire was the dominant political form worldwide and almost every swath of territory had been incorporated into rigid borders. This global closing of borders, combined with the invention of new technologies of governance, allowed colonial governments to expand their control over minute aspects of colonized societies.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Angela Davis points out the centrality of race in the prison industrial complex globally. See Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 85.

context the involvement of private industry is not a necessary requisite for a prison industrial complex; it suffices that private interests and colonial governments sought to exploit racially differentiated penal labor with the intention of profit within a global capitalist economy. It is also important to note that prisons that constituted a true prison industrial complex were actually quite rare in colonies of the high imperial era as prisoners were most frequently put to work performing labor for private interests outside of the penitentiary in what constitutes a “proto-prison industrial complex.”

The proto-prison industrial complex took many forms and blanketed the colonized world by the end of the nineteenth century, including everything from the convict lease system in the American south to French penal colonies in Guiana and convicts sent from the British Raj to build Singapore and work the plantations of Mauritius.<sup>13</sup> The only element of the neoliberal prison industrial complex amiss in the proto-prison industrial complex is the role of prisons as the driving engine of the system; instead, private and state demands for cheap labor to advance the work of colonization across empires created the demand for prisoners. Simply stated, in a prison industrial complex the prison itself produces the demand for penal labor, and in a proto-prison industrial complex it is private (and sometimes state) economic activity that produces the demand for penal labor.

In this larger picture, the realization of a prison industrial complex on Poulo-Condore can be understood as something of an unintended consequence of the proto-prison industrial complex: the result of the failure of French colonial, metropolitan, and private interests to negotiate the convict economy, and so Indochinese prisoners who would otherwise have been sent to the far

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<sup>13</sup> The use Indian penal labor in Singapore and the Straits Settlements is detailed in Anoma Pieris, *Hidden Hands and Divided Landscapes: A Penal History of Singapore's Plural Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), while the transportation of Indian convicts to Mauritius is examined in Clare Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean: Transportation from South Asia to Mauritius, 1815-53* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

reaches of the empire as laborers in penal colonies, plantations, or mines were instead directed to Poulo-Condore as their final destination where they would work to maintain and reproduce the very penitentiary that engaged them. Once Poulo-Condore became firmly established as a destination for prisoners rather than a transshipment point, its very existence prompted administrators to create laws and policies that would send more prisoners there. While sending prisoners to Poulo-Condore was never profitable for Cochinchina which administered the *bagne* or any of the protectorates sending convicts, it was considered the least unprofitable option.

Finally, it is important to note that the form that the prison industrial complex took on Poulo-Condore was by no means static, but responded to scientific, technological, and politico-military developments. In the 1930s, the emerging science of psychology began to play an increasingly central role in how political prisoners were treated and understood on the island. Poulo-Condore also underwent a postwar militarization that transformed prisoners' treatment and status. Together, Poulo-Condore's "psychological turn" and militarization dramatically gave rise to a military prison industrial complex on the island whose primary concern was not transforming convicts' labor into economic capital, but political capital in the form of false confessions and their renunciation of ideologies deemed dangerous to the state. In 1954, the RVN inherited this emerging military prison industrial complex on Poulo-Condore while US funding and advisors expanded its scope to new levels, making the system which was refined on the island the basis of the RVN's entire penal regime.

It is first necessary to delve into Poulo-Condore's historical background, identifying the factors that placed the island in a perpetual state of legal exception and laid the foundations for the prison industrial complex that developed there, then contextualizing them within the plural racialized judicial system of French Indochina and the regime of convict labor that connected the

entire French Empire. Then, the focus will shift to social and political formations on the island itself that were created and shaped by judicial and carceral regimes of French Indochina and the empire, particularly the unique legal status of the island, the role of the Director, and an examination of the identities of convicts and guards. The chapter will conclude by considering the implications of the “psychological turn” and militarization of Poulo-Condore and how they set the stage for the RVN’s carceral regime.<sup>14</sup>

### **Historical Background**

Poulo-Condore’s peculiar territorial and legal status must be understood in the context of the island’s long history along important trade routes, its geography which rendered it resistant to integration by regional political powers, and its role as an important resupply station for French East India Company ships traveling between Pondicherry and China. This final development allowed the archipelago to become a military staging ground for the French invasion of Indochina, and subsequently a secure locale to imprison anyone who resisted or challenged French rule. Poulo-Condore maintained its character as a fearsome prison island throughout French rule, the Japanese occupation, and the independent RVN regime.

From the earliest records, navigators recognized Côn Đảo as an important landmark when plying the sea lanes between East and Southeast Asia.<sup>15</sup> While never a site of long-term

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<sup>14</sup> A more in-depth explanation of the “psychological turn” will be discussed in greater detail in a chapter on prison islands in the Netherlands East Indies.

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that while “Đảo” means island in Vietnamese “Côn” has no meaning. Rather, it is a phonetic approximation of the island’s Malay name, “Pulau Kondur,” or “squash island.” That the Vietnamese name is derived from Malay suggests that it entered the lexicon at a time when it was inhabited by Malays, or, more likely, under Cham control. Malay-derived names for the island have been used since well before the early modern era, as Marco Polo in 1294 noted its name as “Kondur” and “Sundur.” The association of the island with squash is puzzling as the island is neither known for squash, nor does it look like one in any way. Nonetheless, the archipelago’s complex etymological history is indicative of sustained cross-cultural interaction.

Some of the island’s various past names can be found in Lê Hữu Phước, *Nhà Tù Côn Đảo (1862-1930) [Côn Đảo Prison (1862-1930)]*, (Hồ Chí Minh City: NXB Đại Học Quốc Gia TPHCM, 2006).

settlement, evidence of habitation stretches back 2,500 to 3,000 years.<sup>16</sup> While little can be certain regarding the ethnic identity of the island's varied occupants throughout history, accounts from the early modern era indicate cultural features common to both Khmer and Vietnamese peasants as well as a scant and intermittent state presence. Fr. Jacques, a Jesuit scholar and missionary who became stranded on the island for six months awaiting the monsoon winds to carry him to his assignment in Guangzhou, remarks that "The mores and customs of these people are similar in certain ways to Indian ones, and in many other ways to those of Chinese."<sup>17</sup>

Early modern Côn Đảo was a frontier island inhabited by a constantly shifting population of mainland outcasts seeking refuge from poverty, warfare, and heavy-handed rulers. Seafaring traders would await the monsoon there for up to six months at a time which drew mainland merchants from Khmer and Vietnamese kingdoms who would bring their wares to the island. While the Khmer Empire and later the Nguyễn state laid claim to the island, their presence was faintly felt outside of tax collection days. Locals' lives were much more synchronized with those of the transient seafarers to whom they sold supplies – and occasionally swindled or robbed.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the abundance of feral domesticates such as goats and dogs in the mountainous jungle suggests periodic abandonment of peasant settlements, perhaps in response to powerful cyclones or disease seafarers carried to the island.<sup>19</sup> Poulo-Condore had also been a hotspot for piracy throughout the early modern era as the island's inhabitants became victims of pirate raids just as frequently as pirate fleets made a temporary home of the island's harbors.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Con Dao Museum. The main exhibit displays stone tools and pottery fragments attributed to the Sa Huynh culture dating 2,500-3,000 years ago, unearthed in a 2001 archaeological excavation on the island.

<sup>17</sup> "Letter from Fr. Jacques, Missionary of the Society of Jesus, to Mr. the Abbot Raphaelis, 1 Nov. 1722," *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses: Écrites des missions étrangères [Edifying and Curious Letters: Writings from Foreign Missions]*, vol. 19, (Paris: Chez J.G. Merigot le jeune, 1781): 204-245.

<sup>18</sup> Early French accounts have reported incidents of thefts or ransom kidnappings targeting French ships and crews.

<sup>19</sup> *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, 204-245.

<sup>20</sup> The problems posed by pirates to locals as well as the use of the harbor by pirates in the 1600s is mentioned in "Commission and Instructions given by the Court of Directors of the English Company Trading to the East Indies to

While Portuguese visited the island as early as 1516, it was not until the seventeenth century that any European power envisioned colonizing it. Dutch and English ships first encountered the island in 1619, and by the end of the century the French and British Empires both developed claims. The English East India Company first established a small factory and fort guarded by Makassarese mercenaries in 1702. Only three years later, the Makassarese guards mutinied and killed all East India Company personnel, diffusing into the high seas long before anyone could discover the burnt-out fort.<sup>21</sup> The failure of the British factory created a window of opportunity for the French who built a resupply station at BẾN ĐÀM in the south in 1720 and renamed the island “Île d’Orleans.”

By the mid-1700s, Côn Đảo had fallen firmly within the Nguyễn mandala of power. The declining Khmer kingdom still attempted to assert its power on the island by sending periodic royally chartered trade missions, but it is the Nguyễn who collected taxes through a mandarin and monk assigned to the island.<sup>22</sup> Yet, the Nguyễn presence still appeared meager enough to European interlopers that they could effectively project their own power on the island. Furthermore, while agents of the Nguyễn dynasty (including mandarins, soldiers, and monks) on the island were all ethnically Vietnamese, the local population appears to have been largely ethnically Khmer by the mid-nineteenth century. Between 1760 and 1840, the island’s commerce and supply chains pivoted from Cambodia to Saigon.

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Thomas Rashell Gent,” and “Orders and Instructions given by the Court of Directors of the English Company Trading to the East Indies to Mr. Robert Tayer, Mr. Bartholomew Conley, and Mr. William Bignall,” Nov. 25, 1701, E/3/94, British Library.

<sup>21</sup> The mutiny coincided with a decision from London to abandon the factory as it was deemed less profitable than sites in North Borneo. The English East India Company had thought they could attract Chinese traders by setting up a factory that was loser to China than any Dutch territory, but Chinese merchants bypassed it for lack of available commodities and a perceived lack of protection from pirates. Court of Directors of the English East India Company, “To the President and Council at Poulo Condore for Affairs of the United East India Company,” Jan. 18, 1704, E/3/94, British Library.

<sup>22</sup> In Fr. Jacques’ letter of Nov. 1722, he assesses the political situation, noting that the island was technically administered by the kingdom of Cambodia which was a tributary to the kingdom of Cochinchina. It seems that in reality, Poulo-Condore was on the edge of both of these kingdoms’ mandala of power and therefore inhabitants had small-scale obligations to both polities. *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, 204-245.

1841 marked the Nguyễn's first attempt at establishing a permanent organized settlement on Côn Đảo when 100 Khmer settlers were sent to the island to establish agriculture, presumably to help feed a struggling fishing community of about eighty persons. Not long after their arrival, however, a Malay pirate fleet of fifteen ships attacked, killing all but sixty inhabitants who were forced to take refuge in the mountainous jungle.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the island could also be said to have been within the mandala of power of a band of Malay pirates who evidently kept tabs on the island, raiding it whenever a settlement possessed the right combination of size and vulnerability. It is even possible that the Malay pirates who attacked in 1841 were descendants of the guards responsible for the demise of the British factory in 1705. The devastating attack prompted the Nguyễn to establish a fortified outpost with a permanent garrison on Côn Đảo.<sup>24</sup>

While the French presence on Côn Đảo was minimal and intermittent from the 1720s to 1860s, it was nonetheless the eastern tip of the empire, connecting Pondicherry to rich markets in Vietnam and southern China. The island was a springboard for merchants and missionaries alike who frequently resupplied and rested there before carrying out missions in Guangzhou and Đà Nẵng. The most famed missionary to reside on the island, Pigneau de Behaine, arrived in 1786 just in time to irrevocably alter the balance of power in Vietnam. In 1778, the Tây Sơn rebellion broke out across Vietnam, driving the crown prince Nguyễn Anh into exile. He took refuge first on Côn Đảo where he found counsel and a willing ally in de Behaine. Through de Behaine's lobbying, French assistance allowed Nguyễn Anh to definitively quash the Tây Sơn rebellion, the cost of which was the cession of the archipelago to France.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Cptn. Favin-Leveque, "Report on the Corvette *Heroine*'s mission to Tourane, Culao Cham, and Poulo-Condore. Freeing the missionaries Berneux, Gally, Charrier, Miche, and Duclos," 1843. GGI 14616, ANOM.

While the identity of the pirates is uncertain, they were likely Bugis or from Sulu.

<sup>24</sup> Cptn. Favin-Leveque, "Report on the Corvette *Heroine*'s mission."

<sup>25</sup> Frédéric Angleviel, *Poulo Condore: Le bagne indochinois [Poulo-Condore: The Indochinese Bagne]* (Paris: Éditions Vendemaire, 2020).

When Gia Long's (Nguyễn Anh's regnal name) great grandson Tự Đức executed several French missionaries in 1857, Côn Đảo became France's military spearhead into Indochina when their navy used the island as a staging ground for the invasion of Cochinchina in 1858. While French Indochina was divided into the province of Cochinchina and protectorates of Annam and Tonkin (the latter two annexed in 1885), Poulo-Condore had been ceded to France well beforehand, circumstances further complicated by the fact that the Nguyễn dynasty maintained an outpost on the island up to the outbreak of hostilities – demonstrating that neither French nor Vietnamese sovereignty over the island had been absolute. The island was caught between competing conceptions of sovereignty as the Nguyễn adhered to a mandala model of statecraft in which sovereignty was determined by a state's ability to project power over a locale to ensure its loyalty, while the French adhered to the Westphalian system in which they believed a one-time treaty could ensure their continued sovereignty even in the absence of actual French power in a territory.

While French forces handily defeated regular Nguyễn forces with minimal losses in Cochinchina in 1862 and Annam in 1883, in unfamiliar territory guerrilla resistance posed a grave threat to French power. Thus, Poulo-Condore became the one place where the French could securely imprison regular soldiers and rebels without risking escapes or liaisons with resistance groups. The French furthermore justified their immediate use of Poulo-Condore as a prison island by citing the Nguyễn administration's use of the island for exiles, as early observers noted a Khmer village closely surveilled by a Vietnamese outpost. Yet, Frédéric Angleviel aptly casts doubt on this theory, arguing that the French may have mistook a fortified village for a prison.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Under Nguyễn rule, Poulo-Condore was part of the province of Hà Tiên but French administrators transferred it to Vĩnh Long in 1862. To muddle matters even more, the French president designated Poulo-Condore as a prefecture the very same year, an act usually reserved for metropolitan territories.<sup>27</sup> These paradoxical acts placed Poulo-Condore simultaneously within and outside the territorial jurisdiction of the metropole and the colony of Indochina.

Administratively, Poulo-Condore was placed under naval authority. Adm. Bonard laid the legal framework for the prison on February 1, 1862, establishing a penitentiary for Indochinese of two categories: common convicts, and rebels. Additionally, prisoners of war already on the island would be granted land and allowed to live freely there, forming the base population of the village of An Hải which has evolved into Côn Đảo's present population center. The island's Nguyễn garrison that immediately surrendered to the French when war broke out would be tasked with the surveillance of the prisoners who would be incarcerated within the fort's wooden palisade walls as they carried out work for the "public good."<sup>28</sup>

### **Carceral Networks in the French Empire**

In its early days, however, Côn Đảo failed to be the impregnable penitentiary that Bonard had imagined, largely due to a mutual breakdown of trust between the French naval personnel and the indigenous populace. Cptn. Durand St. Amand who visited the island in May 1862 observed uneasily how the local population remained loyal to the emperor and his mandarin under the assumption that the French presence would be temporary. Furthermore, he suspected that rebels had already taken to the island's craggy jungle and were agitating among locals. Of

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Chief Ctr. Adm. Bonard, "Arrêté no. 35," Feb. 1, 1862, Collections of Con Dao Museum. Capt. Durand St. Amand to the Minister of Colonies and the Navy, letter, 22 May 1862, FMAF 327, ANOM. Besides the island's use as a penitentiary, St. Amand also noted Poulo-Condore's strategic significance as a sort of "fort detached from the mainland" and as a site within striking distance of Cochinchina that should be occupied before another European power has the opportunity.

course, it is also quite likely that St. Amand's observations were simply symptomatic of the paranoia of an occupier in a land outnumbered by peoples with unfamiliar languages and customs, some of whom had already organized an unexpectedly fierce guerrilla resistance in the countryside. In a textbook example of a divide-and-rule tactic, he suggested introducing Chinese immigrants who would conduct commerce and ensure the proper resupply of the civilian population as a "moderating influence" on the local population.<sup>29</sup> Bonard was perhaps also worried about the security of the penitentiary when days after St. Amand's initial report he authorized the first trial of Vietnamese convicts in the *bagnes* of Guiana which had been established only ten years earlier.<sup>30</sup>

The prisoners on Poulo-Condore were quickly put to work building prison facilities with the fort as the nucleus of the growing *bagne*, followed by roads inland to facilitate the development of agriculture and the felling of teak trees which were numerous in the mountains while French engineers drew up plans for ovens that would transform the abundant coral reefs enveloping the island into chalk and lime. Vietnamese began to settle around the *bagne*, harvesting wood alongside the prisoners and selling it to the French while Chinese merchants set up shops nearby. Despite the initial distrust, only thirty French marines were stationed on the island doing little more than overseeing the flow of commerce, likely claiming more than their fair share in the process.<sup>31</sup> In the course of months, the *bagne* seemed to have become an engine for economic development on the island, clearing way for the landfall of the proto-prison industrial complex in French Indochina.

The economic boom quickly went to bust in September 1862 when a fleet of Chinese pirates raided the island, bombarding the village and forcing the residents to flee into the hills.

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<sup>29</sup> St. Amand to Min. Col., 22 May 1862, FMAF 327, ANOM.

<sup>30</sup> Adm. Bonard to Ctr. Adm. and GCC, 26 May 1862, FMAF 260, ANOM.

<sup>31</sup> Cptn. Durand St. Amand to Minister of Colonies and the Navy, letter, 1 November 1862, FMAF 327, ANOM.

Then, the raiders swiftly moved in and pillaged the settlement before taking to the sea, all while the battle-hardened detachment of French marines watched idly from behind the safety of their battlements.<sup>32</sup>

Any goodwill that had taken root between the French and the locals had dissipated as quickly as the pirates had taken flight. A revolt transpired which was swiftly and brutally put down by the French garrison. While little was recorded regarding the motives or course of the revolt, it resulted in the impoverishment of the 311 remaining locals who were forced to “wander like wild animals in search of their food,” subsisting on wild root vegetables.<sup>33</sup> The French commander on Poulo-Condore reveled in his bloody repression, claiming that “the conduct was appreciated by the islanders, who understood the hand that chastised them as a parental hand,” justifying it as a “bloody but merited lesson.”<sup>34</sup> He also used the occasion to congratulate himself for his philanthropy, gloating over his distribution of eight tons of rice to the locals in May, remarking that “since they saw the hand that chastised them open its aid to them, they understood that they did not have business with a barbarian enemy, who after exterminating a portion of them with arms, would not allow them to be decimated again by misery, famine, and deprivation.”<sup>35</sup>

The locals’ misfortune opened the floodgates for the transportation of more prisoners to the island who would no longer be in competition with free workers. In 1863, 162 convicts from

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<sup>32</sup> Cptn. Durand St. Amand to Minister of Colonies and the Navy. While the report does not explicitly say that the French marines did not engage the pirates, the report does not make note of any combat or French losses.

<sup>33</sup> Report on Cochinchina for 1863 prepared for the Minister of Colonies and the Navy, FMAF 4, ANOM.

The remaining population consisted of 255 Vietnamese (fifty-seven men, seventy-three women, 125 children), fifty-two former prisoners (eighteen men, twenty women, fourteen children), and four Chinese men. The comparatively low number of men is clearly an impact of the pirate raid and revolt where they would have been the most likely to have fought and died. A large number likely died considering that men are usually over-represented among sojourners and prisoners. Also, while I have been unable to locate more information about the rebellion, Brule who wrote *TSEO Poulo-Condore* obliquely references the “Nguyet Rebellion” which occurred in 1863, presumably the same one. He would have had privileged access to archives that may now no longer exist or be difficult to access.

<sup>34</sup> Report on Cochinchina for 1863 prepared for the Minister of Colonies and the Navy.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*,

Cochinchina were transported to Poulou-Condore to serve their sentences there, representing twenty-three percent of all convictions in the colony.<sup>36</sup> That year, the colony's administration also assumed financial responsibility for Poulou-Condore which had up to that point been funded by the metropole. Only the plantation island of Réunion in the Indian Ocean received more convicts from Cochinchina to where 446, or sixty-four percent of all convictions, were transported to serve their sentences as contract laborers.<sup>37</sup> Réunion had experienced an economic crisis after the abolition of slavery in 1848 as many freed African slaves were naturally reluctant to sign labor contracts with their former masters.

The abolition of slavery in the French Empire had created an economic crisis in colonies that relied almost exclusively on slave-labor dependent plantation economies, and convict labor was the apparent solution. It was no coincidence that the 1848 abolition of slavery was quickly followed by the establishment of the Guianese *bagnes* in 1852. The short-lived Second Republic which abolished slavery came to power on the heels of urban working class uprisings but quickly ended with Louis Napoleon's 1852 coup d'état in which he established himself as emperor of the Second Empire. One of his first acts was to establish the *bagnes* of Guiana, penal colonies to where he could send his political opponents as well as common criminals whose numbers had increased with urbanization, unemployment, and the expansion of definitions of criminality. While plantation owners could not entice freed slaves back to the plantations, Louis Napoleon could provide them with a steady flow of cheap, expendable laborers in the form of convicts. While convict labor came to replace slavery in Guiana, Vietnamese convicts alongside Asian contract laborers replaced the abolished practice in Réunion which was considerably farther from

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

the metropole. Cochinchina became the French Empire's first major post-slavery colony, and so convict and contract labor became its own source of cheap, expendable labor.

In the decades following the French conquest of Cochinchina, we can observe a dynamic in which demand for convict labor within and outside the colony produced a massive flow of prisoners from Saigon to Poulou-Condore and Réunion. When those prisoners considered the scourge of society – recidivists, incorrigibles, and rebels – arrived in Réunion, they were given exploitative labor contracts and integrated into life on the island as common “coolies.” The same categories of prisoners arrived on Poulou-Condore expected to perform forced labor with the goal of making the island a profitable venture. Poulou-Condore could thrive, but realizing the requisite economy of scale required enough labor to regularly drain malarial marshes, clear and cultivate rice fields, and engage in profit-driven activities such as chalk production, woodcutting, and growing cash crops. Lacking the requisite convicts for these tasks, the island's economy shriveled.

In the mid-nineteenth century, a proto-prison industrial complex arose in the French Empire in the vacuum created by the abolition of slavery. While in the west convicts flowed from the metropole to Guiana, in the east they flowed from Indochina to Réunion and Poulou-Condore. Some convicts from Cochinchina found themselves embarked on veritable odysseys as the Governor of Réunion sent them onwards to engage in labor contracts in Guadeloupe and Guiana as if they were traded slaves.<sup>38</sup> The establishment of a penal colony in New Caledonia in 1864 created another outlet for Indochinese convict labor, and deportations to that destination began as early as 1868. Adm. Ohier, the Governor of Cochinchina, abhorred capital punishment and so sent around 200 convicts whose sentences he had commuted from death to forced labor to

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<sup>38</sup> Governor of Réunion to GCC, letter, 17 July 1867, FMAF 260, ANOM.

New Caledonia.<sup>39</sup> The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 further opened the flow of convict labor from Cochinchina to the rest of the French Empire.

### **Civilian Administration and the Colonial Racial Hierarchy**

In 1871, Poulo-Condore's naval administration was replaced by a civilian one in which the island and penitentiary would be governed by a director appointed by the Governor of Cochinchina. At the time, the island's prison population was 1,787, greatly augmented from 520 two years prior.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the regulations established that the penitentiary should be overseen by ten European guards, an agricultural agent, as well as seventy-three indigenous surveillants and Filipino guards.<sup>41</sup> The employment class of "Filipino Guard" was unique to Poulo-Condore and constituted an intermediate rank between "European guard" and "native surveillant". The investigative reporter Jean-Claude Demariaux suggested that Filipino guards were employed on Poulo-Condore as the result of a royal marriage between France and Spain, though it also seems possible that Spain's role in an 1862 treaty resulting the Nguyễn cession of the island to France also factored into their recruitment, and they worked on the island through 1897.<sup>42</sup>

The Filipino guards occupied an intermediary space between European and Indochinese personnel while their place within the penitentiary was also marred by communications difficulties as some spoke neither French nor Vietnamese while others communicated in

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<sup>39</sup> FMAF 260, ANOM.

<sup>40</sup> Director of the Interior to the Governor of Cochinchina, "Report for the General Exposé of the Situation of the Empire," 28 August 1869, FMAF 4, ANOM.

"Report to the Governor General of Indochina on Modifications made to the Administrative Organization of the Poulo-Condore Archipelago," 28 December 1871, GGI 21739, ANOM.

<sup>41</sup> "Report to the Governor General of Indochina on Modifications made to the Administrative Organization of the Poulo-Condore Archipelago."

<sup>42</sup> Jean-Claude Demariaux, *Les secrets des îles de Poulo-Condore [The Secrets of the Poulo-Condore Archipelago]*, (Paris: L'Harmattan 1956).

Gandouin to HCI, "Report on Mission to Poulo-Condore," 17 Jan. 1948, HCI 694, ANOM.

Arragoun [sic] to Director of the Penitentiary and Islands of Poulo-Condore, letter, 4 June 1897, TĐNK 35294, TTTLLTQGII. This is the letter of resignation of the last Filipino guard on the island, Arragoun (a French corruption of a likely Spanish or Cebuano surname). Possibly Aragon based on his own signature.

idiolectic pidgins.<sup>43</sup> While the French directors frequently noted Filipino guards’ “lack of intelligence,” the directors themselves were perhaps projecting their own lack of knowledge on these guards as one assumed his Filipino subordinates spoke “Malay” with one another.<sup>44</sup>

By 1872, demand for convict labor from Cochinchina throughout the empire remained strong, though it underwent a qualitative shift. For the past decade, Cochinchina had been deporting convicts sentenced for piracy and rebellion en masse – in other words, political prisoners.<sup>45</sup> In 1872, the Governor of Réunion notified the Governor of Cochinchina that the colony would no longer accept these categories of prisoners, or those whose sentences had been commuted from death to exile.<sup>46</sup> The newfound disdain for Indochinese political prisoners can be explained by the actions of Vietnamese convicts on Guadeloupe (to where a number had been redirected once the Governor of Réunion found that the island’s plantation labor needs had already been met). They arrived on Guadeloupe with ten year sentences and were given five year labor contracts – the maximum length allowed by local law. When their contracts expired in 1871 and the government of Guadeloupe attempted to assign them a second five-year labor contract, they collectively organized a strike after which the governor allowed them to remain in the colony as free laborers. No longer bound by their oppressive contract, however, many Vietnamese political prisoners on the island found the opportunity and funds to repatriate

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<sup>43</sup> “Individual Bulletin of Notes for Arragoun,” 9 May 1894, TĐNK 35294, TTLLTQGII. The director notes that Arragoun “does not speak any known language... [but] an amalgam of English, French, Malay, and Vietnamese.”

<sup>44</sup> “Individual Bulletin of Notes for Arragoun.”

<sup>45</sup> While “rebellion” is a clearly political act, most Indochinese convicts sentenced to piracy were in fact members of guerrilla bands or, perhaps more frequently, Vietnamese civilians who found themselves at the wrong place at the wrong time. Daurand Sorgues to Procurer General of Cochinchina, “Report on Crimes and Misdemeanors Committed on Poulo-Condore on 19 June 1889,” July 26, 1890, GGI 22791, ANOM, details how many so-called Tonkinese “pirates” on Poulo-Condore were victims of arbitrary arrests aimed to extort them for bribes. Those unable to pay were convicted of “piracy.” Extracts of these convicts’ verdicts can be found in RSTNF 2468, ANOM. Peter Zinoman has written more extensively on this report in Chapter 5 of *Colonial Bastille* on pp. 139-142.

<sup>46</sup> Director of Colonies to Min. Col., letter, February 1873, FMAF 260, ANOM.

themselves to Cochinchina.<sup>47</sup> The rise of the proto-prison industrial complex was not unique to the French Empire, but a global phenomenon that sprung up in the wake of the abolition of slavery. As Vietnamese convicts were sent to populate vacated plantations in Réunion, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Guiana, recently emancipated African American men in the US South were being scooped up from the roadside en masse to populate enormous prison farms and work the roadsides in chain gangs. The proto-prison industrial complex, fueled by Black and Asian convict labor was the *direct descendant* of slavery in the colonized world.<sup>48</sup>

The global proto-prison industrial complex was clearly racialized as it followed on the heels of an early modern system in which Black African bodies were abducted and sold into slavery in the Americas (and later the Indian Ocean) while poor white metropolitan subjects forced into poverty on the heels of the agricultural and industrial revolutions were the subjects of penal transportation. In Britain especially, convicts and debtors were deported en masse to colonies in North America and the Caribbean where they became settlers allowed to live relatively autonomous lives in proximity of African slaves who comprised the workforces of wealthy planters. The American Revolution caused Britain to reroute convicts to Australia in 1786 where they were subjected to a much harsher penal regime than their American counterparts but still ultimately fulfilled the role of settlers who could, after the termination of their sentences, live relatively autonomously. In these cases, we see poor white metropolitan subjects transformed into a colonized class through arrest and penal transportation, only to become the colonizers themselves through participating in the dispossession and genocide of Indigenous peoples.

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<sup>47</sup> Director of Colonies to Min. Col., Feb. 1873.

<sup>48</sup> Here, I diverge from the standard purely territorial definition of “the colonized world” and include peoples subjected to internal colonialism. Thus, I include African Americans in the postbellum US South as part of the colonized world, for instance.

French plantation economies in the Americas were even more dependent on slavery than their British counterparts as poor metropolitan convicts fueled the labor demands of the Mediterranean galley fleet, to be replaced by the *bagne* of Toulon in the 1700s in which prisoners conducted hard labor for the navy. The French also carried the system of chattel slavery used in the Americas to the Indian Ocean where they attempted to develop Réunion and Mauritius along the same lines as Caribbean plantation islands. Slavery on Mauritius declined with the British conquest in 1810 as the slave trade (but not slavery itself) had been abolished in the empire, which was followed by the total abolition of slavery in 1835. While slavery continued unabated on French Réunion, former slave owners on its sister island of Mauritius filled plantations with Indian contract and convict labor.<sup>49</sup>

The mid-nineteenth century was a transitional era when the enslavement of Black subjects existed alongside white and Asian penal transportation and Asian contract labor. With France's abolition of chattel slavery in 1848 and the creation of the Guianese *bagnes* in 1852,<sup>50</sup> more than 50,000 metropolitan convicts were sent to Guiana as forced laborers under a particularly strict and brutal regime of surveillance and penal discipline.<sup>51</sup> By 1867, however, France discontinued the deportation of European convicts to Guiana just as Britain ended the transportation of convicts to Australia. Although France would recommence the transportation of European convicts to New Caledonia in 1872, with political prisoners from the ill-fated Paris Commune comprising the first batch, its importance of European convict labor in the empire remained significantly diminished.

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<sup>49</sup> Anderson, *Convicts and Coolies*.

<sup>50</sup> Note that not all forms of slavery had been abolished in 1848 as the form of debt slavery which had long been practiced in Cambodia and Laos continued in those locales through the late nineteenth century.

<sup>51</sup> Metropolitan convicts include white French convicts as well as Algerian convicts.

By 1867, the world's most expansive empires had abolished slavery while penal transportation and indentured servitude (including contract labor) had shifted from being a primarily white to a primarily Asian phenomenon. While white convicts and indentured servants frequently became settlers with some degree of autonomy after gaining their freedom, Asian convicts and contract laborers were forced to take on the grueling and unrewarding labor that had once weighed on the backs of African slaves (The US is the exception as former slave states created sharecropping and penal systems that reintegrated former Black slaves and their descendants into this labor niche). Thus, Indochinese convicts who were deported en masse to places such as Guiana and Réunion, though not legally slaves, were forced to pick up the yoke once carried by slavery.

Poulo-Condore was, in effect, the first penal colony in the French Empire founded at a site with no historical connection to the Atlantic slave trade and in many respects, it never conformed to the plantation economy model upon which the Guianese and New Caledonian *bagnes* were founded. Hard labor was expected of convicts, but more as a means of offsetting costs and sustaining the penitentiary. Poulo-Condore quickly became the springboard from which Asians from Indochina were dispersed to *bagnes*, penitentiaries, and plantations throughout the French Empire, catapulting them to places that existed as afterlives of slavery.

Poulo-Condore's uniqueness within the French Empire then, was that prisoners there labored not to fill the coffers of investors or to realize profits, but to sustain the penitentiary. And the penitentiary demanded a certain minimum number of workers; whenever the population of the *bagne* drew low, the drainage systems failed resulting in malaria outbreaks, local food production dwindled exposing prisoners to nutritional deficiencies such as scurvy and beriberi, and the lime kilns stopped firing, putting necessary maintenance and construction at a

standstill.<sup>52</sup> The convicts on Poulo-Condore labored for no other purpose than to sustain the functioning of the very penitentiary that consumed them, and hence the prison island marks the first ever realization of a true prison industrial complex. Prisoners were brought to the island to maintain drainage and irrigation canals, tended plantations and vegetable gardens that sustained the islands population, and dove for coral so that it could be transformed into chalk and lime for the construction and maintenance of an ever-expanding prison complex. All of these laborious tasks, each which demanded a certain number of prisoners, existed for no other reason than maintaining and expanding the prison.

### **Imperial or Colonial Penitentiary?**

With the suspension of European convicts' transportation to Guiana in 1862, Poulo-Condore became the object of a struggle between the Ministry of Colonies and the colonial administration in Cochinchina. During its first decade, the Guianese experiment became the priority of French colonial policy, and the cessation of the transportation of white convicts was a major threat to Guiana's existence. In order to make Guiana viable, the Minister of Colonies took to aggressively brokering intercolonial convict transfers.

From 1871 with the establishment of New Caledonia as a second major French penal colony, regular convoys began conveying significant numbers of Indochinese convicts there. In

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<sup>52</sup> Gandouin to HCI, "Report on Mission to Poulo-Condore," 17 Jan. 1948, HCI 694, ANOM. Gandouin remarks that the penitentiary has historically required more than 1,000 convicts to operate efficiently. His claims are corroborated by figures demonstrating that the island was ravaged by malaria and beriberi at the turn of the century when the convict population dropped off from 1,159 in 1896 with a convict mortality rate of seven percent and infant mortality rate of fifty percent (According to *État de la Cochinchine Française, 1896*) to 282 in 1901 with a convict mortality rate of thirty-three percent and an infant mortality rate of seventy-eight percent (According to *État de la Cochinchine Française, 1902*). These statistics are not exceptional but representative of a consistent positive relationship between high mortality rates and low convict populations. While higher convict populations did expose the island to a greater risk of cholera, malaria was the most lethal killer which returned in force whenever there were not enough prisoners to constantly drain stagnant marshes that would form on the plain on which the village and penitentiary were located every monsoon. The only exception to this relationship occurred during WWII when wartime food shortages coincided with a climbing prison population that reached 4,860 in 1941 (according to Inspector of Political Affairs to GCC, "Regarding escapes from Poulo-Condore Penitentiary," 3 July 1942, Tôn Đức Thắng Museum; Gandouin mentions in HCI 694 that the number climbed to 6,000, presumably in the later years of the war).

addition, the 1869 opening of the Suez canal made transportation to Guiana more viable. While New Caledonia received more convicts due to its proximity to Indochina (especially before the Suez Canal), Poulo-Condore became a transshipment point where convicts awaiting transportation augmented the island's prison population and temporarily participated in the forced labor regime.

While the voyage from Poulo-Condore to New Caledonia was long but rather direct, those bound westward were subjected to veritable odysseys as all Guiana-bound convicts had to first be registered in Toulon after which they were usually transported overland to the Atlantic coast where they were held before being sent to a transshipment point before being embarked to Guiana.<sup>53</sup> The journey from Saigon to Guiana often took more than a year. Following Dylan Rodriguez's observations on how the logic of the middle passage came to underlie the contemporary carceral regime in the US, the same can be said for of the French Empire's transportation-driven carceral system.<sup>54</sup>

Alongside the transportation of convicts to designated penal colonies, Cochinchina also opened up inter-colonial routes that excluded the metropole entirely, notably to O'Bock (in present-day Djibouti) and Libreville in Gabon. A special *bagne* for indigenous North Africans sentenced to forced labor was opened in O'Bock in 1886 to which Cochinchina and Cambodia began sending rebels who they considered particularly dangerous in 1888.<sup>55</sup> Libreville rose to prominence in 1888 when it was designated the seat of the French Congo. The growing port city, however, faced food shortages and lacked the labor for agricultural development. The Governor

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<sup>53</sup> Procurer General of Cochinchina and Cambodia to LGCC, letter, 24 July 1896, GGI 7689, ANOM; Note from the Procurer General of Indochina for the GGIC, 1894, GGI 22771, ANOM.

The latter letter establishes that a ministerial decree opened O'Bock as a *bagne* exclusively for Arabs serving hard labor sentences in 1883, while the former notes that another ministerial decree allowed for Chinese and Vietnamese sentenced to forced labor were eligible to serve their sentences there.

<sup>54</sup> Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 224-247.

<sup>55</sup> Resident General of Cambodia to Governor General of Indochina, 30 Dec 1888, FMAF 20, ANOM.

was so impressed with the agricultural performance of 480 Vietnamese political prisoners sent there in 1896 that he requested more on a regular basis.<sup>56</sup>

The French Empire's proto-prison industrial complex was not without internal squabbles, however, as various colonies' mushrooming demand for convict labor often led to competition. When the Ministry of Colonies caught wind of Indochina's convict labor agreements in Africa, it saw them as disadvantageous for Guiana and New Caledonia which depended almost entirely on convict labor. Thus, the Ministry of Colonies and officials in Indochina began a protracted struggle over the destinies of Indochinese convicts that ultimately favored Poulo-Condore.

The Ministry of Colonies first raised objections to Cochinchina's transportation of convicts to African and Indian Ocean colonies in 1868.<sup>57</sup> The Ministry pressed their position that convicts sentenced to more than eight years of forced labor, reclusion, or deportation must serve their sentences at a designated *bagne* in Guiana or New Caledonia.<sup>58</sup> Eight years was a critical number as it automatically subjected transported convicts to *doublage*, a policy that obliged prisoners to remain in the colony to which they were transported for life after the end of their sentences. Thus commenced a decades-long legal battle over the jurisdiction of Indochinese convicts.

Behind the legal arguments traded by the metropole and Indochina was an economic imperative to harness Indochinese convicts' labor power to drive colonial economic development. For Cochinchina, Poulo-Condore became a valuable reservoir for surplus convict labor that

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<sup>56</sup> LGCC to GGIC, telegram, 5 July 1896, GGI 22776, ANOM.

<sup>57</sup> Director of Colonies to Min. Col., Feb. 1873, FMAF 260, ANOM.

After the 1862 suspension of the transportation of European convicts to Guiana, the colony turned to importing contract laborers from the British Raj. Souring political relations between Britain and France ended this in 1868, however, after which the Governor of Guiana began lobbying the Ministry of Colonies to secure Indochinese convicts and contract laborers. This moment was the beginning of a protracted struggle between the Minister of Colonies and the various administrations of Indochina over the destinations of various categories of Indochinese convicts.

<sup>58</sup> GGIC to Min. Col., Telegram, Mar. 20, 1896, GGI 22777, ANOM.

decrowded mainland prisons from where convicts were assigned to *corvées* to build local infrastructure or leased to work for private interests such as plantations and mines. Poulou-Condore was the site where convicts deemed too dangerous for the mainland were sent and engaged in the Sisyphean labor of maintaining the very prison that engaged them, allowing for the transportation of convicts to other colonies once the island's labor threshold was met.

While the Ministry of Colonies actively favored the transportation of colonial convicts to Guiana for its particular demand for non-white convicts, the colonies and protectorates constituting French Indochina found the economic burden of transportation to Guiana and New Caledonia unpalatable, especially after 1898 when the Guiana passed a law that the colony sending convicts must pay for their transportation, upkeep, and repatriation.<sup>59</sup> In the light of the Ministry of Colonies' rebuke of the transportation of Indochinese convicts to other colonies in the Indian Ocean, Africa, and the Caribbean (who did not request maintenance fees since the convicts generated income through plantation work) and the penal colonies of New Caledonia and Guiana's imposition of exorbitant fees for convicts, Poulou-Condore became the most cost-effective alternative even if the island was not profitable.

The full extent to which the Ministry of Colonies saw Indochinese convict labor as an economic force for colonization is evident in a request dated March 36, 1896 for female convicts to be sent to Guiana. The Ministry intended to establish permanent Vietnamese communities in Guiana which required a minimum number of women to produce the offspring to meet the population replacement rate.<sup>60</sup> In practice, however, few women in Indochina were given the kinds of harsh sentences that would qualified them for transportation to Guiana, and so we can see an example of how the French Empire's proto-prison industrial complex functioned by

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<sup>59</sup> Min. Col. to GGIC, letter, Oct. 28, 1898, GGI 5753, ANOM.

<sup>60</sup> Min. Col. to GGIC, letter, March 31, 1896, GGI 7689, ANOM.

actively creating a demand for and requesting a category of convict that did not exist but in small numbers. While it is uncertain how seriously Indochinese officials took the Ministry's request, having done so would have required an increase in arrests and convictions of women for serious crimes, effectively expanding incarceration in direct response to the demand for a particular kind of labor within the empire, a clear indicator of a proto-prison industrial complex.

In 1900, French Indochina began a process of legal wrangling to keep convicts sentenced to categories reserved for Guiana and New Caledonia on Poulo-Condore. In 1896, convoys of around 500 convicts began to leave Cochinchina up to twice a year as the colony quickly became reliant on these deportations while allowing Poulo-Condore to fall into a state of insalubrity and disrepair. Through the 1910s, deportation to overseas penal colonies remained the primary means through which Indochina removed the convicts feared most by the colonial state despite the cost. While Cochinchina and Tonkin increasingly sent convicts to Guiana and New Caledonia, Cambodia and Annam which relied more heavily on the *indigénat* and had leaner budgets began to send larger numbers of convicts to Poulo-Condore.

While Cochinchina paid dearly to send convicts overseas, it supplemented its penitentiary budget by offering to take Annamese and Cambodian convicts on Poulo-Condore for transportation and maintenance costs much lower than those demanded by Guiana or New Caledonia. As in the prison industrial complex that characterizes contemporary penitentiary systems in the US, Cochinchina adopted a business-minded attitude towards Poulo-Condore, offering incarceration as a paid service.

Besides lacking the economic power of Cochinchina and Tonkin, Cambodia and Annam also lacked the prison infrastructure to securely hold all of their convicts. While Cambodia

constructed a grand new Maison Centrale in Phnom Penh in 1892 to address a penal crisis,<sup>61</sup> by 1904 the Cambodian prison system was so overcrowded that every prisoner *corvée* represented a major escape risk.<sup>62</sup> Sending large quantities of prisoners to Pulo-Condore represented a much more cost-effective solution to building more *maison centrales* or deportation to Guiana and New Caledonia.

Annam's prison system, too was gripped by crisis in 1892 in the wake of a serious rebellion. While the French administration in Annam balked at the cost of transporting prisoners to Guiana and New Caledonia, Cochinchina offered to accept a significant number of deportees on Pulo-Condore for a manageable thirty-six piasters per year as well as share the transportation cost fifty-fifty.<sup>63</sup> Deportation to Pulo-Condore was moreover perceived as a valuable counter-insurgency tactic as the Resident Superior of Annam argued that for the rebels "exile would be a real and formidable threat and would decide without doubt to submit. Hesitant villages, living under the constant fear of imprisoned rebel leaders, would no longer hesitate to serve authority if they saw that the [rebels] were always removed, placing them outside of harm."<sup>64</sup>

Additionally, the protectorates appeared to rely increasingly upon the *indigénat* whose sentences, unrecognized by French metropolitan law, could usually be executed on Pulo-Condore without interference from the Ministry of Colonies. While colonial and metropolitan officials frequently decried the excessiveness of sentences handed down by the *indigénat*, attributing it to native administrators' propensity for cruelty and corruption, a more nuanced examination of the system reveals how the *indigénat* served as a means for mid-level French

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<sup>61</sup> Res. Sup. of Cambodia to GGIC, "On the Subject of the Construction of a Cambodian Prison," 8 Jan. 1892, GGI 22797, ANOM.

<sup>62</sup> Res. Sup. of Cambodia to GCC, 23 Feb. 1904, RSC 26023, NAC.

<sup>63</sup> Res. Sup. of Annam to GGIC, "Report on the Attempt of Ba Ho Thuan on the Citadel of Hà Tinh, revolt and escape of prisoners," 18 Sept. 1892, GGI 23306, ANOM.

<sup>64</sup> Res. Sup. of Annam to GGIC, "Report on the Deportation of Prisoners Convicted for Acts of Rebellion," 4 Oct. 1892, GGI 23306, ANOM.

officials (such as residents) to indirectly control local populations through a legal measures that would never be acceptable under French law.

Effectively, French residents within the protectorates cemented their power on a local level by using the *indigénat* as a scapegoat for their own brutality and corruption. After all, even while residents outwardly disapproved of the *indigénat*, their signatures and seals can be found on documents approving almost every trial ruling, even those that clearly did not follow due process or resulted from arrests that were plain extortion attempts.<sup>65</sup> One must wonder what percentage of the bribe money extorted from those arrested found its way to residents' pockets. Moreover, as the number of convictions handed down by the *indigénat* in Annam and Tonkin swelled in the decades following their annexation, those jurisdictions increasingly ordered convicts to Poulo-Condore to ease pressure on overcrowded local prisons and remove convicts whose sentences were purely the result of extortion from the eyes and ears of local society where their very presence risked being a destabilizing influence.

Following in the footsteps of Guiana and New Caledonia, Cochinchina began to ask the protectorates who sent convicts to Poulo-Condore to pay for the transportation and upkeep which in the best years allowed the administration to recover just over half of the penitentiary's operating costs.<sup>66</sup> The protectorates had little grounds to complain since these fees were considerably less than the costs of sending the convicts to overseas penal colonies or expanding and upgrading their own local prison systems. The fact that Cochinchina began collecting

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<sup>65</sup> Daurand Sorgues to Procurer General of Indochina, "Report on the Investigation of Criminal or Misdemeanor Acts Committed at the Poulo-Condore Penitentiary on June 19<sup>th</sup> Last Year," 26 July 1890, GGI 22791, ANOM.

<sup>66</sup> Data from *État de la Cochinchine Française* shows the significant contributions made by the protectorates to the budget of Poulo-Condore. In 1889 before large numbers of Cambodian and Annamese prisoners were sent to Poulo-Condore, the budget ran a deficit of 34,697.75 piasters. The next year, 1890, the number of Cochinchinese prisoners on the island shrank by 133 while the number of Tonkinese prisoners grew by 208, shrinking the budget deficit to 14,509.76 piasters with maintenance reimbursements from the protectorates accounting for 91.5 percent of the penitentiary's income. In subsequent years, these maintenance payments always constituted 45 percent or more of the penitentiary's income.

income by offering the Poulo-Condore penitentiary as a service to Indochina's protectorates highlights another feature of the prison industrial complex that appeared on the island.

### **Identities of the Prisoners**

Poulo-Condore had always been known by French colonists as the home of the "most dangerous" convicts in Indochina, and by Vietnamese as a place from which people seldom returned. While it started as a penitentiary for prisoners from Cochinchina, as France conquered Annam, Tonkin, Cambodia, and Laos, convicts began to flow in from all of these territories, making Poulo-Condore the only prison in Indochina that held convicts from all constituent colonies and protectorates. The variations in legal systems between each territory, however, meant that each sent prisoners sentenced for very different crimes. Who were these prisoners, who were Indochina's "most dangerous?"

As explained earlier, Cochinchina's legal system most closely resembled that of metropolitan France. The colony also administered the penitentiary, and so it was a regular feature of the penal system to where both common law and political prisoners were frequently sentenced. During the penitentiary's existence, the minimum sentence that could be served on Poulo-Condore fluctuated from a minimum of two to five years.

The exception to this rule was for cases of administrative internment. While administrative internees generally were handed down lengthy terms of confinement, occasionally short-term administrative internment on Poulo-Condore could be ordered if it met certain political goals. For instance, in 1897 Le Ba Dang, a professional fraudster in Bắc Liêu, had used legal maneuvering and bank fraud to gobble up the land of unfortunate peasant farmers adjacent to his tracts. Unable to find sufficient evidence for prosecution, the administrator of Bắc Liêu requested that the Lt. Governor of Cochinchina issue an *arrêté* for Dang's administrative

internment on Poulo-Condore for three to six months to deter him and his associates from further fraud and to allow for a more thorough investigation. The Lt. Governor obliged the administrator's request.<sup>67</sup> The possibilities of administrative internment knew no boundaries.

The mixed tribunals of Tonkin and Annam, a part of the *indéginat* were also major sources of convicts for Poulo-Condore. While administrative internees were often sent to Poulo-Condore on mere suspicion or lack of sufficient evidence, a large percentage of those sentenced by the mixed tribunals were innocent – perhaps even a majority – as courts in certain provinces in the north systematically convicted individuals for failure to pay a bribe. Local authorities would frequently arrest random peasants from the roadside to extort a bribe, and those unable to pay often found themselves quickly convicted of piracy or rebellion, landing them frequently on Poulo-Condore. In *Colonial Bastille*, Peter Zinoman effectively summarizes some of these victims' profiles, noting that some were as young as fifteen years old.<sup>68</sup> Yet, even after a judicial inspector from the metropole detailed these abuses in a scathing report and recommended sweeping pardons, French officials in the Indochina government stood by their decisions, obsessing over their need to “save face” before their Asian subjects.<sup>69</sup>

While it is true that the concept of saving face features more prominently in Vietnamese culture than French, French officials' orientalist outlook in Indochina caused them to take the concept to its extremes, essentially using it to mask their own anxiety of losing control over an Asian population. This anxiety was a recognition that they did not understand their colonial subjects, and they sought to project an image of themselves as competent rulers by exaggeratively performing the stereotypes they held of their Asian subjects. Thus, the French

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<sup>67</sup> Vincenti, Administrator of Bac Lieu, to LGCC, 31 October 1897, TĐNK, TTLTTLQGII.

<sup>68</sup> Zinoman, *Colonial Bastille*.

The investigation is detailed in Daurand Sorgues, Report to the Procurer General of Indochina, July 26, 1890, GGI 22791, ANOM.

<sup>69</sup> Daurand Sorgues, Report to the Procurer General of Indochina.

used the notion of “saving face” as a justification for ruling with an iron fist when, in reality, they must have recognized that to reveal their complicity in the false imprisonment of hundreds of peasants who were victims of extortion would create some level of political instability.

They used similar orientalist arguments to maintain the *indigénat* despite protest from the metropole, arguing that to reform the legal system would disrespect Confucian notions of governance which held that “rebellion was equivalent to parricide” and therefore gave local mandarins incredible latitude to mete out harsh sentences for comparatively minor (and often fictive) crimes.<sup>70</sup> By clinging to the *indigénat*, French officials let much of the responsibility for the dirty work of oppression to fall on indigenous officials. For indigenous intellectuals such as Phan Châu Trinh began to speak loudly and eloquently for reform, however, wound up on Poulou-Condore as administrative detainees. Clearly, the French indirectly and selectively favored the *indigénat* because it allowed them to rule with an iron fist without taking responsibility for it.

The *indigénat* remained without serious challenge until the 1910s when rebellions orchestrated by organized political parties began to break out. French officials saw the existing judicial infrastructure as insufficient to investigate and try the myriad participants – and perhaps they had become aware that decades of injustice perpetuated by the *indigénat* had become a destabilizing factor. Provisions for the first criminal commissions were established by a decree in 1896 allowing the Governor General to temporarily establish these legal bodies to try Vietnamese subjects according to French law in cases deemed a threat to the security of the protectorate. This moment marked shift away from a French policy of maintaining separate

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<sup>70</sup> Chief Ctr. Adm. Bonard, *Arrêté no. 35*, 1 Feb. 1862, Côn Đảo Museum.

P. Pompei, *Conferences sur le droit penal Vietnamien [Conference on Vietnamese Penal Law]*, 1948.

Bonard asserts that “for the Vietnamese, rebellion is equivalent to parricide.” Pompei poses a similar argument eighty-six years later, claiming that since the emperor constitutes the state, the gravest crime is rebellion. The similarity in these two texts, written almost a century apart, show the constancy with which the French colonial judicial and penal systems internalized and crystallized orientalist ideas about Vietnamese society and used them to their own advantage.

indigenous and French judiciaries towards the creation of legal bodies that assimilated elements of Nguyễn and French metropolitan legal codes.

While the criminal commissions were created to lend legitimacy to acts of repressing rebellions precipitated by militant parties espousing western political ideologies, in practice they were utterly ineffective in identifying and convicting the right people. For instance, in 1909, the Criminal Commission of Tonkin convicted five individuals for their role in a poisoning conspiracy targeting soldiers in the Hanoi Citadel. Years later, investigators found that the star informant, a Vietnamese officer of the municipal police force, had in fact fabricated all of his testimony to mask his own conspiracy to manufacture poison in large quantities to use on his rivals, leading to a rare pardon of those falsely accused who had by then lived more than two years on Pulo-Condore.<sup>71</sup> While the criminal commissions applied entirely different investigative methods and judicial process from the mixed tribunals, their results were essentially the same: hundreds of convicts, many of them falsely accused, many of them sent to Pulo-Condore and Guiana.

The Yên Bái mutiny in 1930, part of a broader VNQDĐ attempt to spark a nationalist revolution by seizing a series of key garrisons in the north through mutinies, initiated another judicial turn. Yên Bái and the string of nationalist rebellions that accompanied it incensed French officials while igniting a climate of fear among colonists throughout Indochina, initiating a general shift towards hardline law-and-order policies favoring long, harsh sentences. For some, Pulo-Condore was not far or punishing enough for those who participated in the

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<sup>71</sup> Antoine Vincilioni, Transcripts of interrogations of individuals suspected of participation of a poisoning conspiracy in Hanoi Citadel, Aug. 29-30, 1909, GGI 53452, ANOM.  
GGIC to Min. Col., "Minute on the commutation of sentences of Tonkinese natives condemned by decree of the indigénat," June 22, 1911, GGI 20109, ANOM.  
Central Commisariate of Tonkin to Res. Sup. of Tonkin, June 7, 1914, RSTNF 2428, ANOM.

rebellions, so a “special penitentiary establishment” was set up for 535 Yên Bái convicts and their families in the unforgiving Inini plateau in Guiana.<sup>72</sup>

The Nghệ Tĩnh Soviets of 1930-31 proved that the communists were also capable of fomenting large-scale armed rebellions, and so French administrations relied increasingly on administrative internment to excise suspected party members and sympathizers from society preemptively and indefinitely. Most administrative internees were sent to Poulo-Condore where they were classified as political prisoners.

While Vietnamese intellectuals were no strangers to Poulo-Condore which was temporarily home to the likes of Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, Phan Bội Châu, and Phan Châu Trinh,<sup>73</sup> the wave of administrative internment combined with an increasing crackdown on the press brought a substantial intelligentsia to the island, having the unintended effect of growing the ranks of the Indochina Communist Party (ICP) and establishing a flow of communication between convicts and former convicts on the island and the mainland which would blunt the island’s punitive force by revealing its mysteries to the mainland’s public through emerging Vietnamese networks of print capital.

### **The Spectacle of Disappearance**

Now that Poulo-Condore’s role and position within the global carceral apparatus of the French Empire has been established, it is necessary to understand how the island’s particular form of punishment differed fundamentally from that of other carceral institutions to which Indochinese convicts could be sent. Foucault’s argument advanced in his 1975 work *Discipline and Punish* posits that modern modern punishment, characterized by incarceration, differs

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<sup>72</sup> Michel Pierre, *Les Temps des Bagnes [The Times of the Bagnes]*, (Paris: Éditions Tallandier, 2017).

<sup>73</sup> Huỳnh Thúc Kháng and Phan Bội Châu were militant nationalists who had been inspired by witnessing the Cần Vương movement which sought to restore the Nguyễn dynasty’s independence in the aftermath of the invasion while Phan Châu Trinh advocated for reforms modeled on French society.

fundamentally from premodern punishment in that it applies sovereign power to individual bodies exercised through the strict regimentation of time and space to affect the transformation of the punished's soul. Premodern forms of punishment, however, relied on the unrestrained application of sovereign power on the punished's body to create a bloody spectacle to deter subjects from defying the power of the sovereign.<sup>74</sup> While Poulo-Condore was technically a penitentiary that on paper adhered to similar standards of punishment as other penitentiaries in the French Empire, its unique position on an island detached from mainland society meant that every convoy of convicts sent there constituted a massive spectacle of disappearance.

In practice, the prisons of the Indochinese mainland were socially porous as corrupt and underpaid guards mixed with sly prisoners, creating ample opportunities for social and economic exchange with the society that existed outside the walls in what Peter Zinoman aptly calls the "ill-disciplined prison."<sup>75</sup> Under such circumstances, prisoners could easily obtain any goods money could buy, maintain communications with family members (or accomplices), and even escape. Poulo-Condore, cut off from the mainland by the sea and its unpredictable currents, provided few opportunities for interacting with mainland society or for escape. That does not mean, however, that prisoners and guards did not engage in commercial exchange, or that no one tried to escape.

Prison guards and surveillants on Poulo-Condore frequently sold prisoners illicit items and services at dear prices and were quick to take bribes that could make prisoners' lives more comfortable. Joseph Cristiani, a long-standing Chief Guard, for instance, was notorious among prisoners for his brutality and graft. *La Lutte*, a Saigon socialist weekly published primarily by former political prisoners of Poulo-Condore, detailed how prisoners would give him "gifts"

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<sup>74</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

<sup>75</sup> Zinoman, *Colonial Bastille*.

ranging from cash to champagne in hopes of receiving a less punishing work detail.<sup>76</sup> Visitors to Poulo-Condore also remarked, not infrequently, how many Vietnamese surveillants had concubines whom they would pimp out to paying prisoners.<sup>77</sup> Opium also flowed freely behind the prison walls, widely used by convicts, surveillants, and even some more senior functionaries.<sup>78</sup>

While prison personnel and prisoners alike were forbidden from using opium, the colonial opium monopoly still functioned on the island, overseen by the penitentiary's accountant who was entitled to two percent of all sales.<sup>79</sup> An opium user on average smokes about four and a half grams daily, while thirty grams is enough to produce a fatal overdose. The table below illustrates that opium was sold on Poulo-Condore from 1888 to 1893 at a volume well beyond what would have been required for every inhabitant on the island to overdose at least twice *every day*, while the accountant received kickbacks each year of sums that, when compared to buying power in US Dollars in 2021, would be in the thousands. Whether the accountant was simply cooking his books or selling opium to prisoners, personnel, and smugglers, or any combination of these three methods, he was clearly enriching himself on graft so blatant that it was discernible in publicly available statistics. But the colonial government

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<sup>76</sup> *La Lutte*, no. 29, 6 Apr. 1935.

<sup>77</sup> Le Gregam, "Report of Inspection of Poulo-Condore," 23 Feb. 1932, FMNF 2490, ANOM. Dir. of the Interior to Min. Col., "Report on the 27 Aug. Prisoner Revolt on Bai Kanh," 23 Sept. 1883, HCOL 2026. Both of the above reports detail heavy opium use among surveillants on duty.

<sup>78</sup> Director of the Interior to Minister of the Colonies, 23 September 1883, HCOL 2026, ANOM. Legregam, "Inspection Report on Poulo-Condore."

Both of these reports, produced almost fifty years apart, both note widespread opium use by surveillants while on the job. *La Lutte* (no. 86, 1 July 1936) also details how Dr. Maclaud, the prison's head doctor, was so addicted to opium that he only treated prisoners two to three times a week.

*La Lutte*, no 89, 1 July 1936. This issue contains an article recounting Dr. Maclaud's opium addiction. Maclaud was the penitentiary doctor from 1936 - 1937. Note that while he is referred to as "Maclaut" in *La Lutte*, in Brule, *Poulo-Condore T.F.E.O.* his name is listed as "Maclaud."

<sup>79</sup> "Regulations of the Island and Penitentiary of Poulo-Condore," (Saigon: Imprimerie Coloniale, 1889).

The provisions regarding opium use and sale are not significantly different in other versions of the regulations. Title III of the regulations establish the accountant's commission on opium sales while Title XVII Art. 82 bans the use and possession of opium (along with tobacco and betel) inside the penitentiary.

seemed to turn a blind eye since their cut of the opium sales was much greater than the accountant's two percent.

Year	Opium Sales (in kg)	Civilian Population	Opium/person/day (g)	Total population	Opium/person /day (g)	Accountant's commission (piasters)
1887						74.25
1888	75,500	265	791	1,125	180	78.33
1889	40,000	287	382	1,650	69	43.14
1890	56,400	293	527	1,785	87	62.04
1891	69,000	192	985	2,107	90	No value given
1892	76,000	352	592	837	249	153.56
1893	75,000	218	943	720	285	45

*Table 1.1* shows that for all years with available data between 1888 and 1893, the amount of opium sold on Poulo-Condore exceeded the amount required for every individual on the island to overdose twice per day (The average opium user usually consumes 4g per day, and 30g in one day is usually enough to overdose). Therefore, this table clearly indicates that the penitentiary's account engaged widely in illegal opium sales to smugglers and/or prisoners. The data in the tables comes from an annual official government statistical almanac called the *État de la Cochincine Française [State of French Cochinchina]* (Saigon: Imprimerie Commerciale Rey, Curiole, & Co.).

While the “ill-disciplined prison” on the mainland meant that corruption and mismanagement removed the boundaries that separated the social world of the prison from the one outside its walls,<sup>80</sup> on Poulo-Condore the social world that lay beyond the prison walls was limited and dominated by prison personnel and their families. Thus the guards, surveillants, and often the director himself used their positions to enrich themselves at prisoners' expense. While mainland society was opaque to the prisoners of Poulo-Condore, the prison island was doubly so for Indochinese living on the mainland, for the prisoners were erased from mainland society, victims of a spectacle of disappearance displayed by the French colonial administration. While in Foucault's famous description of the spectacle of punishment the sovereign uses physical force to obliterate the convict's body in public view, every convoy of prisoners to Poulo Condore

<sup>80</sup> Zinoman, *Colonial Bastille*.

constituted a spectacle of disappearance, condemning the convicts not only to their pronounced sentences, but obliterating them by relegating them to a state of social extinction.

### **A Separate Set of Laws**

While for the first ten years of its existence, Poulo-Condore was administered by naval personnel who answered to and were funded by the government of Cochinchina, as the state of affairs in the colony shifted from a milieu of military occupation to civil administration, the naval commandant of Poulo-Condore and his marines who surveilled the prisoners were replaced by a civilian administrator appointed directly by the Governor of Cochinchina and a small body of European and Filipino prison guards with a larger number of Indochinese surveillants under their command. The detachment of marines was replaced by a colonial infantry company who patrolled the penitentiary's hinterlands for escapees and only intervened within the walls of the *bagne* upon the director's authorization. The new regulations for the penitentiary and isles of Poulo-Condore were penned and implemented in 1871 and laid out the basic regulations that underpinned their organization that persisted uninterrupted until 1945.<sup>81</sup>

The administration recognized Poulo-Condore's unique situation and designated it as a separate administrative unit in 1876, as the "Isles and Penitentiary of Poulo-Condore."<sup>82</sup> The Indochinese administration moreover established rules for the territory that allowed it to operate entirely differently from the mainland provinces. Every inch of land and coastline of the archipelago was considered the inalienable property of the colonial government, and by extension anything produced from the land immediately became property of the colonial

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<sup>81</sup> "Report to the Governor General on Modifications made to the Administrative Organization of the Poulo-Condore Archipelago," 28 December 1871, GGI 21739, ANOM.

<sup>82</sup> "Decree Establishing the Director of the Isles and Penitentiary of Poulo-Condore," 29 May 1876, TĐNK 34817, TTLLTQGII.

Unlike other provinces of Cochinchina, Poulo-Condore's administrative status was modeled on Guadeloupe's dependency status vis-à-vis metropolitan France, with Poulo-Condore set analogously as if it were a dependency of Cochinchina, allowing for a non-standard administrative structure.

government at the disposition of the territory's director. This also meant that it was the only territory in Indochina that was completely shut off from private investment.<sup>83</sup>

Unlike other provinces in Indochina, the chief administrative role did not fall to a French resident or governor, but to the "Director of the Isles and Penitentiary of Poulo-Condore." The Director was appointed for two year renewable terms by the Governor of Cochinchina and exercised near total authority over both the prison's inmates and the local free population, most of whom comprised prison personnel and their families. Separated from the Governor's palace in Saigon by more than a day's journey, the director was delegated sweeping authority over life on the island. The journalist Jean-Claude Demarieux refers to him as "king of the island,"<sup>84</sup> but it is perhaps more useful to think of the role of director as akin to that of a dictator, albeit one whose mandate of power originated from (and could be revoked by) a government appointment. Still, the director's power knew few constraints and was highly personalized, therefore whether a given director viewed himself as a model civil servant or the personification of punishment had a considerable bearing on prisoner' experiences.

### **The Power of the Prison Director**

As demonstrated in the administrative organization of Poulo-Condore, an incredible amount of almost unchecked power was delegated to the director who had near complete control over the administration of the island's economy, military, policing and surveillance, and justice system. While he was labelled "Director" in official French documents, his title came to be translated in Vietnamese more aptly as "Island Lord."

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<sup>83</sup> The inalienability of Poulo-Condore's land and all products and resources derived from it was established in Title XXIII, Art. 112 of the *Particular Regulations of the Isles and Penitentiary of Poulo-Condore* (from the 1889 version in GGI 22792, ANOM). This article also notes that "an exception is made concerning the fields cultivated by the village called 'Little Cambodia,' until the inhabitants' complete extinction." The administration's commitment to maintaining the island's inalienability is demonstrated in their incredulous response to a metropolitan capitalist who proposed investing in the island to develop its private industry. See "Minute for M. Dutish de la Tuque," 8 Nov. 1873, GGI 22774, ANOM.

<sup>84</sup> Demariaux, *Les secrets de les îles de Poulo-Condore*.

While the government of Cochinchina had the power to determine the regulations of Poulo-Condore and to appoint the Director, the only means of oversight came in the form of monthly reports prepared by the Director and accountant in addition inspections carried out by the Cochinchina government and the Ministry of Colonies.<sup>85</sup> While almost yearly inspections occurred during the penitentiary's first decade of civil administration, later on, years would pass without even one.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, more frequent inspections conducted by the Cochinchinese Government were rarely critical and usually conducted as a mere as a formality. An inspector who visited the island in 1886, for instance, spends pages discussing the various models of rifles used by the soldiers and guards on the island but devotes no more than a handful of paragraphs on conditions inside the prison which go little beyond a detailed regurgitation of the dimensions of various rooms and cells.<sup>87</sup> A former prisoner writing in *La Lutte* laments inspectors of this mold who "are content to see the guesthouse and the feast laid out on the Director's table."<sup>88</sup> Inspections carried out by the Ministry of Colonies, however, were much more detailed and critical.

The most common and consistent critique raised by the Ministry of Colonies regarding Poulo-Condore was that prisoners were not properly treated according to their sentence. According to French law, convicts sentenced to deportation, relegation, imprisonment, administrative detention, and forced labor must be separated and subjected to different penal regimes. However, inspectors found consistently that prisoners on Poulo-Condore were not

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<sup>85</sup> Laws established that inspections by the Ministry of Colonies or the Government of Cochinchina could occur no more frequently than once per year. In practice, however, inspections occurred much less frequently.

<sup>86</sup> No regulations regarding the frequency of inspections was established until 1911 in an arrêté by the Governor General of Indochina setting a year as the minimum time period between inspections conducted by the Cochinchinese government. The arrêté came after a reorganization of the penitentiary by O'Connell who prepared a report that detailed numerous grave irregularities in prisoner treatment. The arrêté, however, did little to improve the effectiveness of inspections since it did not set a maximum time period that could pass without an inspection. Arrêté by Procurer General of Indochina, c. 1911," GGI 20239, ANOM.

<sup>87</sup> "Inspection of Poulo-Condore," 3 Dec. 1884, HCOL 2026, ANOM.

<sup>88</sup> *La Lutte*, no. 54, 25 Sept. 1935.

differentiated and instead subjected to the same intense labor regime intended for convicts sentenced to forced labor.<sup>89</sup> Whether motivated by ignorance, greed, or sadism, it was always the Director who determined prisoners' labor regimes.<sup>90</sup>

For those Directors who were more knowledgeable of the law, they often roped exiles, administrative detainees, and relégués into performing the same backbreaking labor as forced laborers by essentially designing regulations to funnel them into a form of debt bondage. While French law guaranteed these categories of prisoners the right to live on their own means under a regime of limited surveillance in a designated place, regulations on the island provided that if these prisoners could not sustain themselves that they must be confined in the *bagne* and work under the penitentiary's labor regime to earn their keep.<sup>91</sup> Yet, on an island whose economy and land was under the complete purview of the Director, how *could* a prisoner sustain himself? Those Directors who did acknowledge the rights of the aforementioned categories of prisoners to live independently outside the *bagne* often relied on the recommendations of the local village head to determine whether or not individual convicts were self-sufficient. In practice, all it took to remove a convict from the village to the *bagne* was a negative assessment of their self-sufficiency or a false accusation of theft.<sup>92</sup> While most Directors used subtle legal manipulations such as this one to maximally exploit every convict for their own gain, some were more cavalier in their approach.

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<sup>89</sup> Reports of improper adherence to labor categories can be found in the following: Min. Col. to GGIC, "Situation of Poulo-Condore Penitentiary," 31 Mar. 1896, GGI 22777, ANOM. Legregam, "Inspection Report for Poulo-Condore," 23 Feb. 1932.

Chief Administrator of Gò Công to GCC, 22 Mar. 1937, HCI 694, ANOM. r

<sup>90</sup> The Director had the authority to assign various categories of prisoners to different work while the Chief Guard was delegated the task of assigning individuals to different *corvées*.

<sup>91</sup> GGIC to Min. Col., 4 Oct. 1896, GGI 22777, ANOM.

LGCC to Sec. Gen. of Indochina, "Request for Information on the Regime of Administrative Internment and on Several Internees of this Category," GGI 20113, ANOM.

<sup>92</sup> LGCC to Sec. Gen. of Indochina, "Request for Information on the Regime of Administrative Internment."

One of the longest serving Directors – and perhaps the most reviled by prisoners, guards, and administrators alike – was Capt. Seraphin-Étienne Lambert. An officer in the colonial army, Lambert was detached to serve as Director in 1919 after a prisoner assassinated his predecessor, Andouard. While Lambert's appointment was intended to be temporary, no more than a year, until a replacement could be recruited from the civil administration, Lambert's reign as director lasted eight years until 1927. During this time, he created a regime of personalized power on the island unmatched by any other Director as he became progressively ensconced in a paranoid megalomania in what an investigator called a "reign of pleasure and arbitrariness."<sup>93</sup> While Vietnamese prisoners referred to him as "Lord of the Island," and some French administrators referred to him as a "soldier of fortune" after his abuses were revealed, he can aptly be thought of as dictator of the island, taking full advantage of the near absolute power that the regulations of the island delegated him.<sup>94</sup>

By 1927 when Lambert took leave in France, he had enriched himself through systematic embezzlement and a brutal multi-layered system of repression that introduced new non-regulation punishments enacted on prisoners for the most minor infractions. He also introduced the ready and arbitrary application of corporal punishment for Vietnamese surveillants and civilians as well as a system of mail censorship and intimidation that kept European guards from addressing complaints to him or his superiors.<sup>95</sup>

Lambert quickly fell captive to his own inflated ego and saw himself as the man who could make Poulo-Condore great again after it had fallen into a state of indiscipline and disrepair. Upon arriving, he encountered "dilapidated buildings, small badly-maintained roads, brush

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<sup>93</sup> GCC to GGIC, letter, 8 July 1929, GGI 32836, ANOM.

<sup>94</sup> Legregam, "Inspection Report of Poulo-Condore," 23 Feb. 1932.

<sup>95</sup> De Taste, "Inspection Report of Poulo-Condore Penitentiary," 8 July 1929, GGI 52836, ANOM.

invading the village... a post truly neglected and lamentable.”<sup>96</sup> He used this observation to justify the misappropriation of funds and the conscription of all prisoners regardless of their sentence as laborers to carry out his aggressive building program. Many of Lambert’s construction projects, however, did not make the prison more sanitary, secure, or humane, but were designed to providing luxuries and recreational opportunities for the European functionaries, himself included, such as tennis courts, a cinema, an ice factory, improved lodging for the French personnel, and a garden of French vegetables.<sup>97</sup>

Lambert’s racism towards Asians was especially pronounced, even compared to other French colonists in Indochina. Against regulation and all common decency, he began disciplining Asian surveillants with lashes of rattan and cellular confinement for even minor perceived infractions.<sup>98</sup> For convicts, the already stiff disciplinary regime became even more brutal as Lambert devised “improvements” to regulation methods, such as extending cellular confinement in the 8.85x4.6 foot nearly windowless cachots beyond ninety days,<sup>99</sup> the introduction of total deprivation of food and water,<sup>100</sup> as well as embellishments of the regulation “chain” and “double chain” punishments, including “double double chains,” “large double chains,” and “double large double chains.”<sup>101</sup> De Taste, the administrator charged with

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<sup>96</sup> Seraphin-Etienne Lambert to GGIC, letter, July 11, 1927, GGI 52836, ANOM.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> GCC to GGIC, 29 Apr. 1927, GGI 52836, ANOM.

Lambert was formally accused of striking surveillants on four occasions and punishing surveillants with cellular confinement on two occasions. It is likely that Lambert engaged in these abuses beyond these instances listed in the report of the investigation.

<sup>99</sup> GCC to GGIC, 8 July 1929, GGI 52836, ANOM.

In the worst cases, Lambert doubled this punishment, keeping prisoners in the *cachot* for up to ninety days.

A “*cachot*” is a windowless disciplinary cell that could be roughly translated to “the hole.”

<sup>100</sup> De Taste, “Inspection Report of Poulo-Condore Penitentiary,” 8 July 1929, GGI 52836, ANOM.

In regulations, the imposition of a rice and water diet for up to four days was allowed in combination with cellular confinement in the *cachot*, but Lambert frequently replaced the rice and water diet with one of complete deprivation of food and water for four days.

<sup>101</sup> The “chain” punishments involve a prisoner being forced to wear chains on their person at all times, making movement slow and difficult, especially during *corvées*. To picture the “chains” prisoners wore, picture the ball and chain worn in stereotypical popular culture imagery of prisoners breaking rocks.

investigating the allegations that eventually surfaced against Lambert, noted that under his directorship, prisoner deaths elevated markedly as a direct result of Lambert's harsh punishments especially evident by a jump in cachexia deaths resulting from excessive cellular confinement/solitary confinement.<sup>102</sup>

Lambert often imposed these inhumane disciplinary sanctions based on the mere speculation of a prisoner's guilt, or when he felt personally criticized. For instance, one prisoner was confined in the *cachot* for sixty days with leg irons and a reduced dietary regime for "slanderous" complaints made against the Director. Another was placed in the *cachot* with leg irons, to be removed for forty-eight hours every fifteen days, with ten days of rice and water, until he revealed the location of thirty-six eggs the Director accused him of stealing. He was only allowed out of the *cachot* after ninety days as an act of the Director's "benevolence" for Bastille Day.<sup>103</sup>

Lambert also elevated Poulo-Condore's endemic corruption to new levels as he openly diverted prisoners' food resources to develop his personal livestock enterprise. He directly sold swallow's nests, as well, which were painstakingly collected by penal labor to be handed off to passing ship captains while Lambert pocketed the unreported profit. Lambert additionally sent substantial of produce intended for prisoners to acquaintances in Saigon while prisoners suffered from malnutrition. He also kept a special secret account for gambling.<sup>104</sup>

Another irregularity of Lambert's reign – and one that in part explains the extent and audacity of the corruption during this time – was that the administration in Cochinchina had failed to appoint an accountant, leaving Lambert with the responsibility of delegating the task to one of the guards. He chose Patrice Luciani who became Lambert's trusted confidant and

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<sup>102</sup> De Taste, "Inspection Report of Poulo-Condore Penitentiary."

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

accomplice in siphoning prisoners' resources and embezzling government funds for personal gain.<sup>105</sup> Luciani was transferred to Saigon in 1924, however, which allowed him to effectively avoid any scrutiny or consequences for any graft he may have overseen on Poulo-Condore.<sup>106</sup>

The paranoia bred by Lambert's megalomania is evident in the envelope enclosing a detailed letter he sent refuting the accusations levied against him addressed to the Governor General; he stamped its seams with his personal seal no fewer than eleven times as if he anticipated tampering.<sup>107</sup> Ironically, as Director he himself had taken up the task of screening and censoring all mail leaving the island, regularly retaliating against guards, surveillants, and civilians for any information even slightly critical of him.<sup>108</sup>

His eyes pried into every piece of mail that left the island, and prison personnel and civilians alike knew it. He frequently made violent threats, too, to uphold even the island's most minute regulations. For instance, he threatened to personally shoot the telegraph operator's dog (after it had been attacked by a guard's dog) if it was not fully leashed and muzzled when outside, and he similarly threatened to personally shoot a guard's chickens if they wandered into the street.<sup>109</sup> While such threats seem arbitrary at first glance, they cumulatively served to reinforce a rigid hierarchy of power with Lambert at the top, enforcing his will on the prison and civilian population with a small but loyal cadre of European guards. Understood this way, Lambert was quick to threaten the telegraph operator to remind the only person who could send messages off the island without the Director's knowledge that he was being watched and that his place was

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> "Individual Bulletin of Notes, Patrice Luciani," 1924, GGI 52825, ANOM.

<sup>107</sup> Lambert to GGIC, letter, 11 July 1927, GGI 52836, ANOM.

<sup>108</sup> De Taste, "Inspection Report of Poulo-Condore Penitentiary."

<sup>109</sup> De Taste, "Inspection Report of Poulo-Condore Penitentiary."

In the first case, the aggressive dog belonged to Agostini, one of the highest ranking guards on the island. In the second case, Lambert threatens Lucien Luciani (not to be confused with Patrice Luciani mentioned earlier) who was also a high ranking guard. Lucien Luciani eventually was given the task of setting up a series of "special labor camps" for political prisoners on Phú Quốc in 1942, a subject to which we will return in a later chapter.

below that of the prison guards. Similarly, Lambert's threat to kill his guard's errant chickens serves as an example of how he used coercion to reaffirm the loyalty of those upon whom his power depended.

Those guards who did voice even the vaguest disagreement with Lambert's methods could expect unrelenting retaliation. Léon Jean Tisé was placed on Poulo-Condore in 1921, another veteran of the First World War who found his way to the colonial penitentiary service. From early on, Tisé likely voiced his concerns to the Director, as Lambert noted on a 1925 service review that he was "mean and lacking intelligence."<sup>110</sup> Consequently, Lambert blocked Tisé's chances at promotions while newcomers quickly surpassed him in rank.

While Lambert had created an efficient and personalized apparatus of power on the island during his time as Director, its efficacy rested on fear, violence, coercion, and personal loyalty, factors which could only be maintained through Lambert's constant physical presence. When Lambert left Poulo-Condore for six months of leave in France on April 27, 1926, he did not realize that he shared his voyage with a courier bearing a stack of letters and documents prepared by Tisé and one of his colleagues, Bouquet, detailing the Director's abuses. Among the addressees were the Governor General and a journalist of the *Reveille Saigonaise* who published the allegations on May 4, well before Lambert's arrival in Marseille.<sup>111</sup> Facing a mounting public scandal, the Governor General immediately dispatched de Tastes to investigate.

De Tastes uncovered all of Lambert's aforementioned abuses and more. In summary, he concluded, "abuses of every nature transformed his nine years of administration of the bagne into a reign of pleasure and arbitrariness," the most egregious which included the application of the same regime reserved for convicts sentenced to hard labor to prisoners of all categories, the

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<sup>110</sup> "Individual Bulletin of Notes, Léon Tisé," GGI 52830, ANOM.

<sup>111</sup> De Taste, "Inspection Report of Poulo-Condore Penitentiary."

invention of non-regulatory punishments, arbitrary treatment of the free population, and falsification of information given to superiors. Yet, the Governor of Cochinchina admitted that any prosecution on embezzlement or corruption charges would likely fail in the courts.<sup>112</sup> It was Lambert's treatment of Vietnamese surveillants and civilians that would seal his fate.

Other than subjecting Vietnamese surveillants to corporal punishment and disciplinary measures normally reserved for prisoners, he physically assaulted Trần Thị Hương, the fishery mechanic's wife, on one occasion when she visited the Director's office. The visit ended with Lambert repeatedly slapping and kicking Hương until she was ejected out the door. It was this action that moved the Criminal Court of Saigon to convict Lambert for assaulting Hương and subjecting another surveillant to lashes of rattan.<sup>113</sup> For his crimes, the Court sentenced Lambert to pay a paltry sum of 100 francs, but the conviction was more than symbolic as it gave the administration grounds for severing Lambert's contract and revoking his pension since he had committed the acts while serving as a government functionary.<sup>114</sup> The 100 franc fine merely allowed the administration to avoid further scandal but by no means achieved justice for Lambert's victims.

Despite the lightness of Lambert's sentence and the clarity of his culpability, he maintained his innocence every step of the way. His argument for innocence, however, did not rest in the facts of his actions, but in his own sense of impunity cultivated over the course of nine years during which he exercised almost unchecked power on Poulo-Condore. If one unintended consequence of prison islands has been prisoners' resistance which has played into public narratives of martyrdom and transformation, then the other is the all-too-common cultivation of wardens' megalomania.

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<sup>112</sup> Governor of Cochinchina to Governor General of Indochina, 8 July 1929, GGI 52836, ANOM.

<sup>113</sup> De Taste, "Inspection Report of Poulo-Condore Penitentiary."

<sup>114</sup> GCC to GGIC, 29 Apr. 1927, GGI 52836, ANOM.

Wardens of prison islands, as mentioned earlier, are uniquely detached and isolated from the complex colonial and metropolitan societies where webs of social obligations and hierarchies temper the actions of even the most powerful. The warden of the Maison Centrale in Saigon, for instance, knows that reporters outside the prison walls are on the lookout for the next scandal, that the governor and his cabinet working only blocks away can send an inspector or launch an investigation at moment's notice, and that when he steps out of the prison he must remove his kepi before sitting among a crowd of social equals at a posh café.

The Director of Poulo-Condore is entirely removed from this society and takes residence in a lavish seaside mansion on an island of dark, humid prison cells, ramshackle huts, barracks, and a handful of modest abodes. Leaving his mansion, he never encounters social equals but only individuals over whom he has been delegated various degrees of power. His only consistent connection to his superiors is a monotonous monthly report which is hardly frequent enough to remind him that he is subordinate to their authority. Under these conditions, individuals predisposed to megalomania can be swiftly devoured by it as they learn how easily they can impose their own will on the closed society of the prison island with few consequences.

On July 11, 1927, Lambert sent the letter secured by eleven wax seals protesting his sentence of 100 francs not so much because he disputed the facts brought before the courts, but because he continued to live in the delusional reality he had created on Poulo-Condore, a reality in which he was always right and held the power to enforce his will upon anyone on the island. In his rambling and self-congratulatory twenty-three-page letter, Lambert credits himself with having single-handedly saved the island from a state of near ruin, convinced that the allegations levied against him were the product of a cabal of bitter, jealous guards and administrators out to

get him.<sup>115</sup> After the Governor of Cochinchina privately gave Lambert the opportunity to resign in lieu of facing charges, the disgraced Director misinterpreted the Governor's sense of political tact as evidence of a broad conspiracy against him, noting that it "demonstrates well, on the part of the Governor, his firm will to pursue any means of getting rid of me."<sup>116</sup>

His paranoia echoes throughout the letter as he repeats himself: "Their bias to be rid of me by any means necessary is evident, [but] I hold a deep conviction that the Saigonese public shares with me."<sup>117</sup> He does not hide the fact that members of the Cochinchinese Government forbade his return to Poulo-Condore "in fear of... the violence of... [his] character," but instead weaves this sanction into the illusory grand conspiracy against him by speculating that the administration had been plotting with Besnard, the new director, to assassinate Lambert if he should ever return to the island.<sup>118</sup>

The Governor General never replied to this letter written from the bottom of this paranoid and deluded man's narcissistic heart. While at first glance the letter appears full of lies and deflections, it becomes apparent that Lambert likely actually believed what he wrote. He *believed* that there was a broad conspiracy to get rid of him that involved everyone from prison guards up to the Governor's cabinet. He could neither see nor accept his own faults, but could only attribute his demise to the fact that many people were jealous that he had used unconventional means and defied the norms of his position to make Poulo-Condore great again. Lambert had become intoxicated with the incredible power afforded him by the almost absolute control he had come to exercise over Poulo-Condore and its people, and his intoxication seemed to lead him to the delusion that if his will could reshape an island's landscape and cause

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<sup>115</sup> Lambert to GGIC, letter, 11 July 1927.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

prisoners' bodies to wither or thrive, then he could also use this power to force his will upon truth itself.

While some scholars have suggested that Poulo-Condore may be considered a “feudal” prison, Lambert’s story suggests that Poulo-Condore was, in fact, a penitentiary modern beyond its times.<sup>119</sup> The island not only represents the first realization of a prison industrial complex, but the brand of authoritarianism exercised by a number of the island’s Directors was more akin to that of modern dictators than feudal lords. Lambert’s style of authoritarianism was much more similar to that of interwar dictators and strongmen who found their way to power across European and Latin America and cemented their power coetaneously with the Director, than any feudal lords of yore because Lambert tried to use his power to establish an alternative version of “truth” and enforce it upon reality. Lambert’s empire, however, could never extend beyond his island and the fact that his position depended upon the Governor’s approval.

While no other Director reached Lambert’s level of corruption and brutality, others followed similar trajectories, as the complaint levied against Lambert’s homogenization of labor regimes across all categories of convicts had been regularly raised in inspections since the late 1800s, especially under the directorships of Sellier and Cudanet.<sup>120</sup> Bouvier, who served two stints as Director in the 1930s, received the brunt of criticism from highly literate prisoners who began entering the penitentiary in large numbers in the wake of intensified rebellion and repression accompanying the rise of organized nationalist and communist parties. Moreover, by this time the connections between political prisoners and the press made it impossible for Lambert-style abuses of power to occur without public knowledge, especially in the milieu of growing calls in the metropole for the closure of the bagnes of Guiana.

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<sup>119</sup> Angleviel, *Poulo Condore*, 21.

<sup>120</sup> De Taste, “Inspection Report of Poulo-Condore Penitentiary.” GCC to Dir. of the Islands and Penitentiary of Poulo-Condore, 22 Mar. 1937, HCI 694, ANOM.

Some of the island's Directors were also known for their reformist stances, notably O'Connell (1914-1916) who tried to reorganize the island so that it conformed to regulations regarding the differential treatment of categories of prisoners, and Cremazy (1934-1935) who attempted to improve prison conditions. Despite his moderation, Cremazy was widely disliked by members of the administration who took a hardline towards political dissenters, guards whom he frequently reprimanded for their mistreatment of prisoners, and the prisoners themselves who continued to suffer despite the modest improvements to their quality of life. The guards frequently told superiors that "it's not the guards who rule, but the bagnards,"<sup>121</sup> and Bary, a member of the Governor's cabinet, denied his request to expand the infirmary with a sarcasm rarely found in the often reserved and indirect speech favored by French bureaucrats: "this is not a villa, it is a bagné."<sup>122</sup> Thus, while Lambert was widely condemned, the social formations above (i.e. the Cochinchinese bureaucracy) and below (the prison guards) the director favored more authoritarian personalities such as Lambert and Bouvier who would give the guards the greatest leeway in treating prisoners while reassuring hardline administrators who felt rebellions were best crushed with an iron fist.

After the Second World War, the role of Director was fulfilled once again by military personnel, especially officers of the Foreign Legion whose brutality had quickly gained wide repute. Among the directors, Brule's attitude especially echoed Lambert's as he published a short book lauding his own accomplishments on the island, the proudest of which was the installation of miniature tourist steam train from Bavaria.<sup>123</sup> Yet, his short tenure as director as well as his place in the military chain of command combined with the increasing ease of rapid

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<sup>121</sup> Streidter to Governor of Cochinchina, "Investigation of claims in *La Lutte* on 28 May 1935," 1 July 1935, TDNK 53447, TTTLQGII.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Brule, *TFEO*.

communication prevented him and other Foreign Legion Directors from realizing the same excesses as Lambert.

As control of Poulo-Condore was transferred to Vietnamese rule, the practice of appointing military Directors carried over, as well. Nguyễn Văn Vế (1965-1971; 1973-1974) was easily the most infamous Director during the RVN period and is said to have welcomed each new batch of prisoners to the island with the words, “Welcome to Con Son. This is not Con Son Island Prison, this is Con Son Island hell.” While Directors during the RVN period answered directly to functionaries of the national police and US advisors present on the island, the force of Vế’s personality clearly continued to play a role in the way he exercised power. Yet, the RVN seemed to not only tolerate but encourage Directors to cultivate their megalomaniacal tendencies. As the Director present when the “Tiger Cages” were exposed in 1971, Vế was recalled and replaced for public relations purposes only to be reinstated once the US withdrew in 1973.

### **The Militarization of the Prison Island (1945-1954)**

In November 1948, an article appeared in the Czechoslovakian newspaper *Obvoya Lidu* titled “Has France already Forgotten about the Concentration Camps?” The journal concerned top French officials in Indochina because it detailed the plight of political prisoners on Poulo-Condore, claiming (with some exaggeration) that 2000 Việt Minh combatants lived in squalor in a camp on the island, and that 500 were subjected to extreme brutality and summary executions.<sup>124</sup> In truth, there were 1300 prisoners on the island and since at least June 1947 it became the site where death penalties for all convicts from Saigon were served – all political

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<sup>124</sup> Minister of Foreign Affairs Press Service, “Regarding the Poulo-Condore Internment Camp in Indochina,” circular, Nov. 10, 1948, HCI 254, ANOM.

prisoners. This practice had been established as a snap decision thought necessary to decrowding the Maison Centrale of Saigon and maintaining order.<sup>125</sup>

That same year, in November 1947, French officials had begun exploring the creation of a camp on Poulo-Condore for “rebel prisoners” captured during combat as an alternative to the prevailing method in which units “liquidated” prisoners in the field upon capture.<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, the report concluded that Poulo-Condore could immediately receive 2,000 “rebel prisoners,” the same figure cited by the Czechoslovakian newspaper.<sup>127</sup> And while those condemned to death were not “summarily executed,” they were likely condemned to death through a hasty trial before the Military Tribunal of Saigon for the vague but frequently pronounced sentence of “endangering the security of the state and armed forces.”

Top French officials were concerned by the article not because it was accurate, but because some of its most damning allegations were based on a kernel of truth. The article was also wrong to suggest that the French had forgotten the concentration camps, for one month earlier, in October 1948, Gen. Blaizot, commander of French army forces in the Far East, expressed the need for a “*concentration camp* for civilians representing a danger to the public.”<sup>128</sup> While the concept of a “concentration camp” began as a purely descriptive term, coined during the Boer War (1895), describing the concentration of a civilian population within a camp,<sup>129</sup> immediately upon the end of the Second World War the term became inextricably tied to the brutal system of labor and extermination camps that Nazi Germany used to perpetrate genocide, and there is no doubt that Blaizot knew this.

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<sup>125</sup> Commissioner of the French Republic in Cochinchina to High Commissioner of Indochina, June 17, 1947, HCI 694, ANOM.

<sup>126</sup> “Sheet on the creation on Poulo-Condore of a camp for rebel prisoners captured by our troops,” Dec 1947, HCI 694, ANOM. To be clear, “liquidation” here refers to summary executions and massacres of POWs.

<sup>127</sup> Minister of Foreign Affairs Press Service, “Regarding the Poulo-Condore Intenment Camp in Indochina.”

<sup>128</sup> Gen. Blaizot to High Commissioner for France in Indochina, Oct. 22, 1948, HCI 254, ANOM. Emphasis added.

<sup>129</sup> The term was first used during the Boer War to describe guarded camps in which Boer civilians were confined.

Blaizot's suggestion to create a camp on Poulo-Condore was not without precedent, as in September 1943 the Governor General had invoked a 21 January 1940 decree that allowed for the creation of "special labor camps" (which was little more than a euphemism for concentration camp) for individuals deemed dangerous to public security.<sup>130</sup> Amid the warfare that gripped Indochina following Japan's surrender, the organization of the *bagne*, and even its very existence, became a matter of great contention as the military played an increasingly prominent role in Indochina's penal system.

All of Indochina became embroiled in armed conflict as French forces and their allies attempted to reoccupy the colony in August 1945, and during this time they reestablished control on Poulo-Condore, as well. While many prisoners used the power vacuum created by the Japanese surrender to return to the mainland, a few stayed behind on the island led by a former convict named Sơn Vương who proclaimed himself ruler of the "Free Agricultural and Fraternal State of Poulo-Condore." Vương attempted to negotiate with the French but with little success as marines landed on the island in April, 1945, immediately reinstating the penitentiary.<sup>131</sup> The coming years would see the militarization of the island's already brutal and arbitrary carceral regime. While the prewar *bagne* for common law prisoners persisted, it became increasingly marginalized by the military's concentration camp for "rebel prisoners." Indeed, by 1954, the concentration camp mentality undergirded the functioning of all prison units on the island.

While the suppression of the indigénat in 1946 seemed at first a positive development in reforming the Indochinese judiciary, it quickly became clear that the arbitrary, almost summary

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<sup>130</sup> Gen. Blaizot to High Commissioner for France in Indochina, Oct. 22, 1948. The "special labor formation" on Poulo-Condore never gained the same number of internees as those established earlier at Phú Quốc and Núi Ba Ra. The January 21, 1940 decree was a counterpart to President Daladier's decision to ban the French Communist Party following the outbreak of war. The "special labor formations" in Indochina will be discussed in greater detail in a later chapter.

<sup>131</sup> Brule, *TFEO*.

rulings associated with the *indigénat* would be replaced not by a system resembling France's civil judiciary system, but by military tribunals that tried individuals who could not be considered prisoners-of-war based solely on the technicality that no declared state of war existed in Indochina. The categories of "political" and "semi-political" prisoner that filled the *bagnes* of Poulo-Condore from the 1920s onwards had come to be replaced by the innocuous categories of "administrative internee" and "civilian detainee." Sometimes by slip of tongue, French officials referred to them as "political prisoners," but this term carried little legal meaning after 1945.

Outside of Indochina, the *bagnes* of Guiana were in a state of crisis as they had already come under the scrutiny of reformers in the decades leading up to the war. Guiana's "tiger cages," almost identical to those on Poulo-Condore, had been closed in 1945, and all facilities of the expansive Guianese *bagne* had been phased out with the closure of Devil's Island in 1953. During this period, competing voices debated the future of Poulo-Condore, with officials representing Cochinchina and the new government of South Vietnam favoring the retention of the *bagne* under Cochinchinese control (to be later transferred to the RVN), the military and Indochinese government favoring the transfer of control to the Indochinese Union, and metropolitan administrators calling for the closure of the *bagne* altogether.<sup>132</sup> The prolonged debate over Poulo-Condore's future demonstrates the extent to which the island had existed in a state of legal ambiguity since 1862, a problem which had never been tackled head-on until the late 1940s.

The suggestion to place Poulo-Condore under control of the Indochinese Union was first broached in September 1946 when the High Commissioner for Indochina noted that all territories of Indochina contributed to the upkeep costs of prisoners on Poulo-Condore – a situation which

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<sup>132</sup> Brossard to HCI, note, May 1948, HCI 254, ANOM.  
Judicial Service to HCI, note, May 21, 1948, HCI 254, ANOM.

had prevailed since Poulo-Condore became an alternative to the overseas penal colonies in the late 1800s.<sup>133</sup> This arrangement was entirely unacceptable to Cedille, the Governor of Cochinchina, and Nguyễn Văn Thinh, the president of the provisional Republic of South Vietnam, as both claimed that the majority of prisoners on the island were from Cochinchina which also paid the most for the penitentiary's upkeep.<sup>134</sup> The military-run concentration camps were built on the island in 1947, and by 1948 their presence created grounds for the argument that Poulo-Condore remained metropolitan territory. The complex and multi-faceted jurisdictional debates that swirled around Poulo-Condore after it had already been part of the empire for nearly 100 years shows the extent to which the island existed within a legal state of exception.<sup>135</sup>

The case for metropolitan sovereignty rested on the island's physical separation from the mainland, the absence of an indigenous population, and the potential strategic value of a French military base.<sup>136</sup> The High Commissioner for Indochina pursued this option aggressively to the point of drafting two *arrêtés* in 1948 that would have put Poulo-Condore as well as bounties for the capture of prisoners under the general budget of the Indochinese Union, reclassified the *bagne* as a *Maison Centrale*, and required the government of Cochinchina and the provisional government of South Vietnam to pay the maintenance costs of all prisoners from those territories on the island. The most difficult provision, however, would have been securing the retrocession of Poulo-Condore to the Indochinese Union, something to which neither Thinh nor Cedille were willing to consent under any circumstances.<sup>137</sup> In light of their refusals, the High Commissioner

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<sup>133</sup> Commissioner of Political Affairs to High Commissioner of Indochina, 3 Sept 1946, HCI 694, ANOM.

<sup>134</sup> President of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Cochinchina to the High Commissioner for Indochina, 14 Oct. 1946, HCI 694, ANOM.

<sup>135</sup> Agamben, *State of Exception*.

<sup>136</sup> Gandouin to High Commissioner of Indochina, "Mission to Poulo-Condore from 10 to 13 January 1948," 17 Jan 1948, HCI 694, ANOM.

<sup>137</sup> Brossard, "Note for High Commissioner for Indochina," May 1948, HCI 254, ANOM.

for Indochina briefly considered using military force to affect the French annexation of Poulo-Condore, but backed away upon judging that such an action would have played powerfully into the hands of Việt Minh propagandists.<sup>138</sup> The Cochinchinese *bagne* and the military concentration camp were there to stay. So were the corruption and brutality.

### **Prisoners' Reintegration into Colonial Society**

“Recently liberated, honored to let you know the deplorable situation of political prisoners on Poulo Condore, above all the forced labor STOP Waiting the realization of an amnesty integral to the political regime, we ask you to strictly apply the decisions of the Minister [of Colonies] concerning the amelioration, a regime of seven hours of recreation a day, receiving legal newspapers, a special library, locations for the contagious, etc...”<sup>139</sup>

When the Governor General confronted the Lt. Governor of Cochinchina and Director of Poulo-Condore about the telegram received from recently-released inmates, Ho Van Tan, Hoang Trac, Nguyen Ru, Tan Lao Ta, and Ha The Hanh, they were dumbfounded. They were even more shocked to see that the Governor General took the former prisoners seriously and demanded an investigation of their allegations.<sup>140</sup>

The Lt. Governor and Director responded with a laundry list of positive changes made, concluding with a negative assessment of Tan Lao, Ha The Hanh, and Hoang Trac’s conduct in prison which they argued precluded them from making an objective and impartial assessment of the actual conditions on the island. Furthermore, the Lt. Governor noted “the individuals Nguyen Van Ru and Ro Van Tan, they have not appeared in the registers of Poulo-Condore Penitentiary.”<sup>141</sup> In response to the Governor General’s request, the Director simply altered two prisoners’ names to discredit the telegram and avoid sending more information (likely favorable

<sup>138</sup> Note for High Commissioner for Indochina, 27 May 1948, HCI 254, ANOM.

<sup>139</sup> Ho Van Tan, Hoang Trac, Nguyen Ru, Tan Lao Ta, and Ha The Hanh to GGIC, telegram, 8 Mar. 1938, HCI 694, ANOM.

<sup>140</sup> GGIC to GCC, 16 Mar. 1938, HCI 694, ANOM.

<sup>141</sup> GCC to GGIC, “Regarding the Political Convicts Ho Van Tan and Consorts,” 10 June 1938, HCI 694, ANOM.

conduct reports for the two prisoners in question). The five political prisoners had played their hand well, coaxing the Director to defend himself through a particularly juvenile act of name altering that could have been more expected of a schoolyard bully sitting in the principal's office.

Never before had political prisoners released from Poulo-Condore sent a telegram to the Governor General, and when they did the inversion of power it represented was entirely unfathomable to the Director and the Lieutenant Governor. If part of the way power was exercised through Poulo-Condore was the production of a spectacle of disappearance, the colonial state cemented its mechanism of power by controlling the spectacle of *reappearance*. To lose control over this spectacle diluted the power of the initial act of disappearance.

Much like a magic act, the power to make someone disappear at will is nothing without the power to affect their reappearance. Once convicts established communications with the mainland and their voices appeared in the press, they suddenly wrested from the state its power to determine the circumstances of the convicts' reappearance in society. While this development did not change or diminish the violence and injustices suffered by convicts on Poulo-Condore, the act of deporting prisoners to the island ceased to be a spectacle of sovereign power. It was primarily political prisoners' access to print capital and new communications technologies that allowed them to reassert their very social existence.

Recently-released French-educated political prisoners especially worked to carve out this new sphere as editors of *La Lutte (Struggle)* such as Tran Van Thach and Nguyen An Ninh in Saigon and editors of *Le Travail (Labor)* in Hanoi – all former political prisoners from Poulo-Condore – made prisoners' voices heard on a weekly bases, relating events unfolding on the island on an almost weekly basis.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> *La Lutte* in particular ran almost weekly articles on the conditions of prisoners on Poulo-Condore.

The newspaper and telegraph (as illustrated at the start of this section) were powerful tools in the hands of former prisoners competent in their use that, for the first time, put the power to share information and air grievances that could spark official investigations in *their* hands. An article detailing the brutal repression of a strike on Poulo-Condore detailed in *La Lutte* on May 28, 1935, for instance was taken seriously enough that the Government of Cochinchina initiated an investigation.<sup>143</sup>

As Gilmore observes of the geography of prisons, their walls act as boundaries, but also interfaces.<sup>144</sup> The development of indigenous print capital in Indochina created a new spatial realm that encompassed both the mainland and Poulo-Condore, reintegrating previously excluded individuals into Indochinese society. Once a social space was opened that could connect Poulo-Condore's prisoners to mainland society, they suddenly regained their existence as social beings. The prison island was no longer a site of social isolation and extinction, but part of a broader society mediated through print capital.

### **Côn Sơn during the Republic of Vietnam**

When Poulo-Condore penitentiary was founded in 1862, the director remarked that it had two kinds of prisoners: rebel criminals, and common criminals. It would have appeared that little had changed by 1971 when the RVN claimed that Côn Sơn Reeducation Center had two kinds of prisoners: civilian criminals, and Communist criminals. Despite all the varied and complex legal categories that had come to define convicts on Poulo-Condore throughout French rule, the administration never behaved as if there were more than two or three categories.

By the late 1800s, the provisions of Poulo-Condore's civil code dictated rules for everything from disciplinary punishments for prisoners to the proper maintenance of yards for

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<sup>143</sup> *La Lutte*, no. 28, 28 May 1935.

Streidter to GCC, "Investigation of Claims in *La Lutte* of 28 May 1935," 1 July 1935, TĐNK 23366, TTLLTQGII.

<sup>144</sup> Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*.

private residences. While prison regulations were expectedly harsh, codes and ordinances for free residents were oddly specific considering the comparatively chaotic streetscapes of Saigon. While colonial governments were in themselves quite authoritarian, this authoritarianism came full circle on Poulo-Condore where prisoners and guards alike could be punished at the director's discretion, and private residents were required to clean their yards every day, keep collars on all animals, and wear bathing suits within 100 meters of the shore.

The only immediately apparent institutional constraints on the director's power were more-or-less a set of rules stipulating acceptable forms of punishment for prisoners and guards. Otherwise, the director and accountant were required to send monthly reports to the minister of the interior, representing a possible vector of censure should higher-ups disapprove. Yet, these reports only held the director accountable for retrospective actions – and only those he was willing to support. In such circumstances, outside investigators were only sent to the island to look into sensational events such as revolts or assassinations.

Even when investigations were opened into incidents on Poulo-Condore, the investigator, always a French member of the colonial administration, had little motivation to sympathize with the prisoners. Investigators would occasionally throw a guard under the bus, but the director was untouchable. For instance, when Schreidter was sent to investigate an incident recounted in *La Lutte*, he quickly gained a sense that the current director, Cremazy, lacked the guards' respect for taking a permissive approach towards prisoner discipline, while they were nostalgic for the previous director, Bouvier, who was harsh on prisoners. Therefore, the only immediate checks on a director's personalized power were prisoners' and guards' willingness to cooperate. In one instance, a prisoner murdered the director Andouard who was particularly brutal, known most

notoriously for ordering the construction of a pier whose harsh work conditions led to the deaths of 914 prisoners.

Unique among territories in Indochina, Poulo-Condore's entire economy fell under the purview of the director. Any resources or products yielded from the islands or their waters were automatically considered property of the Indochinese government at the director's disposal who had the authority to set prices and tariffs. Only two exceptions existed: fish produced by the penitentiary could only be sold at a rate fixed by the Governor General, and the residents of a Cambodian village had rights over their own harvest "until their population was extinct."

The director of the islands and penitentiary of Poulo-Condore may have very well exercised more unrestrained power than any member of the Indochinese colonial government – perhaps even the French Empire. The appointment was occupied by every sort of official from military officers to civil servants, and more than once served as a stepping stone to the office of Governor General. While some directors attempted to carry themselves as magnanimous reformers and others as tough-on-crime strongmen, their power was always highly personalized and ultimately only the Governor General had the right to grant or revoke it.

What existed on Poulo-Condore was something of miniature autarchic dictatorship caught within a legally ambiguous space between the French metropole and empire. As republics, emperors, and dictators ruled over France, the director's powers remained unchanged. Even after independence, the director of Poulo-Condore, now Côn Sơn, remained a powerful figure, this time appointed directly by the president. This time, however, the director was not only accountable to the president of the Republic of Vietnam, but to U.S. advisors, as well.

The most infamous RVN director of Côn Sơn prison, Nguyễn Văn Vේ, would greet each new batch of prisoners: "Welcome to Côn Sơn. This is not Côn Sơn Island Prison, this is Côn

Son Island Hell,” which his guards followed up not with handshakes, but a collective beatdown. One year after Vê’s first as director (he was transferred after the “tiger cages” incident, but would be reinstated later in 1973), an RVN booklet on the prison system ironically noted, “our prisons... trained in psychology.” In reality, the director’s power remained highly personalized in character under the RVN, as well.

### **Race and the Colonial Legal System**

By the time France had brought much of Indochina under its control by 1887, a complex and plural legal system had developed. Officially, there were two judicial systems: one that tried matters involving Europeans and French citizens whose organization and legal process mirrored the metropolitan judiciary, and the *indigénat* which tried cases involving native residents of the given protectorate. In practice, however, there were four separate identifiable legal pathways: the French system in which cases involving Europeans and French citizens were tried throughout Indochina, a mixed tribunal which was part of the *indigénat* but tried high-level criminal and political cases with the local French resident as the sitting judge, an indigenous tribunal which tried lower-level criminal cases, and the administrative channel by which the Governor General of Indochina, the Governor of Cochinchina, or the Resident Superior of any of the protectorates could order individuals’ detention by decree.

It is important to note that among the five territories of Indochina, Cochinchina was the only French-administered colony, while the others were protectorates, with the exception of southern Laos. Therefore, there was no *indigénat* in Cochinchina, though local Vietnamese leaders at the village level did have jurisdiction over low-level civil cases. Also, the French courts in Indochina may have assured due process for Europeans, but in practice the odds were stacked against Asians who found themselves in the courtroom full of white judges and jurors

who had internalized a sense of colonial racial supremacy. The disparity in treatment can be aptly illustrated through two examples, that of Seraphin-Etienne Lambert, Director of the Islands and Penitentiary of Poulo-Condore, accused of assault and battery of Tran Thi Huong, a Vietnamese woman, and that of a group of Malay seamen from Singapore accused of assault and battery of a French man working for the Saigon Opera named Grivel.

On March 23, 1889, nine Singaporean Malays encountered M. Grives, who they found in a drunken state, and publicly assaulted him with canes and batons, leaving him unable to work for twenty days.<sup>145</sup> The nine accused faced trial before the Saigon Court of First Instance. After a quick and decisive trial, four were sentenced to three years in prison, four were sentenced to two years in prison and sixteen franc fines followed by a five year ban from the French Empire, and one was acquitted. Additionally, the convicted were ordered to collectively pay 2000 francs in damages to M. Grivel and 30.5 francs in legal expenses.<sup>146</sup> All were sent to Poulo-Condore to serve their sentences where one among them, Hamad, died within the first year.<sup>147</sup>

In January 1926, Tran Thi Huong, the wife of the penitentiary's boat mechanic, visited Lambert's office who was at the time director of the islands and penitentiary of Poulo-Condore. Whatever business Huong had, Lambert would not hear her but instead assaulted her with violent slaps to her face while violently kicking and shoving her out the door, resulting in injuries that left her unable to work for at least 20 days. In 1927, the Saigon Court of Appeals swiftly convicted Lambert and sentenced him to pay 100 francs in damages – equivalent to a quarter of the value of the five gold buttons he liked to wear on his coat.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Eight Malay Fishers from Singapore to GGIC, letter, March 16, 1889, GGI 22833, ANOM.

<sup>146</sup> Grivel and the Public Minister vs. Hamad (aka Serin), Transcription of sentencing, Apr. 12, 1889, GGI 22833, ANOM.

<sup>147</sup> Eight Malay Fishers from Singapore to GGIC

<sup>148</sup> Lambert to GGIC. While Lambert protested his sentence vehemently, he had once punished a prisoner who he had falsely accused of stealing his gold buttons to 90 days in solitary confinement on rice and water with double

Considering that these two cases were heard before two different courts in Saigon nearly fifty years apart, the low value that the judges held for Asian lives is strikingly similar.<sup>149</sup> The judge threw the book at the eight convicted Malay seamen, imprisoning them on Poulo-Condore where one died and imposing heavy fines that not only broke the convicts financially, but their impoverished parents, wives, and children in Singapore who barely subsisted off of fishing and had depended upon the wages of their sons and husbands at sea. While Lambert was enraged by the 100 franc fine levied against him, the light sentence was little more than symbolic. The message could not be clearer: the pain and anguish of a white French citizen assaulted by Asians in Saigon was worth 2094.5 francs and 20 cumulative years of prison, while that of middle class Vietnamese woman assaulted by a white French citizen was worth only 100 francs. It is apparent, then that while the French court system in Indochina guaranteed a right to due process, an institutional racism saturated the system at all levels, rendering the prospect of fair trials in cases involving white and Asian parties all but impossible.

In the protectorates, some of the most high-profile cases were tried by mixed tribunals. These courts were especially notorious for their corruption and incompetence. Through the end of the nineteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth, it was mixed tribunals that were responsible for trials carried out in the wake of rebellion and piracy which were rampant in turn-of-the-century Annam and Tonkin.

By the 1910s, a number of influential metropolitan legal reformers had become increasingly critical of the *indigénat*. Not only did the system erode the rights of the accused on paper, but in practice it had become such a mill of corruption that it severely undermined the

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chains. The prisoner was only released after some weeks on this regime once Lambert realized he had misplaced his buttons.

<sup>149</sup> While the Court of Appeals and Court of First Instance were separate legal bodies, judges were frequently transferred from one to the other and called to sit for cases at either one, therefore a similar institutional culture must be expected.

legitimacy of French power in Annam and Tonkin. As armed nationalist and communist uprisings began to rock Annam and Tonkin in the 1920s and 30s, characterized by incidents such as the Yen Bay and Phu To mutinies as well as the Nghe Tinh Soviets, the Indochina government introduced provisions for special criminal commissions.

While historians often look to bustling cities or expanding frontiers for examples of complex intercultural interactions and exchanges, Poulo-Condore itself had a complex ethnic and cultural landscape. It has already been established that those who inhabited the island during the early modern era came from an array of cultural backgrounds, and this trend did not change when the French took possession and established the prison.

While most prisoners were Vietnamese, there were at any given time a considerable number of Chinese, followed by Khmer, Lao, and Hmong. At one point, eleven Kanaks even dwelled there, sentenced for their role in a rebellion in New Caledonia.<sup>150</sup> This represents an exceptional circumstance, however, as the island was generally reserved for Asian persons convicted or detained in Indochina.

Over all, the convict population was heavily Vietnamese, and so Vietnamese culture pervaded the prisoner population. It is worth noting, however, that on Poulo-Condore the French brought together Vietnamese from Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina which they separated as a classic example of divide and rule. On Poulo-Condore, however, these distinctions became less relevant, perhaps giving rise to circumstances in which Vietnamese could more easily imagine a singular ethno-national identity.

While the prison population represented a demographic microcosm of Indochina, the prison personnel hailed from all corners of the French Empire and beyond. While the director was with few exceptions ethnically French, among the guards were Corsicans, Indians from

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<sup>150</sup> Angleviel, *Poulo-Condore*.

Pondicherry, Indo-Europeans, Filipinos, Germans, and Vietnamese, while at different moments in the island's history military detachments from Senegal, Morocco, and Japan were stationed on the island. In fact, most of the ethnically French guards were born and raised not in the metropole, but in India.

Of all ethnic groups, Corsicans were most prominent and at any given time comprised around half of all European guards. This is not entirely surprising considering that Corsica, consistently the most impoverished corner of metropolitan France outside of Algeria, tended to be the source of those most willing to performed the grunt work of colonial expansion. From colonial military units and police in Indochina to dockworkers and prison guards, Corsicans could be found disproportionately among their ranks. In fact, Corsicans comprised a disproportionate amount of Europeans in Indochina in general and were not confined to working class jobs, but were quite numerous among the colonial elite. One Corsican, Thierry, even rose to the post of Governor General.

Corsicans, both those indigent and privileged, faced few prospects for social advancement in Corsica and met barriers posed by stereotypes and stigma in continental France. Enlisting in the military or taking a job within the colonial government was an easy pathway out of poverty for many Corsican men. Even for highly trained professionals such as lawyers, Indochina presented extremely lucrative opportunities, as a disproportionate number of lawyers in Indochina were also Corsican. Corsicans who could gain employment in Indochina had the opportunity to return to Corsica after a colonial career much wealthier than they had left. It is also worth noting that Saigonese lifestyle presented a more comfortable alternative to Corsica, as by 1920 the former was lined with tramways and electric streetlights while the latter remained

largely unelectrified. An electrical power plant was even built on Poulo Condore in 1926, electrifying the island's principle town and penitentiary before the Corsican countryside.<sup>151</sup>

In the colonial context, French were less likely to perceive ethnic differences among themselves. Rather, their shared privileged position in an Asian society caused them to see their common French national identity in opposition to Asianness. Corsican cultural organizations, known as "Amicales Corses," thrived in Saigon, Hanoi, and Phnom Penh. Members would meet periodically to share Corsican meals, make charitable donations, hold balls, and pool resources for mutual aid and interests. These organizations no doubt made it easier for Corsicans to find their way in Indochinese society, connecting them swiftly to jobs and resources. Lawyers, hoteliers, and prison guards were heavily represented in the organization.

While Corsicans enjoyed higher status in Indochina than they did in metropolitan France, stigma and stereotype did not always melt away in the tropical air. On Poulo-Condore, Corsican guards often faced bias and differential treatment from ethnically French superiors. On one occasion, when their complaint went unanswered by the director of Poulo-Condore, Napoleoni, the chief guard appealed to the Amicale Corse of Saigon on the account of "bullying they were the object of on the account of the commander-at-arms." Immediately, some of the organization's more prominent lawyers paid visits to the offending officer's superiors in Saigon, including the commanding general of French force in Cochinchina and the Lieutenant Governor of Cochinchina, and just as quickly, the director and commander-at-arms on Poulo-Condore apologized to all the Corsican guards on the island.<sup>152</sup> The power of the Corsican community in Indochina is demonstrable in the fact that they could challenge the authority of the director of Poulo-Condore whose power was nearly untouchable.

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<sup>151</sup> *Saigon-Cyros: Bulletin Mensuel de l'amicale corse de la Cochinchine et du Cambodge*, no. 30 (Mar. 1927): 12.

<sup>152</sup> *Saigon-Cyros*, no. 40, (Oct./Nov. 1928): 1.

Metropolitan reporters who witnessed the inner workings of Indochinese prisons took note of the harsh and brutal treatment that guards meted out to prisoners, and with few exceptions, these metropolitan reporters ascribed it to their Corsican nature. Andrée Viollis, in a 1934 expose of the Maison Centrale in Saigon took special note of how the “Corsican guard” took pleasure in brutality,<sup>153</sup> while Jean-Claude Demariaux’s expose of Poulo-Condore based on a 1936 visit to the island likewise takes care to mention the Corsican guards, suggesting their violent nature.<sup>154</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In 1954, the French brass in Indochina, all well aware that they had lost the war, mulled over one last piece of territory: Poulo-Condore. While the Geneva Accords sealed France’s fate on the Indochinese mainland, Poulo Condore had existed for centuries within a legal aporia that had never been questioned, let alone settled. It was only when faced with the imminent necessity of withdrawal that the question was posed: was Poulo-Condore part of French Indochina, or metropolitan France?

Successive colonial administrations never seriously took on the question of Poulo-Condore’s territorial status likely because it was convenient not to do so, for the legally gray space that it occupied is precisely what allowed it to exist as one of the world’s most brutal and infamous prison islands. Once individuals enter such a legally ambiguous space, their own legal status is circumscribed by that ambiguity, no longer protected by the same laws and rights to which they would otherwise have access in a way that threatens the very notion of their social existence. Thus, even when France decided to transfer Poulo-Condore to a new Vietnamese state,

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<sup>153</sup> Andrée Viollis, *Indochine S.O.S.*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., (Paris: Gallimard, 1935).

<sup>154</sup> Demariaux, *Les secrets des îles de Poulo-Condore*.

the island, now called Côn Sơn, continued to exist as a prison island within a similar state of legal grayness.

## Chapter 2: A Case Study of Võ Thị Sáu: Poulo-Condore in Vietnamese Historical Memory



*Fig. 2.1.* The above police photographs of Võ Thị Sáu, standardized anthropometric images of her face and right profile, are the only extant images of the heroine. All subsequent artistic depictions of her have been based on these two images. Images public domain.

At midnight I walked amidst the embers, orange fireflies in a sea of fragrant darkness, each one the tip of a stick of incense, each one marking a grave. The faint, reverberating fanfare of patriotic marches drifted northwards towards me on the breeze, muffling the conversation of pilgrims who formed a line along the main path. All were visiting Hàng Dương Cemetery to pay their respects to the prisoners who had died on this island of paradise and infamy, Côn Đảo. The pilgrims hailed from all parts of Vietnam,<sup>1</sup> and most had travelled all the way to this small island

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<sup>1</sup> While most inhabitants on Côn Đảo tend to associate the pilgrims with the North, increasing numbers have recently begun coming from the South, too.

just to place offerings at the grave of Võ Thị Sáu, a young girl executed there in 1952 at the age of nineteen for her acts of resistance to colonial rule.

Many pilgrims first stop at the cemetery's central monument – a towering obelisk surrounded by stone reliefs depicting the history of the prison – to offer incense to the spirits of all the prisoners. Some visit specific graves of historically notable prisoners or family members, but all stop at the grave of Võ Thị Sáu. Her tomb has been gradually monumentalized, transformed into a raised structure covered in lustrous black tiles with a special inscription plate and statuary portrait. Never does her tomb lack visitors. A constant stream of pilgrims comes bearing offerings from incense and joss paper to bouquets, combs, and meals. The crowd swells at midnight, however, the most auspicious moment to leave offerings, when the spirits are closer to the earth and most receptive of the offerings and requests that drift skyward on the smoke of the incense and joss paper.<sup>2</sup> The pilgrims come seeking success in their businesses, careers, and studies. They believe that because Võ Thị Sáu is a powerful spirit, she will ensure their success.

Võ Thị Sáu is simultaneously a powerful spirit that draws pilgrims to Côn Đảo as well as a national hero who has been immortalized in works of literature, art, and film. Her name can be found attached to street signs and schools throughout the country, as well. Yet, the many narratives about Võ Thị Sáu's life often contradict one another. Through a close examination of literary and historical works on Võ Thị Sáu, this investigation sifts through the contradictions to find what truth, if any, lies behind the abundant stories and legends. This chapter will, moreover, consider how Võ Thị Sáu's image has been produced through a complex interplay between folk religious practices and state propaganda that explains how her story has become so popular that she has been deified over the course of half a century.

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<sup>2</sup> The tomb receives an especially high volume of visitors on the first and fifteenth day of each lunar month.

Her status as a folk hero, national hero, and deified spirit was made possible through her death on Côn Đảo, forever tying her memory to the island. At the center of this chapter is an analysis of literary and historical narratives of the heroine, with special focus on identifying points of contradiction and resolving them through cross-referencing archival records. By examining narratives of Võ Thị Sáu's life, it becomes possible to develop a better understanding of the interplay between nationalism and religious practice in Southeast Asia while also unveiling for the first time key archival findings on a figure who has lived in legend. A close inquiry into these narratives not only allows us to distinguish fact from legend, but also provides insights into the processes through which national hero myths are constructed in Vietnam and Southeast Asia as a whole.

Narratives of Võ Thị Sáu are primarily found in literary and artistic works, though she has appeared in a number of Vietnamese historical works as well as some pieces of U.S. and British scholarship. The first historical, research-based work to appear exclusively on the subject of Võ Thị Sáu was Nguyễn Đình Thống's *Võ Thị Sáu: Con người và huyền thoại* (Võ Thị Sáu: The Person and the Legend), published in 1993.<sup>3</sup> Otherwise she has appeared peripherally in Vietnamese-language historical works on Côn Đảo Prison.<sup>4</sup> In English language scholarship, Võ Thị Sáu first appeared in a 1974 with Ngo Vinh Long's translation of excerpts from the 1971 edition of Vũ Lê's novel *Võ Thị Sáu* printed in *Vietnamese Women and Society and Revolution*, v.

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<sup>3</sup> Nguyễn Đình Thống, *Võ Thị Sáu: Con người và huyền thoại [Võ Thị Sáu: The Person and the Legend]*, (Ho Chi Minh City, NXB Tổng hợp Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2013).

<sup>4</sup>For instance, see: Hồ Sĩ Hành, Nguyễn Linh, and Nguyễn Đình Thống, *Nhà tù Côn Đảo, 1945-1954 [Côn Đảo Prison, 1945-1954]*, (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Sự thật, 1991), and Hồ Sĩ Hành, Nguyễn Linh, and Nguyễn Đình Thống, *Lịch sử Nhà tù Côn Đảo, 1862-1975 [The History of Côn Đảo Prison, 1862-1975]*, (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Tổng hợp Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2013).

1. She has also been mentioned peripherally in other works concerned with women in Vietnam or the relationship between women and revolutionary violence.<sup>5</sup>

More recently, Rivka Syd Eisner has published a book based on a study of a performing group for former women political prisoners in Ho Chi Minh City titled *Performing Remembering: Women's Memory of War in Vietnam*. This study, unlike other works of English-language scholarship, does not examine Võ Thị Sáu as a historical figure, but as an important figure through which women veterans express and contextualize their memories.<sup>6</sup> Vũ Lê's 1955 novel, simply titled *Võ Thị Sáu*,<sup>7</sup> will be a key focus of this chapter's investigation. Although Vũ's novel is not a scholarly work, it was the first published on the heroine and claims to offer a factual account based on hard evidence and interviews and has thus served as the model for all subsequent narratives of her life.

While this chapter looks at the various narratives of Võ Thị Sáu's life and how they entangle and interact, it does so in order to excavate the true historical facts behind her life, and thus intervenes in existing narratives to produce a new version of the story. In 2017, a Youtube video appeared titled "The Truth about Võ Thị Sáu," sparking a controversy in Vietnam. In this video, a group of artists discuss how their own works measure up to the facts of her life.<sup>8</sup> This chapter, then, also directly interjects into this debate with new archival data to set parts of the record straight. While these findings definitively enhance our understanding of Võ Thị Sáu the

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<sup>5</sup> Ngo Vinh Long, tr., "Vo Thi Sau," in *Vietnamese Women and Society and Revolution*, v. 1, ed. Paul Grace, (Cambridge, MA: Vietnam Resource Center, 1974);

Arlene Eisen-Bergman. *Women of Viet Nam*, rev. ed., (San Francisco: People's Press, 1975)

Arlene Eisen, *Women and Revolution in Viet Nam*, (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1984)

Whaley Paige Eager, *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists: Women and Political Violence*, (Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Rivka Syd Eisner, *Performing Remembering: Women's Memory of War in Vietnam*, (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, (Hanoi: Thành Niên, 1955)

<sup>8</sup> Nguyễn Quang A, "Sự thật về nhân vật nữ anh hùng Võ Thị Sáu," Youtube video, uploaded 30 July 2017, <https://youtu.be/V5vF2YDi5WE>.

girl, she will continue to coexist with Võ Thị Sáu the guerrilla hero of nationalism, and Võ Thị Sáu the goddess of folk religion. Sifting fact from legend moreover humanizes Võ Thị Sáu, creating the possibility for new and enduring narratives whose relevance may prove significant and timely in new and contemporary social contexts.

This chapter looks closely at Võ Thị Sáu's life and the narratives that have sprung from it in order to examine how prison islands like Poulo-Condore function in the context of Vietnamese literature and historical memory, as well. As this chapter progresses, it will become evident that the narrative frameworks that work together to create a powerful image of Võ Thị Sáu represent a powerful imaginaire associated with prison island that draws from Vietnamese literature and legend which has a strong tradition of female warrior figures and vengeful feminine spirits as well as western narratives, especially referencing figures such as Joan of Arc and motifs from French cinema. While the prison islands literary imaginaire which Võ Thị Sáu inhabits exists specifically within a Vietnamese context, part of this imaginaire also circulates globally.

### **An outline of Võ Thị Sáu's Life**

Although many narratives of her life diverge in details, the following is the basic story of Võ Thị Sáu's life that most accounts agree upon. She was born in the early 1930s in Đất Đỏ, a village in Bà Rịa province, a rural region due south of Saigon. She was born into a peasant family with five siblings including an older brother who left his home to join the Việt Minh.



*Fig. 2.2.* A statue depicting Võ Thị Sáu at the temple dedicated to her in her home town of Đất Đỏ. Photograph by author, April 6, 2018.

Inspired by her brother in her early teens, Võ Thị Sáu joined the People's Security Force unit where she acted as an informant.<sup>9</sup> While still a minor, she accomplished daring feats of arms, most notably a grenade attack on a Bastille Day ceremony in Đất Đỏ that killed a French officer and wounded many soldiers.<sup>10</sup> But she was apprehended in 1950 during a failed grenade attack on a pro-French canton chief named Tồng. She was tortured in Bà Rịa prison before being transferred to Chí Hoà prison in Saigon where older female prisoners mentored her in revolutionary ways and taught her to read and write as she awaited trial before a military tribunal. After the court sentenced her to death, she was transferred to Côn Đảo in 1952 for execution. Following Võ Thị Sáu's death, French personnel and collaborationist prisoners periodically attempted to desecrate her tombstone, each meeting an untimely demise within months of their acts of vandalism, solidifying Võ Thị Sáu's reputation as a powerful and vengeful spirit that spawned a cult of worship on the island. All narratives also emphasize Võ Thị Sáu's love for the lucuma flower, the blossom of the eggfruit tree.

Võ Thị Sáu's life has been chronicled, dramatized in literature and film, and memorialized countless times. Each iteration unveils different details, often contradictory ones, producing a broad level of variation that is unsurprising considering how most artists and historians have had to build their stories from two mugshots and infinite hearsay. Images of the two police photographs can be seen above, depicting a girl who looked young for her age.<sup>11</sup>

Võ Thị Sáu's life story was first serialized in the Hanoi daily *Tiền Phong*, and the author, Vũ Lê, published it the following year as a novel, simply titled *Võ Thị Sáu* which acted as the

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<sup>9</sup> Literally *Công an xung/sung phong*, in English, a People's Security Force.

<sup>10</sup> Earlier accounts generally put the figure at twenty, while later ones put it at twelve to thirteen. Also, some accounts place the attack in 1948, while others place it in 1949.

<sup>11</sup> Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan, ed., *Côn Đảo: Ký sự và tư liệu [Côn Đảo: Chronicles and Data]*, (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Trẻ, 1996).

Mel Halbech, dir., *The Long Haired Warriors*, (Under Arm Productions, 1998).

Nguyễn Văn Huê was interviewed by Lê Quang Vĩnh in Hoàng 1996 and by Mel Halbach in his 1998 documentary *The Long Haired Warriors*.

basis for all future narratives of the heroine.<sup>12</sup> The novel's short length can in part be accounted for by the dearth of information that must have been available on Võ Thị Sáu in Hanoi in 1954. Vũ Lê's novel has been republished countless times,<sup>13</sup> most recently in 2017. The text of the novel has grown from 36 pages in 1955 to 234 pages in 1971 and 298 pages in 2004.<sup>14</sup> A closer examination of the modifications to the text reveal how the author changed the narrative to incorporate new information while reframing it to maintain its relevance in the face of changing socio-political conditions. As Vũ Lê adapted and readapted his text, other narratives competed and intersected with his in the form of songs, playscripts, children's books, and film.

### **Peculiarities in the Narrative**

The incongruities and contradictions within the narratives of Võ Thị Sáu's life ask more questions than they provide answers. First of all, was Võ Thị Sáu born in 1933, or 1935? Generally, earlier accounts state Võ Thị Sáu's year of birth as 1935, conveniently making her age of death seventeen, a claim with dual propagandistic value that simultaneously elevates French brutality and Võ Thị Sáu's bravery. All documentary and physical evidence, however, supports 1933 as her year of birth, including the ledger of deaths for Côn Đảo prison and her

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<sup>12</sup> Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 3rd ed., (Hanoi: Thanh Niên, 1957).

Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 6th ed., (Hanoi: Thanh Niên, 1971).

The author's afterword in this edition is signed March 13, 1955, suggesting that this was the date when he completed the first manuscript. While I have been unable to locate any first edition copies, considering the 1957 printing is only thirty-six pages long and the author's afterword is dated 1955, we can reasonably assume that the text of the third printing is nearly identical to that of the first. I have been unable to locate any copies of *Tiền Phong* from 1954, but the novel's serialization in this daily is mentioned in the afterword of the 1971 edition of *Võ Thị Sáu*.

<sup>13</sup> Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1955; Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, (Hanoi: Thanh Niên: 1956); Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1957; Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, (Hanoi: Thanh Niên 1964); Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1971; Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 3rd ed., (Hanoi: Thanh Niên 2004); Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, (Hanoi: NXB Hồng Đức, 2017).

There were at least seven printings: the original in 1955, 1956, and 1957, a revised edition in 1964, another revised edition in 1971, which was similar to 2004, and 2017 reprints. Thanh Niên published all versions until 2004 and Hồng Đức published the 2017 edition as part of a series of biographies of Vietnamese heroes and martyrs. The 2004 edition claims it is the third printing, though it is uncertain whether or not this includes the 1964 and 1971 editions. The 1957 edition is also a third printing, referring to the 1955 and 1956 printings as the first two. It is quite likely that other printings exist.

It is important to note that Thanh Niên was formed as one of the original state publishing houses in 1954 tasked with producing books for adolescent and young adult readers, but it was dissolved in recent years.

<sup>14</sup> Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1957; Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1971; Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 2004; Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 2017.

tombstone.<sup>15</sup> Despite contrary evidence and the wide public acceptance of 1933 as her year of birth, all printings of Vũ Lê's novel, including the most recent one, maintain Võ Thị Sáu's age at death as seventeen.<sup>16</sup>

Considering Vũ Lê's literary credentials as well as his almost certain close connections to Communist Party officials, he does not need to go to great lengths to defend or justify his claims. One book in particular, a 1979 children's picture book, directly addresses the discrepancy between French records and the story using a footnote: "According to International and French Law, one must be eighteen years old to be sentenced to death. Therefore, the French recorded 1933 as Sister Sáu's year of birth in criminal files so that she would be 'old enough.'"<sup>17</sup> Another picture book published the same year explains instead in a footnote that she died just before turning eighteen and that "in the file, the French noted Sister Sáu's year of birth as 1933, raising her age to nineteen because it is 'wrong in 'French and International Law' to execute a youth who was still a minor (eighteen years old)."<sup>18</sup> The awkward placement of footnotes in children's books suggests that the information was added after the submission of the manuscripts for publication.

The similarity in text – both referencing specifically "International and French Law" and using uncannily similar phrasing in stating how the French altered the documents – suggests that

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<sup>15</sup> The ledger, titled "*Pénetencier de Poulo-Condore: Controle des Décés*," (Poulo-Condore Penitentiary Register of Deaths) is on display at Côn Đảo Museum.

<sup>16</sup> Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 2017, 7, 34, 256.

The text reads "In 1947, Sáu was 14 years old" on p. 7 and that "Sáu became a martyr before turning seventeen" on p. 34, and her year of birth is clearly stated as 1935 on p. 256. Ironically, in the most recent edition, while maintaining 1935 as Võ Thị Sáu's year of birth in the text, one of the subjects listed in the cataloguing data opposite the title page reads "Võ Thị Sáu, 1933-1952, Revolutionary Hero, Vietnam." Own translations.

<sup>17</sup> Bùi Thuận and Ngọc Thuận, ill. Kim Thuận, *Truyện tranh Võ Thị Sáu [The Story of Võ Thị Sáu]*, (Đồng Nai: Ty Văn Hoá và Thông tin Đồng Nai XB, 1979), 37.

The perceived need to address this discrepancy in a children's book shows that by 1979 some Vietnamese must have been skeptical of the official narrative. Own translation.

<sup>18</sup> Lê Quang Vịnh, *Chị Sáu ở Côn Đảo [Sister Sáu on Côn Đảo]*, (Hanoi: NXB Kim Đồng, 1979).

This is a picture book for more advanced readers. Own translation.

the information originated from a similar source. Presumably, the publishers received letters from Vietnamese authorities with instructions on how to address Võ Thị Sáu's age in the light of new information that had surfaced from records and eyewitness testimony that had become available in the north since the end of the war in 1975 confirming that she was born in 1933. The publishers likely paraphrased the letter in a footnote to expedite printing as well as appease government censors who were concerned about the portrayal of Võ Thị Sáu. Children's picture books published at much later dates have continued to propagate the falsity that Võ Thị Sáu was born in 1935, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.<sup>19</sup>

Whether one adheres to the story Võ Thị Sáu was born in 1933 or 1935, in both cases it is certain that Võ Thị Sáu was arrested for a crime she committed as a minor. If Võ Thị Sáu had been born in 1935, her trial and execution would also have occurred when she was a minor, but a 1933 birth year would mean that she was an adult at her execution. Depending on the date of her trial and birth, she could have been seventeen or eighteen years old when she faced the tribunal.

While the two children's books from 1979 point out that the execution of an individual younger than eighteen violates French and International law, they could not have made the same statement in 1952 when Võ Thị Sáu was executed. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the first international legal agreement stating that individuals may not be executed for crimes committed before turning eighteen, was not drafted until 1966 and was not ratified until 1976.<sup>20</sup> Minors in France had been sentenced to death *by guillotine* up until 1975 –

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<sup>19</sup> Nguyễn Thị Hương, *Võ Thị Sáu: Nữ Anh hùng Đất Đỏ [Võ Thị Sáu: The Heroine of Đất Đỏ]*, (Da Nang: NXB Giáo Dục Việt Nam, 2009)

Tiêu Giàu, *Võ Thị Sáu: Người Anh hùng Đất Đỏ [Võ Thị Sáu: The Hero of Đất Đỏ]*, (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Văn hoá – Văn nghệ Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2011).

only six years before the death penalty's final abolition there.<sup>21</sup> In 1952 no provisions in French law would have prevented her execution.

While most museums in contemporary Vietnam agree on 1933 as Võ Thị Sáu's year of birth, one notable exception continues to adhere to 1935:<sup>22</sup> the National Women's Museum in Hanoi, the most famous and well-funded of all museums in Vietnam with an exhibit on the heroine. Yet, from the National Women's Museum, one can walk ten minutes down the street to find an exhibit in the People's Security Forces Museum that lists her year of birth as 1933.

The People's Security Forces Museum also contains an artifact – the blindfold that Võ Thị Sáu wore as she faced the firing squad. But the blindfold is at odds with literary narratives of her life that universally claim that she refused to wear one. The contradictions compound once we consider that the Heritage Exhibition Room for Woman Martyr Võ Thị Sáu on Côn Đảo also displays the blindfold that she supposedly wore before the firing squad. The coexistence of the same artifact at two different sites at the same time indicates the relic is a willful fabrication. What rationale would prison authorities have to save a blindfold used during a routine execution, how would prisoners have gotten ahold of it, and how could anyone have smuggled it to the north in 1959?<sup>23</sup> Although the cloths appear to be made from the same kind of material, differing

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<sup>21</sup> Jean-Claude Vimont. "Un ado condamné à mort en 1975. L'affaire Bruno T. au milieu des années soixante-dix [A Teen Condemned to Death in 1975: The Bruno T. Affair in the Atmosphere of the Sixties]," *Criminocorpus, Justice des mineurs*, (February 20, 2014), URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/criminocorpus/2673>.

Capital punishment for minors was rare in postwar France and Bruno T., sentenced to death by guillotine for a murder committed at seventeen, received a commutation to life in isolation, and in 1984 to twenty years of reclusion.

<sup>22</sup> Museums and historical sites in Vietnam that have exhibits on Võ Thị Sáu include The National Women's Museum (Hanoi), National Fine Arts Museum (Hanoi), People's Security Forces Museum (Hanoi), the Southern Women's Museum (Ho Chi Minh City), the Temple of Võ Thị Sáu (Đất Đỏ, Bà Rịa province), the Võ Thị Sáu Heritage House (Đất Đỏ), the Côn Đảo Museum (Côn Sơn, Côn Đảo) and the Heritage Exhibition Room for Woman Martyr Võ Thị Sáu (the former police post in Côn Sơn, Côn Đảo). Besides these places, there are also monuments and shrines to Võ Thị Sáu at Vân Sơn Pagoda (Buddhist), the Côn Đảo Temple (Daoist), Hàng Dương Cemetery, and various statues in public spaces throughout Côn Đảo.

<sup>23</sup> The exhibition room in Côn Đảo explains that the blindfold was acquired by the Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution (Hanoi) in December, 1959 and later sent to Côn Đảo as a gift. While some staff at the Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution were likely aware of the artifact's falsity, it is uncertain whether the organizers of the exhibition on Côn Đảo would have known.

levels of discoloration from light exposure, fraying patterns, and crease patterns evident in the photographs in Figure 3 indicate that the objects are indeed different, ruling out the possibility that one artifact was transferred from one museum to the other. The blindfolds thus demonstrate the museums' willingness to propagate false narratives to elevate Võ Thị Sáu's stature as a heroine. They also demonstrate, however, the level to which the production of state propaganda is decentralized in Vietnam, allowing for contradictory miscoordinations.

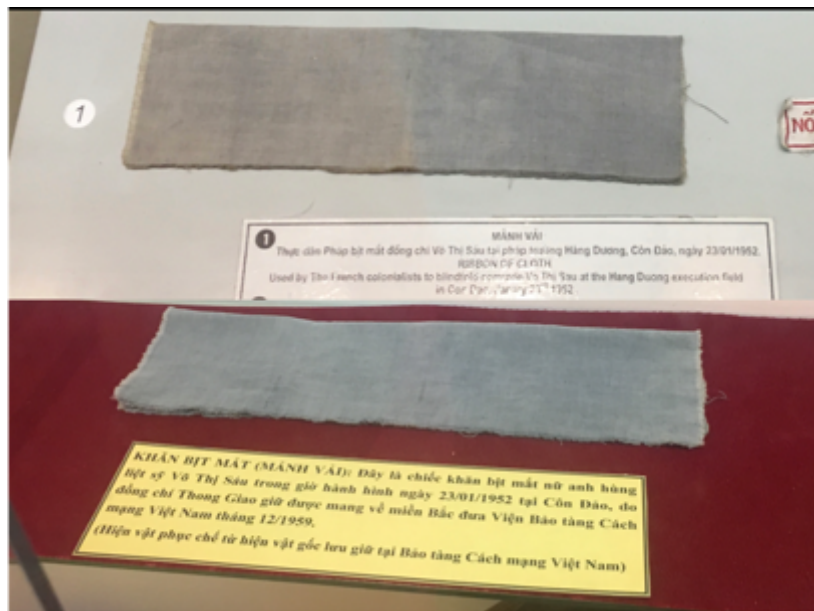


Fig. 2.3 Upper image: The blindfold in The People's Security Forces Museum, Hanoi. Image courtesy of author, June 20, 2018. Lower image: The blindfold in the Heritage Exhibition Room of Woman Martyr Võ Thị Sáu in the former Côn Sơn Police Post. The description explains that "Comrade Thông Giao sent the blindfold to the North where it was passed to the Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution in December 1959." Photograph taken by author, February 28, 2018.

Contrary to the numerous claims that Võ Thị Sáu did not wear a blindfold when she faced the firing squad, Nguyễn Văn Huê, a crew member of the ship that regularly moved passengers between Vũng Tàu and Côn Đảo who witnessed Võ Thị Sáu's passage to the island, has repeatedly claimed that Võ Thị Sáu made a request to die without a blindfold that was rejected by French authorities.<sup>24</sup> The similarity in the information presented for both interviews, his political distance and physical proximity to Võ Thị Sáu, as well as the varied conditions of both interviews (one by a writer subject to oversight by the state, the other by an American

<sup>24</sup> Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan, ed., *Côn Đảo*; Halbach, dir., *Long Haired Warriors*. Nguyễn Văn Huê was interviewed by Lê Quang Vĩnh for *Côn Đảo: Ký sự và tư liệu* and by Mel Halbach for his documentary *Long Haired Warriors*, presenting the same points in both.

documentarian outside the presence of state authorities) suggest that Nguyễn Văn Huê is a reliable informant, having received the information directly from the priest who was present at the execution.



Fig. 2.4. Relief at Võ Thị Sáu's temple in Đất Đỏ depicting her grenade attack on Đất Đỏ market. From left to right, the People's Security Force unit provides covering fire, a grenade explodes killing and wounding a number of soldiers, and French soldiers arrest Võ Thị Sáu. The relief memorializes an event that never occurred. Photographs taken by author, color image of plaster relief with bronze-colored paint rendered in monochrome for clarity. April 6, 2018.

One of the highlights of all narratives of Võ Thị Sáu's life is a Bastille Day attack in Đất Đỏ in 1948 or 1949,<sup>25</sup> placing her age at fifteen or sixteen when she carried out the attack. This feat, considered the crowning achievement of her guerrilla career, is as significant to the narrative of her life as her execution. All accounts agree that she killed a French officer and as many as twenty additional soldiers.<sup>26</sup> While the account vary slightly regarding dates and casualties, no scholar has ever directly addressed these contradictory pieces of information. Therefore, I scoured the archives for the answer.

<sup>25</sup> Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1955; Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1957; Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1971; Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 2017; Nguyễn Đình Thống, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 2003; Hồ Sĩ Hành, Nguyễn Linh, and Nguyễn Đình Thống, *Lịch sử Nhà tù Côn Đảo*; Nguyễn Đình Thống, *Võ Thị Sáu*.

All of Vũ Lê's writings mention 1948, while Nguyễn Đình Thống's place it in 1949.

<sup>26</sup> Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1955; Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet, *Women in Viet Nam*, (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1978).

Vũ Lê's original account claim twenty-one casualties, but other sources starting in the 1970s give the numbers twelve to thirteen, as in Mai and Le 1978.

According to *Sûreté* records,<sup>27</sup> however, there were no casualties, not even any attacks, in the entire province of Bà Rịa during July 1948 or July 1949.<sup>28</sup> The *Sûreté* kept detailed records of guerrilla attacks in Indochina, issuing detailed monthly reports that a Bastille Day grenade attack would not have eluded. Before 1948, it was routine practice for the *Sûreté* to record even suspected gunshots heard from a distance, and hence it would have been impossible for an attack like this to escape mention. Nor would it have evaded numerous Saigon dailies. The truth is simply that *the Bastille Day attack never occurred*.

Yet, numerous official publications propagate the fabrication. Nguyễn Đình Thống, in his book on Võ Thị Sáu, narrates the attack's preparation and execution in detail but omits the casualty count, instead stating that "the combat took place as expected. Chief Le Thanh Tuong really lost face with the French officers."<sup>29</sup> Apparently, Nguyễn Đình Thống, having conducted interviews with locals, must have gleaned the truth that he vaguely glossed over with patriotic exegesis: the "People of Dat Do were pleased to their heart's fullest content and praised Vietnam for their artful attack."<sup>30</sup> While we have established that the Bastille Day bombing could not have occurred, this matter is not yet behind us and we will return to it in a later section.

### **Miscoordinated Propaganda**

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<sup>27</sup> The *Sûreté* was a brutal secret police force in French Indochina.

<sup>28</sup> "Activités terroristes en Indochine au cours du mois de juillet 1948, [Terrorist Activities in Indochina over the course of the month of July 1948]," August 12, 1948, HCI SPCE 158, ANOM; "Note relative aux activités terroristes en Indochine et à l'action répressive aux services de sûreté, mois de juillet 1949, [Note relating to terrorist activities in Indochina and repressive actions of the *Sûreté*, month of July 1949]," August 3, 1949, HCI SPCE 163, ANOM; "Activités rebelles en Indochine, mois de juillet, [Rebel Activities in Indochina, month of July]," September 12, 1947, HCI SPCE 127, ANOM.

<sup>29</sup> Nguyen Dinh Thong, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 40; Hồ Sĩ Hành, Nguyễn Linh, and Nguyễn Đình Thống, *Lịch sử Nhà tù Côn Đảo*.

This book is an abridged English language translation of *Võ Thị Sáu: Con người và huyền thoại* (Nguyễn Đình Thống, 1993) by the same author. It has the main chapters of the original as well as additional color images, but omits appendices available in more recent Vietnamese editions.

<sup>30</sup> Nguyen Dinh Thong, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 40.

As George Orwell famously wrote in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: “In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it.”<sup>31</sup> That passage explains how totalitarian regimes that have control over the minds of their subjects employ propaganda to implant an alternative reality. From its founding in 1954 onwards, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) began promoting Võ Thị Sáu as a martyr and national hero. But at that time artists and writers had access to the most rudimentary of evidence from which they were tasked with creating a complete and inspirational narrative of her life that could be employed as propaganda.

Vũ Lê’s 1955 novel was the first literary portrayal of Võ Thị Sáu’s life. It was reprinted in 1956 and 1957, suggesting a demand among readers as well as state patronage for the project.<sup>32</sup> Lê’s novel was followed by a sculpture in 1956 and a patriotic ballad, “Gratitude for Võ Thị Sáu,” in 1958.<sup>33</sup> A series of Võ Thị Sáu postage stamps was released the same year and in 1960 playwright Phạm Ngọc Truyền published a script of a play about Võ Thị Sáu that had been performed before the Third Party Congress.<sup>34</sup> All books on the heroine were published by Thanh niên (Youth) Publishing House, an official state publishing outlet that produced primarily propagandistic works for adolescents and young adults. From 1954 to 1960, the artists producing

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<sup>31</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949), 240.

<sup>32</sup> Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1957. 9,000 copies were produced in the 1957 printing.

<sup>33</sup> Diệp Minh Châu, “Võ Thị Sáu,” Sculpture in bronze, Permanent Collection, Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi, 1956.

Nguyễn Đức Toàn, comp., “Biết ơn Chị Võ Thị Sáu, [Gratitude for Sister Võ Thị Sáu],” 1958.

The bronze statue, “Chị Võ Thị Sáu,” sculpted by Diệp Minh Châu in 1956, is part of the permanent collections of the Vietnam National Museum of Fine Arts in Hanoi. At least two reproductions have been made, one of bronze in the Southern Women’s Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, and another of stone in front of the Heritage House for the Woman Martyr Võ Thị Sáu in Côn Đảo.

The song “Gratitude for Võ Thị Sáu” is commonly performed by girls in high school, always singing in white *áo dài* with lucuma flowers.

<sup>34</sup> Phạm Ngọc Truyền, *Người con gái Đất Đỏ: Ca kịch [The Girl of Đất Đỏ: A Drama]*, (Hanoi: NXB Thanh niên, 1960).

A sheet of the stamps mentioned can be found displayed in the National Women’s Museum (Hanoi).

works about Võ Thị Sáu clearly showed a high degree of coordination,<sup>35</sup> indicating a level of state involvement and investment in casting her as a national hero.

In Vũ Lê's afterword to the 1971 edition of *Võ Thị Sáu*, he states that he faces "limitations [in understanding] experience of the war in the South, experience in all the prisons including Côn Đảo, the customs, practices, and regional dialect, etc."<sup>36</sup> Though Vũ Lê's biography is discussed by neither the publisher nor himself, the preface and afterword to the 1971 edition make it clear that he was a Hanoi reporter who only learned about Võ Thị Sáu when he travelled to Sầm Sơn beach in fall 1954, where many Vietnamese who had fled the south landed after the Geneva Accords, numerous former political prisoners among them. It appears that many prominent authors and reporters from Hanoi visited Sầm Sơn to meet the refugees, and to gain inspiration for stories that could be told to the people of the newly-established DRVN.<sup>37</sup>

While it is impressive that Vũ Lê fabricated the good part of a thirty-six page narrative of Võ Thị Sáu's life in the matter of months, the 263-page 1971 edition presents a complex and nuanced portrait of the heroine. In this latter edition, Lê includes a foreword that explains how he learned about Võ Thị Sáu's life through interviews with former political prisoners at Sầm Sơn including Châm,<sup>38</sup> one of Võ Thị Sáu's cellmates, and Mùoi Hưng who was on Côn Đảo at the time of the heroine's death to smuggle her last letter out of prison.<sup>39</sup> In that fall of 1954, it would appear Lê had incredible luck to meet one witness to Võ Thị Sáu's time in Bà Rịa and Chí Hoà

<sup>35</sup> One example of close coordination is the continuation of the lucuma motive from Vũ Lê's novel in the song "Gratitude to Võ Thị Sáu." The entire song pivots on the motif of the lucuma flower.

<sup>36</sup> Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1971, 235. Own translation.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Zinoman, "Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm and Vietnamese 'Reform Communism' in the 1950s: A Revisionist Interpretation," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 13, no. 1, (Winter 2011).

All artists and authors producing works about Võ Thị Sáu in Hanoi followed the traditions of socialist realism, a method pioneered in the USSR that encouraged artists and writers to live with and observe common people in order to create narratives and images that presented them as idealized types. Writers and artists who flocked to Sầm Sơn in Fall 1954 to meet southerners followed this principal in an effort to heroically Southerners.

<sup>38</sup> Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1957; Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1971; Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 2017.

In the 1957 edition, her name is Cầm, it is changed to Châm in 1971, in the 2004 edition her full name is revealed as Phan Thị Châm, and revised to Phạm Thị Châm in the 2017 edition.

<sup>39</sup> Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1971. This particular version of the story is found in the 1971 introduction.

Prisons, and another who could speak of the heroine's time on Côn Đảo and reveal her last message to the world.

Vũ Lê's explanation of how he met his sources seems incredible, that is because he fabricated most of it. First, the existence of Võ Thị Sáu's final letter is beyond suspicious. In her last letter, addressed to Mười Hung, she delivers an eloquent and patriotic appeal:

Early next morning I will have to leave you and all of my comrades. I have no regret except that my span of activities has been too short. Since you love me, please avenge my death. The enemy has managed to lock up you and your other brothers' legs and hands, but they will never be able to lock up your mind. So I truly believe that one day you will be able to take the keys, open the cell doors, and walk out. The mainland will be waiting for you.<sup>40</sup>

Võ Thị Sáu supposedly composed the letter after well over twenty-four likely sleepless hours in transit from Saigon to Côn Đảo with rudimentary literacy after which it survived two transmissions within the walls of the most notorious and brutal prison in Indochina to remain intact and concealed for a year after enduring a damp seaborne escape and a subsequent voyage to the north. Yet the letter is neither displayed in a museum nor referenced in other works. The letter is a probable fabrication, and so are Vũ Lê's informants who are not mentioned in any other source.<sup>41</sup>

Upon close examination, the 1971 edition of *Võ Thị Sáu* also appears likely to have been influenced by the appearance of Nguyễn Thị Định's autobiography in 1966.<sup>42</sup> Võ Thị Sáu's story exhibits other strange parallels with that of Nguyễn Thị Định; they both joined the Việt Minh at sixteen, both were inspired to join the revolution by an older brother who acted as a role

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<sup>40</sup> Grace, ed., *Vietnamese Women in Society and Revolution*, 175.

<sup>41</sup> The story of the German soldier's transmission of the news is recounted in: Multiple Authors 2015, 128; Hồ, Nguyễn, and Nguyễn 2013, 348; Hồ, Nguyễn, and Nguyễn 1991, 18. These three texts are nearly verbatim copies, and Nguyễn Đình Thống likely wrote this section for all three.

<sup>42</sup> Nguyễn Thị Định, *No Other Road to Take: Memoir of Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Định*, tr. Mai V. Elliot, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University SEAP, 1976). According to the introduction to this translated version (p.34), Định's autobiography, *Không còn đường nào khác*, (No Other Road to Take) was first published in 1966. Nguyễn Thị Định was the Deputy Commander of the National Liberation Front, commonly known as the Việt Công.

model, both got into disputes with their parents about joining the revolution, and both fought against a corrupt canton chief known for self-indulgence and horrendous acts of violence against Việt Minh.<sup>43</sup> It is more than plausible, then, that Vũ Lê modeled Võ Thị Sáu's life story on Nguyễn Thị Đình's. Indeed, the afterword of the 1971 edition of *Võ Thị Sáu* even states that the author feared his unfamiliarity with the South. Unable to travel to the South in the prevailing political conditions, the sudden publication of the life story of a prominent southern revolutionary woman would have given writers a model for portraying the life of Võ Thị Sáu.<sup>44</sup> Thus, many of the stories and narratives about Võ Thị Sáu that have been produced by northern writers seems to have drawn more than just inspiration from this work.

Though fabricated in Vũ Lê's novel, the depiction of Võ Thị Sáu, Chàm, and Hung's time in prison offers accurate general descriptions of prison life in South Vietnam in the early 1950's, but the portrait unravels through the overly-ambitious invention of detail. Hence, Vũ Lê's narrative could certainly have been based on general stories and testimonies from former political prisoners on Sầm Sơn beach in fall 1954. While a number of facts in Vũ Lê's narrative fall flat, they present a generally accurate picture of the struggles faced by prisoners in the South during the dusk of French colonial rule in a way that relates to a public, shared imagination of the idealized political prisoner.

In inventing its own history of Võ Thị Sáu, the Vietnamese state has failed to complete the propagandist's equation of  $2 + 2 = 5$ . Divergent narratives and facts produced by artists and writers lacking coordination has created an image rife with contradictions identifiable to the discerning reader. The production of propaganda with lax oversight that became more decentralized after 1975 has allowed the story of Võ Thị Sáu to show merely that  $2 + 2 \neq 4$

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<sup>43</sup> Nguyễn Thị Đình, *No Other Road to Take*; Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1971.

<sup>44</sup> Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 1971.

which lacks the force of the Orwellian propagandists' equation. Instead of projecting a single alternative truth, it suggests the existence of multiple alternative truths. This failure of propaganda has, however, created space for the existence of an alternative narrative of Võ Thị Sáu in the realm of folk religious traditions.

### **Women in Southern Spiritual Practice**

Sheltered in a grotto up in the mountains of Côn Đảo National Park is a shrine to the Virgin Mary. The surrounding jungle is filled only with the soft sounds of scurrying lizards and leaping squirrels, punctuated alone by the occasional shrill calls of monkeys and tropical birds. Were it not for the freshly arranged flowers on the altar and “*Merci*” plaques dating from the 1940s to recent years indicating a steady stream of devotees, one might assume the grotto was abandoned. Although the grotto and the “*Merci*” plaques attempt to reproduce the form and practices of the Our Lady of Lourdes grotto in France, the clustered red stubs of expended incense sticks show that devotees bring localized spiritual practices to the grotto, as well.

On the edges of Côn Sơn town, one can find a number of other temples, each one devoted to a feminine deity. The Vân Sơn pagoda is dedicated to the bodhisattva Quan Âm (Guanyin)<sup>45</sup> and the An Sơn temple is dedicated to Phi Yến, a concubine of Lord Nguyễn Ánh who followed him to the island to perish there.<sup>46</sup> These two temples receive a steady stream of visitors from tour buses full of Vietnamese who come to the island primarily to visit the grave of Võ Thị Sáu.

According to Philip Taylor, pilgrimages to shrines and temples dedicated to goddesses in the South have seen a resurgence since *Đổi mới* as pilgrims flock to these sites in increasing

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<sup>45</sup> Lê Trúc Vy, *Côn Đảo: Xưa và nay [Côn Đảo: Past and Present]*, (Hanoi: NXB Tài Nguyên – Môi trường và Bản đồ Việt Nam, 2017), 118.

Constructed in 1965 primarily for the families of prison guards.

<sup>46</sup> Nguyễn 2017, 97-106.

During the Tây Sơn dynasty (1778-1802) which ousted the Nguyễn rulers through a millenarian rebellion supported by the peasant masses, Nguyễn Anh, crown prince of the Nguyễn dynasty who later took the title Gia Long as emperor, was forced into exile during which time he frequently took refuge on the southern islands of Côn Đảo and Phú Quốc.

numbers from the cities to give offerings intended to ensure success in their business and life endeavors.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, Pham Quynh Phuong has observed that pilgrimages to temples dedicated to national heroes such as Trần Hưng Đạo and the Trưng Sisters have become more popular, as well.<sup>48</sup> In Vietnam, popular religion has long been entwined with the mythologization and deification of heroes who have opposed invaders from the outside, and both Phuong and Taylor locate their objects of study at this crossroads, both noting how pilgrimages have not only gained popularity, but also received some degree of benign state sponsorship since *Đổi mới*. Taylor points out that goddess worship is much more common in the south, the result of Vietnamese assimilating the religious customs of Khmer and Cham peoples as they moved farther into the Mekong Delta through settlement and conquest. The folk tradition of the veneration of feminine deities in the south offers a counter-narrative to the patriotic hagiographies produced in Hanoi.

Phuong observes how in Vietnam two processes unfold simultaneously: the “mythicization of history” and the “historicization of myth.”<sup>49</sup> That is, scholars are constantly trying to empirically ground heroes of national mythology, and others are constantly inventing stories about historical figures that offer new layers of symbolic meaning. Võ Thị Sáu is no exception to these processes as scholars and artists simultaneously attempt to unearth new evidence and facts about her life so long as they do not oppose her image as an immaculate hero, while at the same time they also invent stories and life details to embellish that same image. Common people, too, participate in these processes, as rumors spread about Võ Thị Sáu’s life

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<sup>47</sup> Philip Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage and Popular Religion in Vietnam*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), 216-218.

<sup>48</sup> Pham Quynh Phuong, *Hero and Deity: Tran Hung Dao and the Resurgence of Popular Religion in Vietnam*, (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2009).

Trần Hưng Đạo was the founder of the Trần dynasty in the fourteenth century CE and the Trưng Sisters became generals in the first century CE. Both resisted Chinese invasions.

<sup>49</sup> Phuong, *Tran Hung Dao*, 11.

that often conflict with the state narrative and pilgrims participate in ritual activities that augment her mythologized character.

While one who examined Võ Thị Sáu solely from the perspective of the artistic and scholarly works produced about her might easily conclude that she is a product of state efforts to create a hero, anyone who observes the way individual Vietnamese interact with her suggests that she is understood in an entirely different way in the context of folk religion. While Hanoi-based scholars and artists created nationalistic hagiographies about her from afar, the cult of worship that developed among prisoners and the families of prison personnel on Côn Đảo followed the spiritual patterns of the island, and people would visit her grave with offerings so that she might bring them success in their daily life.

After vandals of Võ Thị Sáu's grave met untimely deaths, a sign of her powerful and vengeful nature, her grave became an increasingly popular site of devotion. Moreover, her spirit has come to be seen as a powerful ally to those who respect and make offerings to her. Côn Đảo, more than any place in Vietnam, has been a place of transplanted people, including prison personnel and inmates, each assimilating their own spiritual traditions with those of the island. Thus, one could simultaneously be a devotee of Võ Thị Sáu, Phi Yến, Quan Âm, or the Virgin Mary. The cult of Võ Thị Sáu developed on Côn Đảo for decades alongside other cults of feminine goddesses, bodhisattvas, and saints in isolation of Hanoi.

By the time tourism to the island became viable on the island in the 1990's, *Đổi mới* had paved the way for a more open state stance towards religion and the state appropriated the cult of worship surrounding Võ Thị Sáu, making the pilgrimage and offerings a larger part of the national hero legend it had created around her. Despite the state-sponsored monumentalization of her grave and the installation of patriotic monuments, statues, and loudspeakers in Hàng Dương

cemetery, pilgrims continue to engage with her spirit in ways similar to those of other goddesses of the south.

### **Rumors and Hearsay**

On a hot March day in 2017, a small group of prominent artists, writers, and poets gathered together in the comfort of a Saigon café. Among them were the poet Nguyễn Duy and the writer Nguyễn Quang Sáng who wrote the screenplay for *Like a Legend*.<sup>50</sup> Then, as Nguyễn Duy, the poet, rose from his seat to speak truth, a smartphone began filming. Nguyễn Duy confronted the band of artists regarding the outright fabrications about Võ Thị Sáu that they had propagated in their works. Anyone who travelled to Đất Đỏ in search of artistic inspiration themselves knew, Nguyễn Duy continued, how the town's elderly would relate how Võ Thị Sáu was “not all there,” “insane,” or “crazy.” It was common knowledge among the people of Đất Đỏ who had known Võ Thị Sáu that she suffered visibly from mental illness.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, when telling the visitors about the event that led to her arrest, locals recounted how she was given a grenade to kill a worker from the French military post running errands at the Tết market. Even though her target never appeared, Võ Thị Sáu threw the grenade anyway, resulting in the deaths of twelve to thirteen Vietnamese civilians. Some of the artists at the table chimed in, affirming the poet's claims, while others sat on the sidelines, displaying visible discomfort or disinterest.<sup>52</sup>

Nguyễn Duy's claim that much of Võ Thị Sáu's story has been fabricated by artists and writers like himself seeking to propagate a hero myth reinforces the evidence found within the

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<sup>50</sup> Phan, ed., *Côn Đảo*..

<sup>51</sup> There is no excellent direct translation for “*bị chập*” in this case, but it suggests a broken record or short-circuit and may be referencing epileptic seizures or a similar neurological disorder, or other kinds of random outbursts.

<sup>52</sup> Nguyễn Quang A, “Sự Thật về Võ Thị Sáu.”

Blogs and news reports suggest that the original video was posted by someone with the screen name “Nguyen Quang A” on March 5, 2017, but has since been removed. Since it was taken down, multiple other youtube accounts have re-uploaded downloaded versions.

contradictory narratives of Võ Thị Sáu's life, as well as the archival evidence that refutes some of the most important parts of it. While Nguyễn Duy's claim that Võ Thị Sáu suffered from mental illness cannot be definitively proven, it fits squarely within the constellation of empirical evidence.

When the video hit social media on March 5, 2017, blog posts began to quickly appear, first among dissident writers abroad.<sup>53</sup> Then, the media remained relatively quiet on the Nguyễn Duy video until the end of July when overseas dissident presses began to exchange broadsides with Vietnamese state-owned presses. While dissident presses doubled down on Nguyễn Duy's claims, state-owned media followed up with newly collected testimony clearly produced as a form of damage control, such as interviews with witnesses to Võ Thị Sáu's life and an official conference in an effort to discredit Nguyễn Duy's so-called slanderous claims that had rippled through social media.<sup>54</sup>

While the newspapers both relied on oral evidence and hearsay to either corroborate or discredit Nguyễn Duy's claim that Võ Thị Sáu threw a grenade into a market that killed twelve to thirteen civilians, none are able to provide the documentary evidence that could make their

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<sup>53</sup> Trần Vọng Ngữ, "Sự thật Chị Võ Thị Sáu là như thế, [The Truth about Võ Thị Sáu is like This," *Văn nghệ*, no. 442, (March 30 2017): 14.

<sup>54</sup> For some of the articles in dissident papers, see:

"Nhà thơ Nguyễn Duy: Chuyện Võ Thị Sáu toàn bịt đặt., [Poet Nguyễn Duy: Setting the Story of Võ Thị Sáu Straight]," *Người Việt*, Los Angeles, (July 20, 2017), <https://www.nguoi-viet.com/tin-chinh/nha-tho-nguyen-duy-chuyen-vo-thi-sau-toan-bia-dat/>.

"Nhà thơ Nguyễn Duy: Chuyện Võ Thị Sáu toàn bịt đặt., [Poet Nguyễn Duy: Setting the Story of Võ Thị Sáu Straight]," *Đất Việt*, (July 21, 2017), <https://www.datviet.com/nha-tho-nguyen-duy-chuyen-vo-thi-sau-toan-bia-dat/>. For some of the articles in Vietnamese state-owned papers, see:

Đào Bích, "Sự thật về những giây phút cuối đời của nữ anh hùng liệt sĩ Võ Thị Sáu, [The Truth about the Final Moments of Heroic Female Martyr Võ Thị Sáu's Life]," *Báo điện tử VOV*, Hanoi, (July 27, 2017), <https://vov.vn/van-hoa-giai-tri/su-that-ve-nhung-giay-phut-cuoi-doi-cua-nu-anh-hung-liet-si-vo-thi-sau-652367.vov>. Nguyễn Hằng, "Hé lộ những giây phút cuối đời của nữ anh hùng huyền thoại Võ Thị Sáu, [Revealing the last Moments of Legendary Heroine Võ Thị Sáu's Life]," *Dân Trí*, July 27, 2017. <https://dantri.com.vn/van-hoa/he-lo-nhung-giay-phut-cuoi-doi-cua-nu-anh-hung-huyen-thoai-vo-thi-sau-20170727072646845.htm>.

Trung Sơn, "Bịa đặt về liệt nữ Võ Thị Sáu là sự tráo trở, vô ơn, [Rumors about Female Martyr Võ Thị Sáu are Fraudulent, Ungrateful]," *Công an Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh*, July 28, 2017, [http://congan.com.vn/tin-chinh/chinh-tri-thoi-su/bia-dat-ve-liet-nu-vo-thi-sau-la-su-trao-tro-vo-on\\_42808.html](http://congan.com.vn/tin-chinh/chinh-tri-thoi-su/bia-dat-ve-liet-nu-vo-thi-sau-la-su-trao-tro-vo-on_42808.html).

case bulletproof. Recall the earlier discussion of how the Bastille Day bombing never occurred. A broader search of *Sûreté* records from 1948 to 1950 did reveal just one incident that matches the characteristics of the attack credited to Võ Thị Sáu. In the weeks leading up to Tết in February 1950, a *Sûreté* report on a grenade attack in a market in the province of Bà Rịa states “...in Baria a grenade [attack] had 25 [victims].”<sup>55</sup> A province-by-province table further shows that there was only one attack in the whole province of Bà Rịa in February 1950 that produced twenty-five casualties, leaving five civilians dead and twenty civilians wounded. There were *no military casualties*. While this does not match Nguyễn Duy’s figure of twelve to thirteen, it confirms that Võ Thị Sáu harmed only civilians. Moreover, it is possible that only five victims died immediately at the scene and that more later succumbed to their injuries, as only immediate deaths would have appeared in the incident report sent to the *Sûreté*. Details aside, the *Sûreté* records offer solid evidence corroborating Nguyễn Duy’s claim that Võ Thị Sáu threw a grenade in Đất Đỏ market that killed and injured civilians.

None of the historical works on Côn Đảo give a casualty count for Võ Thị Sáu’s Bastille Day attack, but Nguyễn Đình Thống makes an interesting remark in his 1993 book: “to ensure that no civilians were harmed in the grenade attack, members of her unit would ‘shout: ‘Vietminh attack’ and guide the people to run away.”<sup>56</sup> The author must have included this detail because he knew the truth about Võ Thị Sáu’s attack on a Tết market, so he presented a mirror image of the truth he found hidden in archives to which few others have access.

### **Reframing Võ Thị Sáu’s Life Story**

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<sup>55</sup> Marcel Bazin, Chief of the French Security in South Vietnam to the Chief of the French Security Service in Indochina, “*Activités terroristes en cochinchine*,” (Terrorist Activities in Cochinchina). March 3, 1950, HCI SPCE 190.

<sup>56</sup> Thong, *Vo Thi Sau*, 40.

Some readers may be wondering, by exposing so many errors and deliberate historical falsifications present in the story of Võ Thị Sáu's life, have I killed a heroine, so to speak? I've hardly done that, nor do I intend to. Rather, this chapter has removed a blindfold printed with untruths that has been fabricated to misuse a young girl's tragedy to aggrandize and promote the interests of a state. In this way, Võ Thị Sáu has experienced injustice at the hands of France who tortured her and put her to death for an act she committed as a minor as well as the DRVN who has fabricated much of her story to produce a legend that serves the state's interests, effacing Võ Thị Sáu's true personality and character and the complex personal struggles and vulnerabilities it entails to replace it with an idealized revolutionary heroine cast from a recognizable bronze mold.

While the truth is disturbing that Võ Thị Sáu threw grenades into a Tết market that immediately killed five civilians and wounded twenty, the full range of facts that emerge serve to humanize her by elucidating her complexity and vulnerability in contrast to the image of the ideal guerrilla heroine the Vietnamese state makes her out to be. So now it is time to tell the story of Võ Thị Sáu the girl.<sup>57</sup>

Võ Thị Sáu was born in 1933 as Nguyễn Thị Sáu in Đất Đỏ to a peasant family, and from a young age she suffered from uncontrollable seizures and outbursts that earned her demeaning nicknames such as "Broken Sáu" and "Crazy Sáu." Unable to control or explain the expression of her affliction in a social milieu that misunderstood and stigmatized mental and neurological disorders, she lived an alienated childhood in constant want of approval from her family, peers, and neighbors. During her formative early teen years, she found a sense of community and purpose in the Việt Minh. Her new comrades no longer saw her as an impediment but an asset, a

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<sup>57</sup> This narrative uses new evidence to reject the existence of the Bastille Day attack and describe her grenade attack at the Đất Đỏ market in February 1950. It also assumes that Nguyễn Duy's description of Võ Thị Sáu's mental and/or neurological disorder is true. Thus, this version of the narrative should not be understood as an absolute representation of the truth, but a closer approximation of it based on newly verified evidence.

source of power, especially in intelligence and counter-intelligence operations. Her successes in exacting the cooperation of enemy soldiers brought her the praise and validation she had lacked and yearned for throughout her life.<sup>58</sup>

In February 1950, after many successes working in intelligence and counter-intelligence operations, her unit entrusted her with a grenade to perform her first armed attack – to kill a French collaborator at Đất Đỏ marketplace. Just weeks before Tết, the market was especially crowded. The French collaborator never showed up, so Võ Thị Sáu faced a decision: should she throw the grenade?

Having tasted praise and acceptance, she did not want to return to being “Crazy Sáu,” so she pulled the pin and let the grenade part from her hand. Seconds later, a loud bang mixed with the sound of crashing debris, followed by screams and panicked footsteps. Her flight was impeded by the chaos as the shoppers at the Tết market ran every direction at once, and French troops stationed at Đất Đỏ Post quickly cordoned off the area to make arrests. Amid the chaos, Võ Thị Sáu found herself tackled to the ground, her arms bound at the elbows as soldiers dragged her off.

She was taken to a series of destinations unknown to her, but soon she wound up at the Bà Rịa *Sûreté* Post for interrogation. Only during her interrogation did she learn that she had killed five civilians and wounded twenty; the case against her was strong since there had been many witnesses, and the *Sûreté* interrogators pressed her to sign prewritten confessions that,

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<sup>58</sup> Archives note a young girl named “Thị Sáu” who was tasked with taking part in interrogations of abducted Vietnamese soldiers serving in the French military in the coastal areas near Vũng Tàu. Considering that this figure’s, age, area of operation, month of arrest, and given name are a match for the Võ Thị Sáu of legend, it is highly likely that the figure described participating in Việt Minh intelligence operations is indeed the Heroine. The reports describe her as a member of a team of interrogators who would threaten abductees and their families with decapitation to secure information. It is possible that her likely mental illness contributed to her success as an interrogator by rendering threats that would have normally seemed moot coming from a teenage girl of small stature quite credible. “Cấp Saint Jacques, Sept. 1952-Sept. 1954,” 14 HCI 37.

barely literate, she could not read. Each time she refused, they would apply a new method of torture more intense than the last: water-boarding, electrical current, etc.<sup>59</sup>

She neither confessed her guilt nor divulged information on her comrades or their operations. In April 1951, the Director of the Cabinet of the High Commissioner of the French Republic in South Vietnam remarked on the difficulty of interrogating Việt Minh suspects in Bà Rịa, that “...they have been remarkably indoctrinated because they do not submit themselves to fear, but to the contrary to a sort of pride. One can feel in them the conviction that they are struggling for a cause that they feel is just.”<sup>60</sup> Surely, Võ Thị Sáu was among the interrogatees that gave him that impression. Had she given up any information, the judges surely would have shown greater leniency in their sentencing.<sup>61</sup>

Around April 1950, Võ Thị Sáu was transferred to Chí Hoà Prison which held all prisoners in Cochinchina awaiting trial before a Military Tribunal. She became integrated into the network of Communist prisoners, participating in political actions aimed at improving conditions in the squalid prison. She faced trial in 1951, likely for the vague but serious charges of undermining the external security of the state and/or participation in an attempt to demoralize the army or the nation.<sup>62</sup> The six judges briefly heard evidence and testimony. The evidence was

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<sup>59</sup> “Functioning of Baria *Sûreté* Post,” April 20, 1951, HCI 695.

In this document, the chief of Bà Rịa Province confirms the use of these techniques at the *Sûreté* post in Bà Rịa.

<sup>60</sup> R. Mialin, Director of the Cabinet of the Commissariat of the French Republic in South Vietnam to the Baria Installation of the Security Services of the High Commissioner of France for Indochina, April 5, 1951, 14 HCI 37, ANOM.

<sup>61</sup> HCI 695, ANOM.

While Võ Thị Sáu’s attack was violent, it was not exceptional as far as grenade attacks went – for instance, the same month, February 1950, there was also a grenade attack in a market in Bạc Liêu that killed five civilians and injured fifty. Countless grenade attacks with civilian casualties around fifty can be found throughout *Sûreté* records, further indicating Võ Thị Sáu’s lack of cooperation with interrogators as a justification for the death sentence.

<sup>62</sup> Thống, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 102; HCI SPCE 150, ANOM.

This supposition is based on two sources: first of all, HCI SPCE 150 contains scattered lists that gloss Military Tribunal sentences, and the only two that ever receive death sentences are these two. Furthermore, in an appendix to Nguyễn Đình Thống’s book *Võ Thị Sáu: Con người và huyền thoại*, p. 102, a former prisoner named Liên An claims that he was assigned a prison job as a typist and vaguely recalls typing down these two crimes in association with Võ Thị Sáu.

damning, and with no admission of guilt, no cooperation with investigators the judges quickly sentenced Võ Thị Sáu to death. The sentence was jarring, but not unexpected; after all Kim Dung, who was the same age and had briefly shared a cell with Võ Thị Sáu, had also recently received a death sentence from the same tribunal for a similar grenade attack carried out in Saigon. But while Kim Dung could hear protesters chanting against her sentence as the truck pulled away from the Palais du Justice, Võ Thị Sáu's departure was met with silence but for the regular clamor of the Saigon streetscape. Kim Dung had friends, family, and comrades who daily made their way through these streets and had connections to people inhabiting every part of the urban patchwork while Võ Thị Sáu knew no one in the city except for her cellmates in Chí Hoà prison.<sup>63</sup>

By the end of January 1952, Võ Thị Sáu was transferred to Côn Đảo for the execution of her sentence. The transit was an arduous ordeal, shackled at the ankles and arms tied at the elbows as the truck took her to the docks to board a boat that travelled down the Saigon River to Cáp St. Jacques (now Vũng Tàu) where she had to await a transfer to an oceangoing ferry to Côn Đảo.<sup>64</sup> She arrived on Côn Đảo in a sleepless state, having spent upwards of twenty-four hours with only hard surfaces to rest on and the imminence of death on her mind.<sup>65</sup> She arrived on the island on July 21, 1952.

From the pier, gendarmes escorted her past the prison director's mansion to the police post nearby, circumventing the prison complex entirely, and left her in a holding cell where she stayed for the following day and two nights, interacting only with jailers and prison officials.

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<sup>63</sup> Eisner, *Performing Remembering*, 176-178.

<sup>64</sup> HCI 695.

We can reasonably assume that Võ Thị Sáu was transported to the docks in a very utilitarian truck, as at that time Chí Hoà had only two vehicles available to transport prisoners.

<sup>65</sup> Phan, *Côn Đảo*.

In his interviews, Nguyễn Văn Huê mentions that he mistook Võ Thị Sáu for a civilian and only learned that she was a prisoner when she disembarked, indicating she must have been free of restraints for the length of the voyage.

Early on July 23 before dawn, the heavy iron door opened and the gendarmes escorted her to the main road. She was taken along the beach to Bagne III, through the main gate. The next door opened to another complex of smaller cell blocks set in a more open space. In the northwest corner was a wide field with mountains rising up behind the prison wall, silhouettes softly glowing in the aurora of dawn.

A wooden pillar and a squad of soldiers armed with rifles awaited her. Director Jarty and a priest were also there to witness the execution. Her final request to face the firing squad without a blindfold denied, Võ Thị Sáu was tied to the pillar and forcibly blindfolded. Upon command, the firing squad got in formation, lifted their rifles, and fired. Seven shots rang out all at once. By 7:00am, her death was confirmed. Her body was removed and another prisoner, Hồ Văn Năm, stepped up to take her place at the scaffold.

Both received the unceremonious burial of a prisoner in Hàng Dương cemetery. But prisoners, aware of Võ Thị Sáu's youth, her political commitment, and her untimely death crafted her a special tombstone that over the years was reconstructed and modified. People on the island began to honor her with offerings that in time grew into a cult of worship. The news of her death made its way to Chí Hoà in the next few days, spreading by word of mouth. Võ Thị Sáu's story made its way to the North by 1954 when Hanoi propagandists molded her into a national hero.

Vũ Lê remarked that “Võ Thị Sáu is the living epitome of the teachings of the Party, of Uncle Hồ, of the Youth League, and of the People's revolution in general.”<sup>66</sup> How could she be otherwise if much of her life story was fabricated to fit that description? Võ Thị Sáu became a significant figure through two competing forms of memory, one produced by the state that attempted to mold her into an idealized national hero who became a martyr through her militancy

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<sup>66</sup> Vũ Lê, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 2017, 8.

and love for country, and another produced from the ground up through Vietnamese spiritual practices that understand her as a powerful spirit because of her tragic death at a young age. The former produces a hero and valorizes her militant acts, while the latter produces a goddess and valorizes her experience of tragedy and injustice, both which are necessary to understand the cult of worship surrounding Võ Thị Sáu. Ultimately those who make the pilgrimage to Côn Đảo do so because Võ Thị Sáu is a powerful spirit who can aid them in achieving success in their lives.

The true story of Võ Thị Sáu is no less captivating or tragic than her largely fabricated national hero myth and introduces a complex, human element to her life. The tragedy of her story is the key element. A young girl is sent off to a prison island to be extinguished from society and memory by the state she tried to oppose. But her wronged and vengeful spirit is forever bound to that land of ghosts, achieving a kind of immortality. Her execution on Côn Đảo allowed her to become a legend, a symbol of the resilience of prisoners as well as the illegitimacy of the French colonial state. Kim Dung explains that it is the act of removing Võ Thị Sáu to Côn Đảo, “a place where rumors, legends, and ghost stories are born,” for her execution that the French “unknowingly catapulted her into eminence and beloved martyrdom.”<sup>67</sup> Even though Võ Thị Sáu’s story could not be mobilized as a form of propaganda until after the fall of the French regime, the RVN continued to operate the prison on Côn Đảo. There her spirit remained locked away, and so Võ Thị Sáu came to offer a critique of the new government in the south as they continued to arrest and exile even greater numbers of political prisoners to that island.

Many of the books that have been written about Võ Thị Sáu can rightly be considered propaganda, yet they still possess inherent literary value. If a work has no literary value, how can it fulfill the aim of propaganda, to move people to act? Despite the falsities and fabrications in Võ Thị Sáu’s story, it is also a story that many Vietnamese could connect to, especially those

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<sup>67</sup> Eisner, *Performing Remembering*, 178.

who lived during the wars – the lucuma flower which represents Võ Thị Sáu’s connection to her hometown and family to whom she can never return, the loss of her youth in the prisons, and the tragedy of her young death.

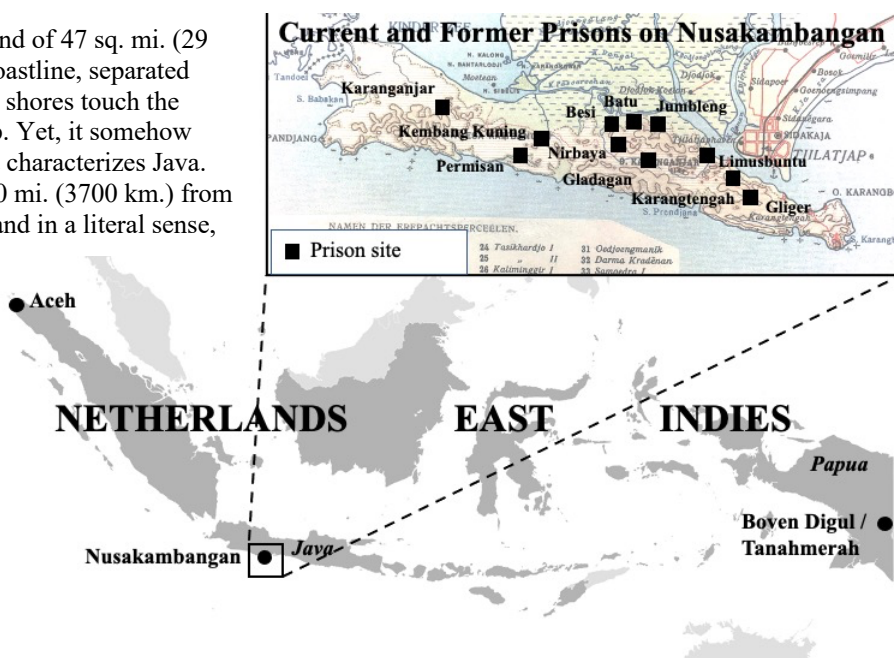
The fabrications of Võ Thị Sáu’s story do tell a greater truth, that of two generations who forever lost their youth in the dark, dirty prisons of French colonial rule and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) that followed. At its peak, the incarceration rate in the RVN reached approximately two percent. The impacts of mass incarceration in the RVN spared no one, for those who were not imprisoned certainly knew friends or family in prison. Prison conditions in the RVN were also horrendous, marked by frequent indefinite detention without trial, poor health and sanitary conditions, overcrowding, and widespread use of physical and psychological torture. Survival was not guaranteed. Võ Thị Sáu represents someone who suffered through these realities and overcame them, even if she could only overcome them through death.

While this chapter has pointed out a number of falsities and fabrications in the story of Võ Thị Sáu, they do not diminish her status as a legend, but humanize her by unveiling her true story full of complex human dilemmas. If you should travel to Côn Đảo, be sure to visit Võ Thị Sáu’s grave. When you are burning incense there, think not of the flawless soldier celebrated in the countless books and films depicting her life, but instead of a young girl who suffered her whole life from mental illness and ostracism only to have that new life cut short at the moment she was beginning to discover a place in this world where she could find comfort and acceptance. Though her victims were innocent bystanders, she too was a victim of a society that stigmatized her, of a justice system that made no effort to understand her state of mind and youth, and, in her death, of a state media apparatus that effaced her image and supplanted it with one of its own creation. The true story, if we accept Nguyễn Duy’s claim that Võ Thị Sáu was mentally ill,

furthermore presents an opportunity for fighting stigmas against mental illness that persist in contemporary Vietnam by showing that even a national hero can suffer from it. If her spirit is indeed as vengeful and righteous as the legends say, then it is the people who fabricated and used the story of her life for their own purposes who will incur its wrath as new information surfaces. Perhaps they will be forced to account for their fabrications as new facts and evidence comes to surface, revealing the truth bit by bit.

### Chapter 3: Prison Islands of the Netherlands East Indies: Nusakambangan and Digul

Fig. 3.1. Nusakambangan, an island of 47 sq. mi. (29 sq. km.), almost touches Java's coastline, separated only by a marshy channel, and its shores touch the harbor of the busy port of Cilacap. Yet, it somehow escaped the dense population that characterizes Java. Boven Digul, by contrast, is 2,300 mi. (3700 km.) from Jakarta. While Digul is not an island in a literal sense, its position amidst a sea of Papuan jungle make it a considerably more isolated place than Nusakambangan. The inset map is excerpted from "Overzichtskaart van de Residentie Banjoemas," (Batavia: Topografische Inrichting, 1910).



Of the prison island of Nusakambangan where Pramoedya Ananta Toer passed one month in 1969 awaiting exile to an undisclosed location in the eastern archipelago that he would soon learn to be Buru Island, he remarks that "it was the island no one has been allowed to write about ever since colonial times."<sup>1</sup> Normally, such sweeping statements – especially when found in literary narratives – are the result of rhetorical hyperbole and therefore must not be taken literally, but in this case, it is mostly true. From 1905, when prisoners were first permanently established on the island, to the demise of Dutch colonial rule in 1942, only one prisoner ever produced a (fairly obscure) written account of their captivity on Nusakambangan.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pramoedya Ananta Toer, tr. Willem Samuels, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, (New York, NY: Hyperion, 1999), 318. On pg. 5, Pramoedya specifies that he was first held in Karang Tengah Prison for one week, then in Limus Buntu for three more.

<sup>2</sup> The account was written by Oey Tiang Tjeoi (黃長水), a prominent member of the Batavia *peranakan* Chinese community who was briefly imprisoned on Nusakambangan from February to March 1942 for his pro-Japanese views and activities. Later that year, he wrote a book about his experiences titled *Pengalaman Kita dalem pengasingan Garoet-Sukabumi dan Noesakambangan* [*Experiences of our Exile to Garut-Sukabumi and Nusakambangan*], (Jakarta: Hong Po, 2642 [1942]).

The dearth of accounts from Nusakambangan stands in stark contrast to Boven Digul where from 1926 to 1941 more than 13,000 Indonesian political prisoners and their families were incarcerated and together produced a corpus of works of inspired fiction and narrative non-fiction.<sup>3</sup>



*Fig. 3.2.* Indonesian convicts on Nusakambangan carrying European women on palanquins. The image encapsulates the racial inequality and brutal labor regimens of Dutch colonial prisons in Indonesia.

From Chief Editor of *T Leven* to M.B. Van der Jagt, photographic negative, February 1925, in 2nd Deposit, Collectie 421, M.B. Van der Jagt, folder 38, Het Nationaal Archief. The author of this dissertation has cropped this photograph and modified its color to render it as a developed photograph.

Digul's stature was so elevated within Indonesian public discourse during its existence that it entered the lexicon of the emerging Indonesian language. After 1926, everyone knew what it

meant to be “diguled” or to be a “Digulist.” To be “diguled” meant to be spirited away on the government's whim to a camp in the farthest corner of the archipelago from where there was no hope of escape, but to be a Digulist was a mark of honor – a recognition that one had survived the colonial state's attempt at imposed social extinction implied by being diguled.<sup>4</sup> A number of Digulists' captivity in Tanahmerah bolstered their political careers as Mohammad Hatta went on to become Indonesia's first vice-president and Sutan Sjahrir the nation's first prime minister.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Pramoedya Ananta Toer, ed., *Cerita dari Digul [Stories from Digul]*, (Jakarta: Gramedia Kepustakaan Populer, 2001), xxii.

Some of the most well-known writers who were incarcerated in Digul include Marco Kartodikromo (for his short stories) and Sutan Sjahrir (for his political writings and letters).

<sup>4</sup> The term “Digulist,” from the Indonesian “digulis,” has commonly been used in scholarship, as well, while the verb form, “didigulkan,” seems to have been confined to the corpus of works produced by former Digulists. I will use “Digulist” and “diguled” in this chapter to represent these words in Indonesian, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> While “Boven Digul” is the name of the regency in which the camp was established (Because it is on the upper reaches of the Digul River), Tanahmerah (meaning red earth) is the name of the actual town in which the camp was

In contrast, Nusakambangan is no Digul. If one could disappear to Digul and return a martyr, one simply disappeared to Nusakambangan. Yet, at least 500 prisoners on Nusakambangan had been arrested in connection to some of the same political movements and uprisings that had led so many Indonesians to Digul.<sup>6</sup> This chapter offers a close study of Nusakambangan during the colonial era, a topic which has, in contrast to Boven Digul, largely eluded historiographies.<sup>7</sup> At the center of this study is an inquiry into the origins of idea of the “political prisoner” in Indonesia by asking why, in contrast to Digulists, prisoners sent to Nusakambangan during the colonial era have been largely excluded from political prisonerhood. By first tracing the historical development of Nusakambangan from a natural paradise and a plantation site to a full-fledged prison island, this chapter compares the island to Digul’s establishment amidst the milieu of anti-colonial struggle that characterized the second half of the 1920s. Then, it examines Nusakambangan during wartime through a close reading of a memoir written by a Japanese sympathizer who was incarcerated on the island during the months leading up to the Japanese occupation, the only known written account by any prisoner of the island during colonial rule. This account allows us to further unpack the contours of the concept of the political prisoner in Indonesia, as well as the role prison islands have played in shaping it. The chapter concludes with a comparative look at Nusakambangan and Digul during the Indonesian

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established. The two names may be used interchangeably to refer to the camp, but English-language scholarship has tended to opt for “Boven Digul.” I will use both terms.

<sup>6</sup> Around 500 communist political prisoners are mentioned in Jumbleng prison on Nusakambangan between 1927 and 1930, almost certainly arrested in connection to the botched Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) uprising in 1926. See “Report on the Penitentiary on Nusakambangan for 1930,” 1930, KITLV Collections, H 1675, Leiden Universiteitsbibliotheek.

<sup>7</sup> Nusakambangan has been the subject of only two article-length historical studies. One recently published article examines the reputation of Nusakambangan in the colonial Dutch-language press:

Klaas Stuuftje, “From across the Water: Nusakambangan and the Making of a Notorious Prison Island,” *International Review of Social History*, 64:3 (August 2019) 493-513.

Another article, written in Indonesian, narrates the history of the island’s prisons through a social scientific lens: Muchamad Sulton, Ibnu Sodik, and Andy Suryadi, “Perkembangan Lembaga Pemasyarakatan Pulau Nusakambangan Kabupaten Cilacap [The Development of the Nusakambangan Correctional Institution in Cilacap Regency],” *Journal of Indonesian History*, 7:1, 2018.

National Revolution, especially with an eye towards the evolution of how Dutch and Indonesian authorities grappled with the term “political prisoner” in relation to each.

This chapter argues that prison islands, especially Digul, played a central role in framing the concept of the political prisoner in Indonesia, while Nusakambangan’s role was minimal. Digul played such an important role due to the concentration of literate prisoners there as well as the timing of the prison camp’s creation as it was open just as the Indonesian language had come of age. Nusakambangan, by contrast, tended to receive far fewer literate prisoners who could easily communicate their experiences with the public through writing and the penitentiary had been established just before the formational period of the Indonesian language took root.

### **The First Indonesian Prison Islands**

Islands were important sites of exile during Netherlands East India Company (hereafter VOC, for Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) rule which first laid territorial roots in Indonesia in 1603. As a chartered trade company, the VOC was a multinational corporation vested with the power to administer and govern overseas colonies on behalf of the nascent Dutch state. As such, they were not bound to implement the judicial and carceral methods of the metropole, so they put into practice a range of judicial and penal policies, integrating those common to the Netherlands as well as those used by indigenous societies of newly acquired territories. In addition, the VOC frequently improvised, devising new methods that they found convenient or advantageous to the company.<sup>8</sup> Needless to say, the legal system which the VOC had cobbled together from the Cape to Taiwan was rife with arbitrary and extra-judicial

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<sup>8</sup> See Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and

Matthias Van Rossum further details this system in his chapter, “The Dutch East India Company in Asia, 1595-1811,” in Clare Anderson, ed. *A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018),

which both detail a range of punishments assigned to prisoners that advanced the VOC’s economic interests, such as convicts from Bengal sentenced to VOC rope factories on Onrust and convicts from Ceylon sentenced to work plantations on Allelande.

punishment, and its endemic corruption even meant that one could often buy a rival's exile for the right price.<sup>9</sup>

Exile was among the most common forms of punishment in the VOC's empire, especially for individuals of high social standing.<sup>10</sup> In the social and political milieu of early modern Europe from which the VOC sprang, exile was a far more common a punishment than imprisonment, especially in the legal practices of the Spanish state from which the Netherlands had recently gained independence.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in its earliest manifestation, the VOC's empire was a territorially diffuse web of strategic trade ports. While insular exile generally ensured secure incarceration with minimal expense, long-distance exile for the company's enemies meant that potential threats to its power could be removed from the social fabric of their communities of origin.<sup>12</sup> Within the VOC, each major colonial node had a corresponding island of exile: Robben Island for the Cape Colony, Allelande for Ceylon, Onrust and Edam for Batavia, Buru for Ambon, and Rosanganin for Banda. These intra-imperial networks of exile, as Kerry Ward points out, were tightly connected and consequently the banished could be sent to any site.<sup>13</sup>

Even while the British interregnum in the NEI (1811-16) introduced sweeping penal reforms accompanied by a prison building boom, the returning Dutch colonial administration continued to rely upon methods more familiar to them. It was the abolition of slavery in the colony in 1860, however, that produced a marked shift towards incarceration as convict leasing was seen as an economical alternative to slavery at a moment labor-intensive plantation and mining industries were rapidly expanding throughout Southeast Asia.<sup>14</sup> These economic factors,

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<sup>9</sup> Ward, *Networks of Empire*.

<sup>10</sup> Ward, *Networks of Empire*; Van Rossum, "The Dutch East India Company in Asia."

<sup>11</sup> Christian G. De Vito, "The Spanish Empire, 1500 to 1898," in Anderson, ed., 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Ward, *Networks of Empire*.

<sup>13</sup> Ward, *Networks of Empire*; Van Rossum, "The Dutch East India Company in Asia."

<sup>14</sup> Van Rossum, "The Dutch East India Company in Asia."

alongside Dutch colonial military expansion in the archipelago, set in motion the events that would soon transform Nusakambangan into a prison island.

From 1908 onwards, Dutch authorities constructed the first of eight prison facilities on Nusakambangan, and it is true that no Indonesians wrote about their experience there during the entirety of Dutch rule.<sup>15</sup> Thus the prisons of Nusakambangan were as fearsome as they were mysterious to much of the Indonesian public. While Nusakambangan devoured the lives of thousands of rebels and dissidents during its existence as a prison island, it was a different prison “island” – Boven Digul, also referred to sometimes as Tanahmerah – that came to be associated with the political struggle for independence. Located in a sea of Papuan jungle and malarial swamp, Digul was not an island in terms of its physical geography, but in the sense that it totally isolated prisoners from Indonesian society. Digul also operated outside of the Netherlands East Indies (hereafter NEI) penal apparatus since it was actually a camp designated for those imprisoned through administrative internment, a process by which the governor general could indefinitely incarcerate anyone in the colony by decree for any reason. In this way, not one Digulist passed through the judicial system on their path to exile, giving them special claims to innocence that propelled them to the status of martyrdom.

Prisoners on Nusakambangan, however, had all passed through the courts and had been convicted of crimes deemed relatively serious by the standards of NEI law, many which were political in nature. Moreover, prisoners sent to Nusakambangan tended to be illiterate, in contrast to Digulists who were largely part of a highly literate intelligentsia.<sup>16</sup> Digulists’ literacy and social capital meant that they could write and speak eloquently about their experiences to a large

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<sup>15</sup> Sulton, Sodiq, and Suryadi, “Perkembangan Lembaga Pemasyarakatan Pulau Nusakambangan.”

<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that numerous peasants and working class Indonesians were also diguled as administrative internment was also frequently employed towards individuals in general who the Governor General perceived to be a security threat or was suspected of having committed a crime but for whom there was insufficient evidence to send to trial.

receptive audience. Following Benedict Anderson's formulation of a nation-state as an imagined community, even in exile the Digulists played an active role in shared discussions unfolding through the circulation of vernacular language print capital.<sup>17</sup>

The political prisoners of Nusakambangan during Dutch colonial rule were, by contrast, often peasants, including rebels who resisted Dutch authority immediately after the subjugation of Aceh in 1904 and, later, rank-and-file communists who had answered the call to arms in a botched 1926 uprising. In 1926, even while communists sent to Digul would eventually achieve the status of national heroes and martyrs, communists sent to Nusakambangan were cast into the same void as all other prisoners banished to the island. Nusakambangan was by no means the first prison island in the NEI, though it has been the most enduring.

### **Situating Nusakambangan in the History of Indonesian Prisons**

Separated from the Javanese coastline by a narrow, swampy, crocodile-infested strait, Nusakambangan is isolated from Java due more to its unforgiving setting than its remoteness. On its easternmost end, the island is clearly visible from the port city of Cilacap, just as Alcatraz island is readily visible from San Francisco and the Île d'If from Marseille. Like Nusakambangan, these islands act as readily visible symbols of a state's capacity to punish, yet are almost entirely inaccessible due to environmental factors such as violent currents or near impassible swamps.

Nusakambangan had long remained outside of the shifting politics of Javanese kingdoms, hosting only small fishing villages. The island eventually became ritually connected to the kingdom of Surakarta, however, as its rulers at one point began to trek to the island each year to ceremonially pluck the Wijayakusuma, a flower indigenous to the island whose name translates to the "flower of victory." In this way, the rulers of Surakarta made their political presence felt

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<sup>17</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed., (New York, NY: Verso, 2008).

on the island without expending military force or administrative resources while boosting his legitimacy in his court through ritual.<sup>18</sup>



Fig. 3.3. Dutch soldiers with prisoners in Aceh, c. 1890-1900. “Greopspportret militairen met gevangenen, Atjeh,” [Group Portrait Soldiers with Prisoners], Photograph, c. 1890-1900, Collectiestichting Museum van Wereldculturen, <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/223597>. Public Domain.

Little changed on Nusakambangan with the onset of Dutch rule, though in the early 1800s it did briefly attract the interests of plantation capitalists.<sup>19</sup> Besides the establishment of a lighthouse to guide ships into the adjacent Cilacap harbor, little of note occurred on the island for the remainder of the century.<sup>20</sup> Major

changes that would transform Nusakambangan into the prison island it is known as today were catalyzed by the conclusion of the Aceh War in 1904, which lasted more than three decades and consumed the NEI’s military and financial resources as the Dutch attempted to subdue the last major independent kingdom in the Indonesian archipelago. After Aceh’s defeat, Dutch forces

<sup>18</sup> Sulton, Sodiq, and Suryadi, “Perkembangan Lembaga Pemasyarakatan Pulau Nusakambangan.” Peter Carey, *The Power of Prophecy: Prince Dipanagara and the End of an Old Order in Java*, (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2008), 844.

Carey notes how the southern coastline of Java had always held special significance in Javanese cosmology as the realm of Ratu Kidul, the goddess of the southern seas, who was traditionally the consort of central Javanese rulers and therefore the subject of many court rituals. Nusakambangan’s location on this body of water suggests that it linked the sultan to Ratu Kidul.

<sup>19</sup> Adewilde to J. van den Bosch, letter, 21 March 1839, J. van den Bosch Collection, C22034, Folder 115, 2.21.028, Het Nationaal Archief, The Hague.

A Dutch planter named Gelpken tried to establish a plantation in the 1810s that quickly failed, and by 1839 the disused property attracted the interest of an English investor named John Stewart who seems ultimately to have turned away upon learning of his predecessor’s ill fortune.

<sup>20</sup> Sulton, Sodiq, and Suryadi, “Perkembangan Lembaga Pemasyarakatan Pulau Nusakambangan,” 48.

The lighthouse was constructed with convict labor, though they did not seem to remain on the island for long after its completion.

arrested thousands in their attempts to violently suppress ongoing guerrilla resistance. Quickly, however, the occupiers realized that the presence of thousands of imprisoned rebels nearby would only fuel further resistance. Over 1,200 miles from Aceh, Nusakambangan was a location sufficiently distant both physically and culturally where a large concentration of captive rebels could pose little threat to the colonial order.

The 1870s not only saw the outbreak of the Aceh War, but the introduction of a new cash crop to the NEI: rubber. As the Aceh war progressed, so did the cultivation of rubber trees as a multitude of new uses were developed for its sap. With the rapid development of automobiles at the turn of the twentieth century, rubber tires suddenly became indispensable, creating a surge in demand for the relatively new cash crop. The first rubber trees were planted in 1901 in Banyumas Regency, of which Nusakambangan was a part, and G. J. Oudermans, the resident, saw great economic promise in them.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas previous plantation endeavors had failed on Nusakambangan, Oudermans believed rubber trees could thrive there. He established a rubber plantation on Nusakambangan in 1905 but struggled to procure a sufficient labor force. Meanwhile, Acehnese prisons overflowed with convicted rebels. Later that year, the resident of Banyumas and the General Government found a mutually beneficial solution to one another's problems by transporting Acehnese convicts to the island en masse to work the plantation.<sup>22</sup>

On Nusakambangan in particular, the distinction between plantation and prison became almost entirely blurred as prisoners worked a plantation that outwardly resembled many others in

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<sup>21</sup> G.J. Oudermans, "Memorie van het Overgave van G.J. Oudermans [G.J. Ouderman's Memorandum of Resignation]," March 15, 1908, Minister of Colonies, Memories van het Overgave, folder 49, 2.10.39, Nationaal Archief, The Hague.

In the NEI, every outgoing resident wrote an overview of their experiences and accomplishments during their appointment for the new incoming resident.

<sup>22</sup> Oudermans, "Memorie van het Overgave."

the archipelago. Even in the NEI where convict leasing was ubiquitous and the transmigration program was in full force, the employment of so many convict laborers on a single plantation was highly irregular – a fact which Oudermans acknowledged. He moreover hoped that the Acehese convicts could continue to work on the Nusakambangan plantation upon their release as contract laborers.<sup>23</sup> To meet the labor demands of the plantation, 200 prisoners from Java joined the 600 Acehese already there.<sup>24</sup>

By 1908, Nusakambangan had proven itself an economically viable plantation, but it met the role of containing and controlling prisoners entirely inadequately. Oudermans cited escape as the principal problem the plantation faced – an issue that plagued coeval plantations and prisons alike throughout colonial Southeast Asia.<sup>25</sup> In order to reduce instances of escape, he recommended increasing surveillance personnel, establishing regular patrols of the narrow channel separating Nusakambangan and the Javanese mainland, and the construction of permanent structures for housing prisoners and plantation personnel. With these measures, Oudermans intended the plantation to eventually employ a workforce of 1,000 composed entirely of Acehese convicts.<sup>26</sup> In his account, however, it is clear that the resident's goals remained to develop Nusakambangan not as a prison, but as a plantation.

While the resident initially envisioned the venture on Nusakambangan as a plantation that could transform convicts into laborers, the plantation instead metamorphosed into a formal prison when the governor general issued a decision appointing a director to oversee convict laborers on the island and authorized the Department of Justice to hire prison guards to replace

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<sup>23</sup> Oudermans, "Memorie van het Overgave."

<sup>24</sup> In Oudermans, "Memorie van het Overgave." The resident notes that the addition of Javanese penal labor was seen as a temporary measure who the resident intended to replace with a fully Acehese labor force once was a central prison was constructed in Purwokerto.

<sup>25</sup> Oudermans, "Memorie van het Overgave."

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

the plantation overseers, known as *mandoer*, when their appointments lapsed.<sup>27</sup> Over the course of 1908, the Department of Justice hired three *cipiers* (senior-ranking European prison guards) and a director.<sup>28</sup> These decisions formalized Nusakambangan's status as a prison as it was also given the official designation of *dwangarbeidskwartier*, or forced labor unit.<sup>29</sup> However, even though Nusakambangan had been officially incorporated into the architecture of the colonial penal system, the Department of Justice recognized that it was an exceptional case reserved for those receiving forced labor sentences resulting from military operations in Aceh, further stipulating that even though the Acehnese on Nusakambangan fell under the jurisdiction of the Department of Justice, they would be supervised by military personnel.<sup>30</sup>

Over the next few years, Nusakambangan developed as a prison and a plantation and, as the Aceh War grew distant, it became a destination primarily for Javanese convicts who eventually constituted an overwhelming majority of the prisoner population. In 1911, the General Government invested 20,600 Guilders in the island's plantations, and in 1912 a new position was created for a deputy director of the prison who primarily managed its agricultural aspects.<sup>31</sup>

Evident in the early days of the Nusakambangan prison was its unpopularity among personnel. Most *cipiers* spent one to two years working on the island and after the first director

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<sup>27</sup> "No. 221, Decision No. 3 of the Governor General, 6 March 1908," *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië over het Jaar 1908 [Official Gazette of the Netherlands Indies for the Year 1908]*, Landsdrukkerij, Batavia 1909.

<sup>28</sup> *Regeerings-Almanak voor Nederlandsch-Indië [Government Almanac for Netherlands India]*, Batavia: Landsdrukkerij, 1909.

J. La Gordt Dillier was appointed director in April 1908 while three *cipiers* arrived between January and October. *Cipiers* were European prison guards with the authority to supervise large numbers of indigenous guards. Generally, a *cipier* was tasked with overseeing a small prison or a unit within a large prison. In the case of Nusakambangan, the initial plantation was divided into three camps and it is likely that one *cipier* oversaw each camp.

<sup>29</sup> Forced labor was a sentence reserved for crimes deemed especially serious committed by non-Europeans.

<sup>30</sup> *Regeerings-Almanak voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, Batavia: Landsdrukkerij, 1909.

<sup>31</sup> "Decision no. 228," *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië over het Jaar 1911*, Landsdrukkerij, Batavia 1912. *Regeerings-Almanak voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, Batavia: Landsdrukkerij, 1912.

The Deputy Director was appointed by the Department of Agriculture, Industry, and Trade and paid by the Department of Justice.

left at the end of 1911, the post went unfilled for an entire year.<sup>32</sup> Prison directors and staff were not paid any less than their counterparts in other parts of Java, but the relative isolation made it far less appealing than working in urban prisons where a guard could leave his workplace at the end of the day and have access to his own home and partake in urban social life. On Nusakambangan, there was no separation between workplace, domestic realm, and public space. Additionally, the director was expected to perform the dual labor of simultaneously running a secure prison and a profitable plantation.

In 1913, the Department of Justice decided to dramatically increase the pay of the director and adjunct director to levels unimaginable in any other prison in the NEI as the director's salary rose from 300 to 500 Guilders a month and the deputy director was allowed up to 1,200 guilders per year from the plantation's profits.<sup>33</sup> From that point onward, the prison was never understaffed and personnel tended to remain for long periods of time.

It is also important to recognize the prominence of corruption in colonial prisons as most guards would have made considerable side income by conveying illicit goods and information through the walls that separated the incarcerated from the bustling urban society on the other side. While many guards and other personnel on Nusakambangan no doubt sold goods and information to prisoners for extortionate prices, the fact that they spent most of their time on the island meant that they had fewer opportunities to obtain the kind of contraband that prisoners would pay dearly for.

By 1917, the prison of Nusakambangan had grown considerably in size and complexity. While no figures exist regarding the prisoner population at this time, since it employed 129

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<sup>32</sup> *Regeerings-Almanak voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, Batavia: Landsdrukkerij, 1912.

<sup>33</sup> "Decision No. 125 on 28 January 1913" and "Decision No. 135 on 3 February 1913," *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië over het Jaar 1913*, Landsdrukkerij, Batavia 1914.

"No. 221, Decision No. 3 of the Governor General, 6 March 1908," *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië over het Jaar 1908*, Landsdrukkerij, Batavia 1909.

personnel which included two directors and 119 guards of various ranks, anywhere from two to three thousand convicts likely lived on the island.<sup>34</sup> This growth was only a prelude to the expansion of colonial carceral infrastructure that would accompany the 1920s as a product of the colonial state's increasingly direct involvement in colonial society at all levels and an emergent Indonesian national identity. These two crescendoing historical processes would collide in a roar of discontent and repression.

### **The First Indonesian Political Prisoners**

The rapid expansion of the colonial government that ratiocinated in the 1920s had also fostered the growth of the indigenous Dutch-educated bureaucratic middle class, and among them an intelligentsia who would ironically become the articulators and drivers of anti-colonial dissent. The 1910s had seen the first stirrings of Indonesian nationalist political organizations, but it was over the course of the 1920s that various political movements from liberal democratic nationalism, to political Islam, to communism would come to truly threaten Dutch power. The repression that the Dutch colonial government unleashed in 1926, responding directly to a botched armed communist uprising, would produce a cohort of political prisoners from across the ideological spectrum who would come to define and embody the idea of the idealized political prisoner in Indonesian society. Members of this cohort would moreover come to occupy positions of political leadership and cultural eminence in postcolonial Indonesian society that would allow them to define it for decades to come.

Alongside an Indonesian national identity, the 1910s and 20s witnessed the rapid developments of the modern Indonesian language, Bahasa Indonesia, and modern Indonesian

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<sup>34</sup> "Decision No. 41, 1 June 1917," *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië over het Jaar 1917*, (Landsdrukkerij, Batavia 1918).

The estimate of two to three thousand prisoners is based on Department of Justice guidelines regarding the ratio of prison personnel to prisoners.

literature. These developments were the result of the Indonesian intelligentsia's conscious efforts to standardize a form of market Malay starting in the 1910s, which had become widely used as a lingua franca as well as an unofficial language by which the colonial government communicated with subjects.<sup>35</sup> The 1920s were the critical period for Bahasa Indonesia's development as journalists and writers began using it before its adoption by the Second Youth Congress in 1928, the event often identified as the language's official establishment.

The character of works produced in Indonesian during the period 1910s and 20s were markedly modern in form, including novels, newspaper articles, and treatises. Prison memoirs appeared at an early moment in the language's history, starting with *Tiga Minggu dalem Penjara* [*Three Weeks in Jail*], a short parodic autobiographical account of a journalist's short stint in a Batavia prison published in 1922.<sup>36</sup> The sub-genre truly came into its own after 1926, however, when Digulists began to write about their experiences. According to C.W. Watson, "Digoelist figures... were... the pioneers of this sub-genre of prison literature set in remote places of exile, in which there was a curious blend of straightforward documentary description of prison conditions, ethnographic and exotic accounts of the customs of the regional ethnic groups, and a note of defiant anti-Dutch heroism."<sup>37</sup> I would add that these narratives rarely broadcast a stoic sense of defiance, but a defiance rooted in wisdom that comes only after prisoners' resignation. Usually, the prisoner gives up all hope after a long, sustained struggle against the hardships presented by their prison and captors, only after which they realize that a regime based on such brutality is destined to fail. This self-liberation of the mind and soul is then usually followed shortly by their release.

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<sup>35</sup> C.W. Watson, *Of Self and Injustice: Autobiography and Repression in Modern Indonesia*, (Leiden, NL: KITLV Press, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Indo China, *Tiga Minggu dalem Penjara*, (Batavia: Snelpersdrukkerij Goan Hong & Co., 1922). Note that the author uses a pen name.

<sup>37</sup> Watson, *Of Self and Injustice*, 25.

In this context, it is no surprise that Pramoedya chooses to portray, Hardo, the protagonist of *The Fugitive*, a prisoner recently released by the Japanese amidst the revolution, as an ascetic.<sup>38</sup> While Pramoedya was a member of the generation of '45 (the generation of Indonesian writers and artists that followed the Digulists), his portrayal of the ideal political prisoner as an ascetic was built upon Digulists' writings. Political prisoners are portrayed by both generations of writers as exceptional persons because they have come to possess a special knowledge and wisdom which they are able to impart upon Indonesian society. Watson has described how Indonesian prison writing has a tendency to paint an image of the "imprisonment of society as a whole" and that political prisoners' writings show that they "have come to a particular vision of what constitutes a way out of that confinement both through arguing for an alternative account of the nature of the dynamics of Indonesian history and society, and through directly creating the physical opportunities for greater freedom and social interaction."<sup>39</sup>

The image of the ascetic may have first entered Indonesian religious life with Brahmanic and Buddhist traditions, but it came to take on a cultural life of its own as members of Javanese courts employed ascetic practices from these traditions to commune with indigenous Javanese deities and spirits. Even as courts adopted Islam, asceticism as a means of connecting to Javanese deities and spirits remained not only an important religious practice, but a crucial aspect of political legitimacy. This can be seen in the 1820s by observing how Dipanagara, a self-described purifier of Islam, could only press his claim for the Surakartan throne and raise the call to rebellion after years of solitary meditation and self-abnegation with the goal of

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<sup>38</sup> Pramoedya Ananta Toer, tr. Willem Samuels, *The Fugitive*, (New York, NY: William, Morrow, & Co., 1990).

<sup>39</sup> Watson, *Of Self and Injustice*, 25.

establishing communication with Ratu Kidul, the Goddess of the Southern Sea who traditionally bestows legitimacy upon Javanese rulers.<sup>40</sup>

While early Javanese anti-colonial rebels like Dipanagara justified rebellion through invoking a particularly Javanese worldview, the Digulists and subsequent political prisoners adapted the same legitimating narrative structure to a modern worldview centered on nationalism which could be readily recognized by both the colonizer and colonized. It is the combination of nationalism as an articulation of political legitimacy and prisoners' (often subconscious) echoing of the ascetic motifs commonly associated with Javanese notions of kingship that created the conditions for the birth of the Indonesian political prisoner.

There were, of course, many thousands of Indonesians who had been imprisoned for political beliefs and actions before the 1920s, but they could not truly be considered "political prisoners" in the modern sense not only because the term had not yet entered the vocabulary of Indonesian society, but also because the Digulists had not yet established a narrative archetype that successfully wove Dutch and Indonesian conceptions of martyrdom and political legitimacy into their own personas. Thus, the Digulists embodied a specific image of a political prisoner that was simultaneously legible to Dutch colonizers and colonized Indonesians from all walks of life. No matter how much sympathy Dipanagara or the Acehnese guerrillas exiled to Nusakambangan evoked among Javanese and Acehnese, respectively, Dutch colonizers almost unanimously dismissed them as backwards and unruly.

One commonality shared by nationalisms across the globe is the tendency to project one certain country's worldviews pastwards. In the case of Indonesian nationalism, historical figures who could never have known of Indonesia were anachronistically claimed national heroes. By extension, those heroes who have been incarcerated by an antagonistic power have been labeled

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<sup>40</sup> Carey, *Power and Prophecy*, 844.

“political prisoners,” though they may have lived long before such a concept existed. Digul was the birthplace of the Indonesian political prisoner not only because the Digulists knew they were being incarcerated because of their belief in the concept of an Indonesian nation, but also because they could frame themselves as such to a broader Indonesian and Dutch public.<sup>41</sup>

The term political prisoner had slowly developed over time, gaining its present-day usage and connotation between the mid-nineteenth century through the early twentieth century when, as Padraic Kenney argues, states began to use the term “political prisoner” to describe certain categories of convicts and prisoners associated with various political and social movements and who used prisons as an arena for advancing their goals rather than a hindrance.<sup>42</sup> Kenney notes that when states have recognized political prisoners as a distinct class of convict, such recognition has usually been fleeting and often proved more useful to their political opponents who were less willing to let the term fall out of use.<sup>43</sup> The concept of the political prisoner came into use in the NEI in the 1920s and was used both by the state and its opponents, though officially the NEI government neither condoned nor recognized the existence of “political prisoners.” Yet, it is evident that prisoners themselves and even many of their jailers commonly used the term.

A 1930s manual for prison personnel in the NEI devotes an entire chapter to political prisoners, tacitly recognizing the existence of a large number of political prisoners in the colony in contrast with the official position. The manual emphasizes that it is “hard to make a distinction

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<sup>41</sup> While the Digulists found few sympathizers among Dutch colonists in the NEI, they had a more receptive audience in the Netherlands. As soon as 1928, Dutch communists launched a campaign to shutter the camp and liberate its inmates. That year, a booklet titled *Het Digoelkamp-Schandaal!* [*The Digul Camp Scandal!*] appeared as a special addition of Red Aid’s Dutch-language magazine. *Roode Hulp, Het Digoelkamp-Schandaal!*, (Amsterdam: Uitgave van der I.R.H., 1928).

<sup>42</sup> Padraic Kenney, *Dance in Chains: Imprisonment in the Modern World*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11.

<sup>43</sup> Kenney, *Dance in Chains*, 11.

between political crimes and other offenses, and the criminal code does not provide for it.”<sup>44</sup> The manual implies that jailers who view political prisoners differently are prone to sympathizing with them and offering better treatment. Rather than encouraging jailers to ignore the political prisoners as a distinct category of convict, however, it recommends treating political prisoners with special severity and vigilance as “political prisoners are attackers... [and] still a great danger to society – more than ordinary criminals who only care about personal interests.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, while the Dutch colonial state chose not to officially recognize the category of political prisoner, the aforementioned manual makes it clear that the existence of political prisoners in the archipelago’s prisons and camps was widely acknowledged at all levels of society, including the state’s backers and detractors alike. Moreover, the manual suggests that jailers’ recognition of their captives political prisonerhood often segued into sympathy.

### Nusakambangan in an Age of Political Upheaval



*Figs. 3.4 (left) and 3.5 (right):* Convicts engaging in rubber production on Nusakambangan. On the left, chained convicts transport vats of sap collected from rubber trees, and on the right, convicts process the rubber.

*Figs. 3.4:* “Veroordeelden te werk gesteld op Noesa Kambangan,” Photograph, 1908-1926, De Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, TM-10016323, <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/233716>. Public domain.

*Figs. 3.5:* From Chief Editor of *T Leven* to M.B. Van der Jagt, photographic negatives, February 1925, in 2nd Deposit, Collectie 421, M.B. Van der Jagt, folder 38, Het Nationaal Archief. The author of this dissertation has cropped the photograph and modified its color to render it as a developed photograph.

<sup>44</sup> *Verkorte Leidraad der Gevangenskunde voor het Gevangenis Personeel [Abridged Guidebook on Penology for Prison Personnel]*, c. 1933, KITLV Collections, H 1675, Leiden Universiteitsbibliotheek.

<sup>45</sup> *Verkorte Leidraad der Gevangenskunde voor het Gevangenis Personeel*.

During the 1920s, Nusakambangan's rubber plantation continued its rapid expansion. A rubber company that had been formed in 1913 was nixed for one more directly managed by prison personnel, likely a means of increasing efficiency and profits through technocratic rationalization.<sup>46</sup> By this time, the prison island held around 3,500 convicts and expanded significantly as new prison facilities were constructed every few years.<sup>47</sup> By 1921, the island was staffed by over 120 surveillance staff and by the middle of the decade had one hospital and four clinics – the greatest concentration of medical facilities in all of Banyumas Regency.<sup>48</sup>

The NEI carceral system grew as a whole during this decade with the introduction of other major sites that rivaled Nusakambangan's scale, such as the Sawah Luntu prison in Sumatra where 3,000 inmates sentenced to hard labor worked the Sawah Luntu coal mines and Pulau Laut where convicts mined the earth on a smaller scale. Convict labor was nothing new to the NEI, but the system that took shape in the 1920s represented a new level of intensity and specialization. Before Nusakambangan, penal labor took the form of small-scale workshop production or *corvée*, but Nusakambangan, Sawah Luntu, and Pulau Laut brought significant quantities of raw materials to market and adopted the organizational model of other private colonial plantation and mining companies.

The scale of these prisons grew to the point that in 1924 separate Assistance Commissions were established comprising important local administrators. In the case of Nusakambangan, the commission included Cilacap's military commandant, harbormaster, and

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<sup>46</sup> "Decision no. 667," October 18, 1920, *Staatsblad van Nederlands Indië over het Jaar 1920 [Official Gazette of the Netherlands Indies for 1920]*, (Batavia: Landsdrukkerij, 1921).

<sup>47</sup> Sulton, Sodiq, and Suryadi, 2018, 50.

<sup>48</sup> "Decision no. 641, October 29, 1921," *Staatsblad van Nederlands Indië over het Jaar 1921 [Official Gazette of the Netherlands Indies for 1921]*, (Weltevreden: Landsdrukkerij, 1921).

Map of Hospitals and Clinics in Banyumas Regency, 1928, Ministerie van Colonies, Memories van het Overgave, 2.10.39, Folder 54, Het Nationaal Archief.

Bupati.<sup>49</sup> An annual report from Nusakambangan in 1930 gives us a window into the actions and concerns of the commission which seemed concerned with enhancing security by upgrading surveillance equipment and increasing coordination between the prison and local authorities. In March 1930, the commission proposed obtaining upgraded rifles for prison guards, installing telephone lines connecting nearby prison and military posts, and relocating a local fishing village that persisted on the western end of the island – all measures intended to reduce successful escape attempts.<sup>50</sup>



*Figs. 3.6, 3.8, and 3.9: Prison facilities on Nusakambangan in 1925. Note in the above left image how the structures are temporary barracks with fabric roofs in the foreground, and permanent structures in the background. Towards the left, there is constant smoke coming from the rubber processing shed. The above center image is Batu Prison consisting of permanent structures constructed over the course of 1925. The upper right image shows prisoners constructing a building within Batu Prison.*

From Chief Editor of *'T Leven* to M.B. Van der Jagt, photographic negatives, February 1925, in 2nd Deposit, Collectie 421, M.B. Van der Jagt, folder 38, Het Nationaal Archief. The author of this dissertation has cropped both photographs and modified their color to render them as developed photographs.

The fishing villages on the eastern end of the island at first enjoyed a benign coexistence with the prisons. Prison authorities only began to see them as a threat to security in 1923 when the prison's territorial expansion coincided with a steep increase of escape attempts. This year, the governor general had also decreed that all of Nusakambangan would be reserved for convict labor and, furthermore, that all non-official travel to the island would be forbidden.<sup>51</sup> The same

<sup>49</sup> *Regerings Almanak voor Nederlands-Indië*, (Weltevreden: Landsdrukkerij, 1923).

<sup>50</sup> "Verslag over de Strafgevangenen op Noesa Kambangan over 1930."

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

year, the government offered to purchase the fishing village of Banjar Nusa.<sup>52</sup> The next year, all villagers were forcibly moved to the other side of the Anak Laut, a small sea separating Nusakambangan's western end from the mainland for a total cost of 8,925.55 guilders, followed by a separate decree expressly forbidding them from returning to the island for any purpose.<sup>53</sup>

Tension between locals and prison authorities mounted over the course of the 1920s as the villagers' material and spiritual lives had since long before the presence of the prisons become enmeshed with the island's landscape. The villagers' only sources of potable water and their ancestors' graves were located on the island, meaning that they had no way of obtaining water or participating in the important ritual of washing ancestors' graves during Ramadan if they were banned from entering/travelling to the island. Ultimately, the authorities turned a blind eye to villagers' visits to the island, allowing them to collect water freely while issuing permits to groups to visit gravesites and even conduct new burials under military escort.<sup>54</sup> When an inspector from the Department of Justice witnessed a burial on the island, the head of the Penitentiary Service issued a strict order banning the practice. However, the Resident of Banyumas not only openly defied the order but also called for them to create an official mechanism for burials and graveyard visits.<sup>55</sup>

While the General Government and Justice Department prescribed top-down utilitarian methods to reduce escapes, the resident and prison authorities realized that the security of Nusakambangan would only be threatened by further antagonizing the local population. Officials in Batavia and Bogor saw the island as a series of maps, and moving the villages across the water to the mainland seemed as simple as manipulating a slide puzzle. But local officials perceived

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<sup>52</sup> "Decision no. 381," August 3, 1923, *Staatsblad van Nederlands Indië over het Jaar 1923*, (Weltevreden: Landsdrukkerij, 1924).

<sup>53</sup> Adriaans, "Memorie van het Overgave."

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

details that high officials could not respond accordingly, even in defiance of the central government. We cannot, however, conclude that officials working at the regency and prison-level were moved by their empathy for the villagers, as every permit that villagers requested to visit the island surely had a fee and/or bribe attached, and villagers with grievances both grave and righteous could rebel or, worse, find common cause with prisoners. Therefore, any sympathetic gestures towards locals on the part of the prison administration or regency may also be interpreted as a means of mitigating grievances to maintain social control or even profiteering.

From 1920, escapes grew increasingly common until they peaked in 1926 when the monthly average was fifty-two (there were over ninety escapes in September alone). After November 1926, however, escapes declined dramatically for the rest of the decade, averaging just over thirteen per month.<sup>56</sup> The 1926 peak coincides with the failed communist uprising of 1926, and it is possible that the electric atmosphere of rebellion and repression wafted over the waters to Nuskambangan and animated the prisoners.

While thousands of prominent anti-colonial agitators and those who associated with them were quickly dispatched to Digul that year under the orders of the governor general, thousands more participants from humbler backgrounds who took part in the rebellions – either rank-and-file party members or bystanders who were in the wrong place at the wrong time – were tried and sentenced. Among the convicts were 500 communists sentenced to hard labor who began to arrive on Nusakambangan in February 1929.<sup>57</sup>

Heeding official guidance on political prisoners, the prison director decided that communist prisoners shall only perform labor within the walls of Djoembleng prison, a contrast

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<sup>56</sup> “Report on the Penitentiaries on Nusakambangan for 1930.”  
Escapes per month averaged fifty-eight from December 1925 through October 1926, and 13.1 per month from November 1926 through December 1930.

<sup>57</sup> “Report on the Penitentiaries on Nusakambangan for 1930.”

to the experiences of other prisoners who were expected to perform labor outside of the prison walls in the rubber plantations, vegetable gardens, lumber camps, and fisheries of the island.<sup>58</sup> While the director's report refers to the communists as political prisoners and accordingly treats them with greater caution, it is clear through the director's language that he primarily views them as a source of labor. Inside Djoembleng prison, the communist prisoners made hats and mats of woven rattan, a task which they apparently excelled at. In 1929, 3,340 hats and 3,705 mats were sold on the market for profits of 100 and 200 percent, respectively.<sup>59</sup>

The dispute over security, centered on the rights of locals' access to ancestral lands, seems to have eventually relegated the formidable prison island to the margins of the NEI's penal system. Whereas previously the island's prisons had been reserved for only convicts with harsh sentences, in 1935, the Justice Department decreed that only those with sentences of one year or less should serve sentences on the island as escapes had once again become common.<sup>60</sup> Nusakambangan retained its fearsome repute even as it became relegated to the margins of the NEI's penal system.

Meanwhile, over the course of the 1930s, Digul expanded in size and significance as few Digulists were released while another large cohort of internees were incarcerated there in 1934. Digul expanded not only because of intensified political radicalism and repression, but also because the NEI increasingly relied on the governor general's extraordinary power to intern individuals by decree. The court system was a long, winding road to Nusakambangan, while the governor general's stamp was an express train to Digul. A political prisoner awaiting trial could agitate in the jails and outside supporters could mobilize journalists and lawyers who could turn

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

The report also notes that some communist prisoners were tasked with cleaning rice.

<sup>60</sup> Sulton, Sodiq, and Suryadi, "Perkembangan Lembaga Masyarakatan Nusakambangan," 50.

the eventual trial into a spectacle of colonial repression. The governor general's extraordinary powers, however, could excise anyone from colonial society on the basis of mere suspicion and subject them to indefinite incarceration. Building upon the VOC tradition of exiling political opponents, the NEI government believed it could banish anyone it deemed a threat to a far corner of the archipelago, causing prisoner's social extinction. However, Digulists refused to be consigned to social extinction, using their social position and education to portray themselves as ideal political prisoners in a way that appealed to Dutch and Indonesians alike to garner sympathy and support.

### **Examining the Concept of the Political Prisoner through Oey Tiang Tjoei**

The only account from a captive's perspective on Nusakambangan during Dutch rule comes from Oey Tiang Tjoei, a prominent member of Batavia's *peranakan* Chinese community who became the editor of *Hong Po*, a pro-Japanese newspaper, in 1939.<sup>61</sup> His book is not significant for its inherent literary value – on the contrary, it suffers from hasty editing and bludgeons readers with ill-placed Japanese propaganda throughout the text – but because it offers a captive's perspective on Nusakambangan during the colonial era and, most importantly, provides an example of a failed political prisoner narrative. In other words, through this memoir, Oey attempted to portray himself as an idealized political prisoner in emulation of Digulists before him, but failed. Additionally, Oey was arrested and interned alongside tens of thousands of others, most of whom were incarcerated in camps for nothing other their ethnic or national identity, which included ethnically those who were ethnically Japanese or Korean as well as all

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<sup>61</sup> Oey, *Pengalaman Kita*. .

*Peranakan* Chinese are a recognized ethnic group in Indonesia and Malaysia whose ancestors settled in the region before the 1500s. *Peranakan* families tend to have both Chinese and Malay ancestry, speak a distinct dialect of Malay, and have traditions influenced by Chinese and Malay culture.

citizens and subjects of the Japanese Empire. Therefore, Oey writings serve as a window into their experiences of an historical injustice which has been insufficiently studied.

It is important to note, however, that Oey was not incarcerated for his ethnic identity or nationality, but because of his outspokenly pro-Japanese views (and actions). Oey was, in fact, a Japanese agent as *Hong Po* was secretly funded by the Japanese consulate with the express purpose of “pacifying” anti-Japanese sentiments among Indonesian Chinese.<sup>62</sup> Oey made an ideal Japanese agent for his ideological loyalty, his prominence in his community, and his former experience leading a secret society called the Hoo Hap.<sup>63</sup> Like many colonial elites who had become disillusioned with Dutch rule, the seeds of his disenchantment had been sewn during his education in the Netherlands. For Oey, however, it was not communism or liberal democratic nationalism that had inspired him, but Pan-Asianism.<sup>64</sup> And for him, *Hong Po* was more of a means to his ideological ends than a natural outgrowth of his intellectual and professional passions.

While *Hong Po* surely drew derision from most Indonesian *peranakan* Chinese, especially since it was established well after Japan’s 1936 invasion of China which was followed by a steady trickle of rumors and news reports of Japanese atrocities that circulated to all corners of the diaspora, Dutch intelligence likely followed the paper closely as geopolitical tensions in Europe and East Asia boiled over. As Nazi armies swiftly overran the Netherlands in 1940 followed by France which allowed Japan to establish a foothold in Indochina, the threat of

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<sup>62</sup> Peter Post, William H. Frederick, Iris Heidebrink, and Shigeru Sato, eds., *Encyclopedia of Indonesia in the Pacific War*, (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2010), 535.

<sup>63</sup> Post, Frederick, Heidebrink, and Sato, eds., *Encyclopedia of Indonesia in the Pacific War*, 567.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

While in theory Pan-Asianism held that Asian peoples could expel European colonizers and rule their own nations better independently through cooperation among Asian peoples, in practice it became entangled with Japanese imperial ideology as the expanding power began appropriating and promoting it to weaken European power in Asia while strengthening its own position. Pan-Asianism thus became the ideological justification for the imperial slogan “Asia for Asians” and the East Asia Co-Prosperity sphere, positioning Japan as the nation that would lead all Asian peoples to freedom.

Japanese invasion suddenly became palpable in the archipelago. Therefore, the Political Intelligence Service (Politieke Inlichtingsdienst, or PID) ramped up surveillance of Japanese citizens and subjects, as well as Indonesians who they considered potential agents and sympathizers. Colonial authorities also drew up plans to intern them should hostilities erupt. Oey was on the PID's lists and, in fact, they had interrogated *Hong Po's* employees and pressured him to shut down the paper well before the outbreak of war.<sup>65</sup>

Sure enough, at 6:00 am on December 8, 1941, only hours after Japan launched its invasion of Malaya, Oey received a knock at his door and was immediately taken into custody by military authorities. He found himself loaded onto a truck alongside ethnically Japanese, Taiwanese, and Chinese people who were taken to an internment camp, arriving around 7:00 pm.<sup>66</sup>

Over the next few months, Oey and his peers were frequently transferred from camp to camp, spending most of their time in Garut and Sukabumi.<sup>67</sup> Oey documented this experience in *Pengalaman Kita dalem pengasingan Garoet-Sukabumi dan Noesakambangan [Experiences of our Exile to Garut-Sukabumi and Nusakambangan]*, written in 1942. What unfolded in these camps was a phenomenon not dissimilar to the mass incarceration of persons of Japanese heritage in the US, Brazil and numerous other Allied states and territories in the Americas. This comparison has its limits, however, as the incarceration in the NEI was much broader, rounding up all subjects of the Japanese empire, persons with Japanese heritage, Indonesians with suspected Japanese sympathies, European citizens of Axis nations, and even Dutch fascists. Thus, while Japanese Americans were incarcerated in the US solely because of their national and/or ethnic identities, the Netherlands placed those persecuted for their ethnic and national identities

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<sup>65</sup> Oey, *Pengalaman Kita*, 5.

<sup>66</sup> Oey, *Pengalaman Kita*, 9.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

in the same concentration camps as those arrested for their political views and actions. Oey was one of the latter, and as someone who had been secretly paid by the Japanese government to publish propaganda, his actions would have easily met the legal definition of treason in almost any nation.

While the fact that Oey was an agent for a fascist state who actively embraced its ideology hardly makes him a sympathetic character, the circumstances of his incarceration, extrajudicial circumstances of his arrest and incarceration, and his internment alongside thousands of others who were clearly persecuted simply for their ethnic identity or nationality shed light upon the extent of the Dutch colonial state's dependence on extrajudicial incarceration as well as an under-examined episode of state repression in Indonesian history. While the NEI authorities could easily have justified Oey's arrest and likely convicted him of a number of offenses in a trial, they chose to intern him through the special powers of the governor general – the same extra-judicial process through which so many Indonesians had been diguled in the preceding decades. Given that Oey was subjected to the same legal measures, he tried to insert himself within the same political prisoner narrative that the Digulists had, only to be met with public dismissal. Oey's book never gained a wide readership, after the war he lost elections for leadership positions in the Indonesian Chinese community to relatively unknown candidates, and his death in the 1970s. In the following, I offer a close examination of Oey's experiences to reveal the extent to which a literate public decides who is a political prisoner and who is not.

Oey's enthusiasm for Japanese fascism, an ideology which after the war came to be disavowed and discredited by all but a radical political fringe, is the first and most obvious factor that disqualified him from being celebrated as a political prisoner among the general public. Unlike nationalists like Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta who could claim they collaborated with

Japanese fascists instrumentally to advance the cause of Indonesian independence, Oey was a true believer. The term “political prisoner” has come to function as a mark of honor bestowed not by the state, but by a concerned public. Therefore, except for those rare circumstances in which the state makes the misstep of officially proclaiming any of its own prisoners “political,” the act of bestowing, or claiming, the title of “political prisoner” is a subversive one reserved for non-state actors.

To further understand why Oey’s claims to political prisonerhood fell flat, it is also necessary to look into how his narrative was crafted and circulated. As for circulation, the book was published by Oey’s paper, *Hong Po*, which few Indonesians trusted and even fewer read, especially since it was officially supported and endorsed by the Japanese occupation government. As a newspaper editor with strong anti-Dutch sentiments, Oey was no doubt familiar with articles and other works published by and about Digulists in the preceding decade, which was reflected in his narrative style that clearly emulated many elements of Digulists’ writing. From the beginning of his incarceration through his time on Nusakambangan, Oey constantly employs language foreshadowing exile, suggesting that his transfer from camp to camp culminating in his stay on Nusakambangan was a long road to exile overseas.<sup>68</sup>

While Oey never exiled overseas, his fixation on exile shows his awareness of its gravity in Indonesian society. Rudolf Mrázek has suggested that for Minangkabau figures, such as Sjahrir and Mohammad Hatta, exile has been interpreted through the lens of *merantau*, the process through which men leave their communities to embark on a journey in unknown “foreign” places to gain wealth, experience, and/or knowledge. While a number of ethnic groups throughout Indonesia practice various forms of *merantau*, it is most central to Minangkabau

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* Oey first brings up rumors that Japanese subjects had been exiled to Australia on p. 26, and frequently refers to himself and others incarcerated in the camps as “exiles” from p. 11 onwards.

identity which Sjahrir and Hatta are associated.<sup>69</sup> In Java and many other parts of Indonesia with strong Indic cultural traditions, *wayang* narratives even weave together a strong connection between exile, captivity, and political legitimacy, especially those derived from the *Ramayana*. These themes are echoed especially in Pramoedya's narrative non-fiction works about his exile on Buru.

Not recognizing the resonance of exile with particular Indonesian concepts like *merantau*, Dutch colonial rule made wide use of exile and forced relocation as means of quashing political dissent and disorder, providing plentiful examples of persons who could be inserted into these narrative structures and cultural patterns. As Dutch rule passed into high colonialism in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a growing Dutch-educated indigenous intelligentsia would become familiar with the canon of modern western literature and its own narratives of exile and return as exemplified in *The Odyssey* or *The Count of Montecristo*. As a member of this intelligentsia, Oey was undoubtedly well familiar with both Javanese and western narratives of exile as well as their political implications in Indonesian society, and he would have had these in mind when writing his account of incarceration. Oey narrated his journey as a road to exile because he knew that it was more likely to move his audience.

In its foreboding of exile, Oey's memoir consciously draws from the elements of narratives that propelled the Digulists to a state of martyrdom via extrajudicial exile and incarceration. The comparison is easy to make because the process of administrative internment applied to the Digulists was the same applied to Oey and all others who were incarcerated with him. Furthermore, by the time Oey was on Nusakambangan, the Digulists had already been evacuated from Dutch territory to concentration camps in Australia while a few shiploads of

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<sup>69</sup> Rudolf Mrázek, *Sjahrir: Politics and Exile in Indonesia*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1994), 9-16.

Europeans in Oey's cohort of internees had already been evacuated to camps in various Allied territories. It would only have been logical for Oey to assume that he would be next. Of course, in retrospect it is easy to dismiss all of Oey's foreshadowings as mere red herrings, but they play a more important role in his narrative by setting the Japanese military up as rescuers, saving him and his fellow internees from exile and potential death.<sup>70</sup>

Oey's narrative focuses on the camps within which he was interned, but he shows a frequent awareness of a broader constellation of camps throughout Java into which people from all corners of the archipelago – and world – flowed. He details how Asians of various ethnicities and nationalities shared the same barracks and buses, yet were segregated from the Europeans. In his descriptions of racial segregation within the camps, he expresses no surprise, suggesting that the racially segregated nature of the camps is but a microcosm of colonial Indonesian society under Dutch rule.<sup>71</sup>

It is especially striking, then, how he describes his final days of incarceration on Nusakambangan which began with a feeling of overwhelming terror and concluded with an all-powerful sense of victory as he witnessed Dutch guards and wardens of the most infamous colonial prison cower and relinquish their control in the face of advancing Japanese forces. Almost all political prisoner narratives worldwide contain this moment – the moment that the

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<sup>70</sup> Oey (*Pengalemen Kita*, 61) further justifies his fears of exile through discussion of the *S.S. Van Imhoff*, a ship of mostly German exiles bound for India that was erroneously sunk by Japanese aircraft. The way Oey weaves his story into unfolding contemporary events lends it credibility and urgency, enhancing its effectiveness as propaganda. The *Van Imhoff* remains a topic of public concern and contention in the Netherlands and Germany to this day. Oey generally writes about European internees with a sense of sympathy, but one inflected with bitterness whenever he describes the regime of racial separation within the camps in which Europeans received better treatment, and facilities than their Asian counterparts (Oey, c. 1942, 16, 63). He counts Germans, Dutch, and Hungarians (Oey mentions a Hungarian injured during an altercation with a prison guard on Nusakambangan on p. 50) amongst the Europeans in the camps.

<sup>71</sup> Oey, *Pengalemen Kita*, 23.

prisoners realizes that they are more powerful than their captors.<sup>72</sup> Yet, Oey never truly succeeded in convincing Indonesian society to confer him the status of a political prisoner.

Oey's memoir of his internment loses persuasive force in how it was clearly written hastily for propagandistic effect, likely the result of the author penning the memoir while taking on new responsibilities delegated to him by the occupation government and then being required to make hefty revisions requested by Japanese censors. These circumstances led to an unrefined published work with whole blocks of text repeated at different points in the narrative and inconsistent style and grammar. This is especially the case with Dutch loanwords which the Japanese occupation government ordered replaced with newly coined indigenous terms almost overnight. Oey evidently began writing his memoir before this change, as *tren*, a Dutch loanword for train, appears almost as frequently as the new Indonesian term, *kareta api*.<sup>73</sup> However, the drafty state in which the manuscript was published suggests that Japanese authorities believed it possessed sufficient propagandistic value to rush it to the printing presses.

Japan certainly recognized the propagandistic value of colonial prison islands, evident in their treatment of the Andamans, an archipelago on the eastern end of the Bay of Bengal that became the British Raj's most notorious penal colony, and therefore it is not surprising that they would have been extremely interested in capitalizing on Oey's experience on Nusakambangan. Common criminals and political prisoners from across the ideological spectrum were imprisoned

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<sup>72</sup> There is a notable strain of more pessimistic fiction published during and after the Second World War in which the state destroys the prisoner, best exemplified by George Orwell's *1984* (New York, NY: Signet Classics, 1977) and Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1941). The latter is one of the few books that Pramoedya had with him during the later years of his exile on Buru.

<sup>73</sup> The impact of linguistic changes and censorship in Oey's memoir can be traced through the way he refers to trains throughout his work. One Dutch loanword that the Japanese military government ordered replaced is the word for "train:" *tren*. The Indonesian term that came to replace it is *kareta api*, or "fire cart," likely inspired by similar constructions found in East Asian languages such as Chinese (火车, literally "fire car"). Oey uses both *tren* and *kareta api* at different points in the text, suggesting that the Dutch terminology was used in the original manuscript but hastily replaced by Japanese censors before publication. Another term that appears in many different forms is "Taiwan," which is differentially referred to as "Formosa," "Taywan," and "Thaywan."

on the Andamans when Japan seized it and nationalist prisoners who were on the far right (or simply opportunistic) found common cause with the new conquerors and were recruited into the Indian National Army, a unit of the Japanese military formed mostly from Indian P.O.W.s who had been captured defending Malaya.<sup>74</sup> Aside from the wartime internees on Nusakambangan who had been incarcerated alongside Oey, however, the Japanese occupation government likely saw little use in the prisoners who Oey patronizingly describes as “too simple-minded, unable to see the beauty of nature and humanity.”<sup>75</sup> These convicts would be afforded no special treatment or regard by the new occupation government who came to regularly use them as a source of forced labor in Cilacap.

When Oey reached Nusakambangan, he had only known of it by its reputation as “hell on earth,” but despite his circumstances, he was still awe-struck by the island’s natural beauty.<sup>76</sup> He contrasts the Wijaykusama flower and the island’s striking landscapes and sunsets with the Dutch prisons there, setting up a juxtaposition between Asian civilization as one which harmonizes with nature and western civilization as one which seeks to control it.<sup>77</sup> Yet, Oey acknowledges that the common convicts on the island had not the capacity to appreciate the island’s natural beauty, suggesting that seeking harmony with nature is not a racially innate feature, but one which can be transmitted and cultivated through Asian traditions of culture and statecraft. By drawing attention to the Sultan of Surakarta’s relationship with the island as mediated through the Wijayakusama flower, Oey shows that pre-colonial Java espoused this relationship with the land while his own appreciation of the island’s natural beauty arises in his narrative only once he realizes that Japanese forces were nearing victory. Japanese leadership, he

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<sup>74</sup> Joyce Chapman Lebra, *The Indian National Army and Japan (reprint)*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

<sup>75</sup> Oey, *Pengalemen Kita*, 56.

<sup>76</sup> Oey, *Pengalemen Kita*, 53.

<sup>77</sup> Oey, *Pengalemen Kita*, 54.

implied, would restore this harmonious relationship and prepare Java for an independence in continuity with its precolonial past.

This dual juxtaposition of west and east, controlling vs. harmonizing with nature, must be understood, of course, within the context of Oey's own extensive western education where he would have learned and internalized orientalist essentialisms that had been constructed to justify western imperialism in Asia in the first place. Oey did genuinely believe in the cause of Indonesian independence, but through his remarks on the convicts' lack of appreciation for nature, he articulates the need for Japanese leadership to establish an Asia independent of western rule. Thus, unlike prominent Indonesian nationalists such as Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta who collaborated with (and eventually turned against) the Japanese occupation government opportunistically, Oey was a true believer in Japan's cause. His belief partially derived from a critique of the racial hierarchy that places white over Asian people. Given that the Japanese empire avidly promoted the ideology of Pan-Asianism to counter western domination of the Asian race, Oey firmly believed that Japan's leadership and tutelage was an essential feature of any independence project.

Oey's narrative and worldview also had a distinctly Javanese inflection as he used the imagery and motifs of *wayang* to describe the contrasts between Dutch and Javanese rule. Oey places himself within an emerging Indonesian-language literary tradition in using *wayang* as a narrative device, a feature which can be found in many narratives of exile on Digul and Buru.<sup>78</sup> Alluding directly to the Mahabharata, Oey identifies himself and Japan with the victorious Pandava family and the Dutch with the vanquished Kurawa, directly comparing Japan to the

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<sup>78</sup> Allusions to themes and characters in *wayang* are especially evident in Pramoedya's narrative non-fiction works based on his experiences on Buru, notably: Pramoedya. *The Mute's Soliloquy*, and, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Perawan Remaja dalam Cengkeraman Militer: Catatan Pulau Buru [Young Virgins in the Military's Grasp: Stories of Buru Island]*, (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2001).

*kshatriya* warrior caste.<sup>79</sup> *Wayang* has long been politicized, remaining throughout Dutch rule a means by which Javanese could convey implicit but powerful political and social critiques without rousing rulers' suspicions, especially when those rulers were Europeans who generally had little to no understanding of Indonesian culture, let alone the expansive and intricate repertoire of *wayang*.

At first glance, Oey and Pramoedya appear mismatched in any comparison. Oey's social Darwinist outlook directly clashes with Pramoedya's liberalism, and where Oey sings praise to the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, Pramoedya recalls the Japanese occupation as a time of suffering. One of the reasons that Pramoedya's and Oey's memoirs of exile and incarceration are comparable is because they both have a similar narrative arc (i.e., arrest, the journey to exile, enduring the challenges of the final site of exile, inversion of the captors' power, freedom). In their first-person narratives, Oey and Pramoedya (along with many other Indonesian authors) go beyond alluding to *wayang* in directly imagining and portraying themselves as characters in *wayang*. When describing his arrival at the first internment camp, Oey refers to their military and police escorts as *wayang cokok* spectators, implying that the internees are the *wayang* characters while cuing readers from early on to interpret his narrative through the framework of *wayang*.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Oey, *Pengalaman Kita*, 32.

On the broadest terms, the *varna* caste system is divided into five fundamental groups: the *brahman* (a priestly class), the *kshatriya* (a warrior class), the *vaishya* (skilled laborers and merchants), *shudra* (unskilled laborers and peasants), and *shudra* (those outside of the caste system). In Pramoedya's formulation, he notes that only *brahman* and *kshatriya* castes had ever developed in Indonesia, calling the majority of Indonesians who fell outside of these two castes *wong cilik*. While Pramoedya does not directly equate the *wong cilik* with the *shudra*, it is possible to make this connection. In foregoing this comparison, Pramoedya avoids the negative connotations associated with the Indian concept of the *shudra* so that he can construct the *wong cilik* as a category representative of the Indonesian peoples. Thus, while *shudra* constitute an oppressed out-group, the *wong cilik* represent an oppressed in-group who embody an Indonesian national and cultural identity.

<sup>80</sup> Oey, *Pengalaman Kita*, 3.

While almost all Javanese would have understood the implications of Oey's allusions, his choice to identify the Japanese positively with the *kshatriya* is a reflection of his own social Darwinism in which he values raw physical power above all else. By contrast, Pramoedya Ananta Toer who would over twenty years later find himself on Nusakambangan awaiting transfer to the more remote penal colony of Buru instead, identifies the authoritarian New Order regime that had imprisoned him with the *kshatriya*.<sup>81</sup> He positions himself and other prisoners as the *wong cilik*, or "little people" who had always been outside the scope of the caste system. In associating himself and the Japanese with the *kshatriya*, Oey reinforces the idea of a natural social hierarchy which can be reconfigured through military force, while Pramoedya's invocation of the *wong cilik* inherently critiques the notion of a natural social hierarchy. On the broadest level, Oey's identification with the *kshatriya* reflects a worldview in which political legitimacy is rooted in physical force. In contrast, Pramoedya's identification with the *wong cilik* sees physical force, when applied amorally, as a source of suffering and illegitimacy.

The social Darwinian outlook of Oey's writing is perhaps its greatest undoing because, as mentioned earlier, Digulists' narratives reflected a long-held association between asceticism and political legitimacy, locating political legitimacy not in military force,<sup>82</sup> but special knowledge and endorsement of the divine. In striking contrast, Oey's writing is characterized by his eagerness to fight any Dutch to the death should they try to exile him.<sup>83</sup> In his glorification of military might, Oey fails to connect to the shared suffering of the Indonesian people. For him, independence comes through overpowering a colonial regime, while for the Digulists, independence comes through negating a colonial regime's power. By attributing the possibility

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<sup>81</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, 249-258. Note that Pramoedya uses the Javanized Sanskrit term *satria* whereas I use the more commonly used Sanskrit-derived term, *kshatriya*.

<sup>82</sup> This is not to say the military force is not an essential element of Javanese statecraft.

<sup>83</sup> Oey, *Pengalaman Kita*, 41.

of Indonesian independence to the ability of Japanese military force to overpower the Dutch, his words are only as strong as the Japanese military.

Oey's social Darwinian fixation on physical force more over predisposes him to a sense of open condescension towards those he considers weak. This is especially evident in his aforementioned dismissive attitude towards the common prisoners on Nusakambangan. He also uses *wayang* allusions to communicate his attitude towards Nusakambangan's common prisoners, likening them to *punakawan*, oafish but well-meaning clown characters essential to any *wayang* performance.<sup>84</sup> The convicts' portrayal as the *punakawan* becomes evident as Oey relates a song they sing while working the banana plantations, seemingly oblivious to the magnitude of social and political changes unfolding around them even as gun shots and explosions can be heard drifting to the island from Cilacap:

“Serene sounds, lights out  
 Lots of people running from here to there  
 The food within the soil comes to die  
 It is Semar who will one day be noble”<sup>85</sup>

It is uncertain whether Oey actually heard the prisoners singing this song or he created it out of literary license (though the latter is far more likely), but the reference to Semar, the main *punakawan* in *wayang*, softens his condescension while making space for them within his vision of an independent Indonesia. While Pramoedya has never explicitly ascribed to one ideological orthodoxy or another, throughout his memoirs he frequently refers to and sympathizes with “democracy,” “liberalism,” and “anti-fascism.”<sup>86</sup> Conversely, while Oey never directly refers to himself as a “fascist,” his pan-Asian ideology tacitly recognizes the role of an authoritarian,

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<sup>84</sup> Oey, *Pengalaman Kita*, 55.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute's Soliloquy*,

militaristic Japan in creating a postcolonial Asian geopolitical order. Hence, even while Pramoedya's and Oey's memoirs of exile and incarceration both have a similar narrative arc, the way that the coercive and violent power of the state operates in each one could not be more different.

In the beginning of March 1942, three months since Oey's arrest, he describes how Dutch jailers' hostility melted away as the Japanese bombardment of Cilacap intensified and eventually, he and his fellow internees were permitted to move around the island freely. When he crosses the water to Cilacap, he meets Japanese soldiers who help him arrange a long journey back to Jakarta, only to be awestruck by the scale of destruction wrought by the Japanese military. Notably, Oey is careful to portray Japanese military force as beneficial to Indonesia by attributing the destruction of civilian property and infrastructure to scorched earth tactics employed by retreating Dutch forces. This stands in direct contrast to the fact that, although the retreating Dutch forces likely played a role in this destruction, in reality much of it should be attributed to the Japanese military.<sup>87</sup>

### **Nusakambangan during the Japanese Occupation and Indonesian National Revolution**

When considering why Oey failed to portray himself as a political prisoner, another important fact that should be taken into account is that he was exiled to Nusakambangan, not Digul. Whereas Digul is imagined as a place of exile and return, Nusakambangan is one of disappearance and extinction. Pramoedya had referred to it as "the island no one has been allowed to write about ever since colonial times,"<sup>88</sup> various Dutch journalists had likened it to as a "France's Devil's Island, [and] the mercury mines of Siberia,"<sup>89</sup> and Oey has simply called a

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<sup>87</sup> Oey, *Pengalaman Kita*, 66.

<sup>88</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, 318.

<sup>89</sup> Chief editor of *'T Leven* to M.B. Van der Jagt, letter, February 10, 1925, 2<sup>nd</sup> deposit, Collectie 421, M.B. Van der Jagt, folder 38, Het Nationaal Archief.

“hell-on-earth” where “people with heavy sentences are taken.”<sup>90</sup> Nusakambangan was never bestowed the legendary stature of Digul, which is highly politicized in Indonesian collective memory and literary imaginary. After the conclusion of WWII, Digulists became popularly associated with resistance to fascism, especially as many contributed to the Allied war effort from the camps in Australia.<sup>91</sup> A newsletter published by pro-independence Indonesians in Cairo in 1947 makes this connection clear, hyperbolically declaring that “the Dutch concentration camp of Boven Digoel... is more horrid than those of the Nazi’s” and is “sufficient to prove that the Dutch government in Indonesia was the same as those of the Fascists.”<sup>92</sup>

In striking contrast, Nusakambangan has been depicted as the site not of political struggle and sacrifice, but as a setting for adventure and intrigue, as illustrated in the 1976 novella, *The Former Exile of Nusakambangan*, and the 1987 true crime film *Johny Indo*.<sup>93</sup> While the former is a piece of pulp fiction full of dramatic escapes, disguises, and pencak silat fights, the latter is a film relating the true story a gold thief’s successful escape attempt from the island. *Johny Indo* is notable in that the leading role was given to Johny Indo himself, transforming his experience as a gold thief, convict, and escape artist into a lifelong career on the silver screen. Therefore, the stature of Nusakambangan in Indonesian collective memory and literary imaginary is depoliticized, lending itself to adventure stories rather than narratives of political struggle – similar to the way Alcatraz is depicted in US popular culture.

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<sup>90</sup> Oey, *Pengalaman Kita*, 42, 54

<sup>91</sup> Frank C. Bennett, *Return of the Exiles: Australia’s Repatriation of the Indonesians, 1945-47*, (Melbourne, VIC: Monash Asia Institute, 2003).

<sup>92</sup> *Indonesian Republic*, 17 August 1946, Cairo: Indonesian Association for Independence Central Committee, Ministerie van Buitenlands Zaken – NEFIS/CMI 1942-49, 04553, Het Nationaal Archief. Rudolf Mrázek, *The Complete Lives of Camp People: Colonialism, Fascism, Concentrated Modernity*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2022).

In this volume, Mrázek reinforces the unwavering association of the Digulists with opposition to fascism through a monogram-length comparison of Theresienstadt, a Jewish ghetto established by Nazis outside of Prague, with Boven Digul.

<sup>93</sup> Any Asmara, *Tilas Buangan Nusakambangan*, (Solo: Penerbit/Toko Buku K.S., 1976). Dir. Jimmy Atmaja, *Johny Indo*, (Jakarta: PT Tobali Indah Film, 1987).

While Oey's narrative provides an endoscopic view of the prisons of Nusakambangan at the very twilight of Dutch rule, he offers few insights into life on the prison island during the Japanese occupation. The Japanese military indeed released the internees on the island, but for common convicts, life appears to have continued largely as it had under Dutch rule; some of the Dutch surveillance staff continued their function and role on the island even while many of their compatriots were rounded up into internment camps, suggesting that the Japanese occupation government recognized their jobs as essential and irreplaceable.<sup>94</sup>

For the common prisoner, labor assignments in Cilacap were introduced while they likely saw a gradual decline in rations reflective of food shortages that increasingly gripped Java as the war progressed.<sup>95</sup> It is clear that some high-profile incidents must have occurred on the island as over the course of the occupation two prison administrators on the island were tried and convicted by the occupation government. On June 30, 1949, J.F.L. Gaster, the director of Djoembleng Prison, was convicted on unspecified charges and sentenced to ten years imprisonment.<sup>96</sup> Just over a year later, on October 25, 1944, a prison director named Johannes Buebreft was sentenced to death for the nebulous charge of "disturbing the peace."<sup>97</sup> While the Japanese military government administered justice severely and often arbitrarily, even this sentence seems comparatively harsh, especially considering that a number of Europeans convicted of treason, conspiracy, and other seemingly more serious offenses were handed prison

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<sup>94</sup> "List of Japanese Sentences During Occupation," c. 1945, NEFIS/CMI 1942-49, folder 3521, Nationaal Archief. The continued use of Dutch and Indo-European prison personnel on Nusakambangan throughout the occupation is evident in some Allied intelligence reports that mention two such prison personnel tried by the Japanese military occupation government.

<sup>95</sup> Sulton, Sodiq, and Suryadi, "Perkembangan Lembaga Masyarakatan Nusakambangan."

<sup>96</sup> "List of Japanese Sentences During Occupation"

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

The name "Johannes Buebreft" does not appear in earlier lists of personnel on the island, therefore it is possible that he was given his position during the occupation, or that an informant misreported the name. Mistranslations of a number of Indonesian and Dutch language words in the document suggest that the informant was likely a native speaker of a Chinese dialect who conveyed information orally to native English-speaking transcribers, leaving the possibility that the name "Johannes Buebreft" was also mistransliterated somewhere along the way.

sentences between two years and life.<sup>98</sup> In fact, death sentences appeared uncommon except in relatively rare circumstances, with the exception of espionage cases in which the sentence was fairly common. All that is certain is that the occupation government viewed Buebreft's "disturbance of the peace" as a threat to its power.

On August 17, 1945, on the eve of Japan's surrender, Sukarno declared Indonesia's independence. The new republic had supporters throughout Java who, with the aid of Japanese arms and military training, established control on the island in advance of the arrival of Allied forces charged with reoccupying the NEI on behalf of the Dutch.

As Indonesian and Dutch battlefronts shifted across Java throughout the conflict, Nusakambangan remained firmly under Dutch control. From the start of the conflict, most Indonesian prisoners were placed in concentration camps in the Javanese countryside, closer to Dutch and allied military units and far from the front lines. While Nusakambangan was an island of formidable prisons, it was often close to areas under Indonesian control. Large concentrations of pro-independence P.O.W.s and political prisoners, therefore, would have represented a substantial risk if they escaped, or if they agitated among the prisoners already there. It was still Digul that captured the attention and imaginations of both pro-independence Indonesians and Dutch authorities.

After Japan's surrender, Australia began to grow impatient with the Netherlands' maintenance of concentration camps for the former Digulists on Australian territory, so the

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<sup>98</sup> Most convictions for "treason" and "planning treason" received around ten year sentences, though there were a not insignificant number of death sentences (six out of twenty-seven reported for treason). All reported convictions for conspiracy received between two and ten years, with a vast majority receiving ten years with no reported capital sentences. Espionage-related charges, in comparison, almost always received death sentences. While this data is only a snapshot of Japanese sentences and convictions, they do sketch a larger picture of how Japanese military courts treated various offenses, and it suggests that the occupation government Johannes Buebreft's "disturbance of the peace" on Nusakambangan as an act that threatened or undermined its power. For instance, it is possible that the warden incited prisoners to protest, failed to suppress a prison riot, or a mass jailbreak, but there is no extant detailed records of what occurred on Nusakambangan during the occupation, so whatever constituted Buebreft's "disturbance of the peace" is open to speculation.

Dutch had to draw up plans to return the Digulists to Indonesia. In Australia, many Digulists had the opportunity to with Australians as they were located near towns and village on the outskirts of major cities such as Melbourne and Brisbane.<sup>99</sup> Many even took the opportunity to work outside the camps for pay where they contributed to the Allied war effort.<sup>100</sup>

Digulists' position within Indonesian's political imaginations had only grown since the end of the war, and the unmasking of Hitler's brutal system of concentration camps had provided a new framework for understanding and talking about Digul. The Dutch had furthermore come to understand that maintaining the camp at Digul in its prewar scale and form would have gifted the new republic an invaluable piece of propaganda. After some heated negotiations among Dutch, Australian, and Indonesian representatives, an agreement was eventually struck to release most Digulists to Indonesian-controlled territory in Java. So, thousands of former Digulists disembarked from Australia in 1946, ending an odyssey of exile which for had lasted more than fifteen years. But not all would escape Digul so easily.

Dutch military authorities drew up orders for around forty Digulists to be reincarcerated at Tanahmerah. All had been accused of taking part in pro-Japanese and anti-Dutch activities in the Australian camps. Coincidentally, all were also loosely or directly connected to Partindo, a party led by the enigmatic Tan Malaka that had been formed after his split with the Comintern-aligned PKI. Two of the better-known Digulists slated for reincarceration were Jamaluddin Tamin, a Partindo leader, and Hamid Loebis, an eloquent and outspoken Acehnese journalist.

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<sup>99</sup> Bennett, *The Return of the Exiles*.

<sup>100</sup> Examples of Digulists performing auxiliary roles in Allied ammunition dumps can be found in: Digulists' Letters of Protest to Lt. Gen. Van Oyen, letter (translated), March 14, 1945, Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, NEFIS/CMI 1942-1945, folder 231A, Het Nationaal Archief. The letter written by journalist A. Hamid Loebis emphasizes his service working at an Allied ammunition dump while interned in Australia.

Col. Simon Hendrik Spoor, the founder and director of the NEI's military intelligence service (NEFIS), launched an investigation on Jamaludin Tamin, A. Hamid Loebis, and around forty of their peers and concluded that they should be immediately interned in Digul for "subversive activities in Helidon." The forty Digulists were shocked to learn that they were to be sent back to Tanahmerah as they had all contributed to enthusiastically to the Allied war effort by volunteering to work at a munitions depot near their camp. In fact, when they learned that they were to be re-Diguled, none knew why. In letters of protest penned to Gen. L.H. Oyen, the commander of Dutch forces in the NEI at the time, all seemed to think their "subversive act" had been to speak too excitedly about the prospect of Indonesian autonomy or independence after a speech by Queen Wilhelmina. Spoor's investigation, however, had alleged that the Digulists in question had actively worked with Japanese agents to distribute pro-Japanese and anti-Dutch propaganda in the camps.

When many of the re-Diguled prisoners had learned of the decision, they wrote letters of protest, affirming their devotion to the Allied war effort and expressing the shock over the decision. Civilian colonial authorities launched their own counter-investigation into their claims and interviews conducted with many Indonesians in the Australian camps seemed to confirm the Digulists' stories. When Spoor was forced to explain the decision to his superiors in light of the Digulists' protestations, he revealed the details of his "investigation."

Spoor writes in a markedly defensive tone, accusing the civilian authorities of trusting the words of "unnamed Indonesian contacts" over his own (but lone) named informant. Spoor's informant had furnished him with information that the individuals in question had smuggled in chests of pro-Japanese propaganda which they distributed throughout the camps. There was conveniently no physical evidence of these collections of propaganda – not a single leaf of paper

– because they had been smuggled out of the camps. Yet, Spoor was confident in his informant, an Australian living in Merauke known only as “Johnie,” was more reliable and trustworthy than all of the anonymous interviews collected among the Indonesian prisoners and personnel from the camps outside of Brisbane and Melbourne.

Spoor insisted that NEFIS would soon uncover the physical evidence necessary to charge the forty Digulists, but that until then their continued internment in Digul was necessary as a matter of national security. Predictably, NEFIS never did uncover the evidence (which was likely as much a product of Spoor’s imagination as his informant, Johnie) and the last Digulists were eventually released when the colonial government decided to close the camp in Digul definitively less than a year later in November 1946.<sup>101</sup>

While Spoor likely believed that fabricating a false pretext for the internment of these forty Indonesians would strike a major setback to the revolution unfolding on Java and Sumatra, in reality he had only fanned its flames. He clearly did not understand Digul’s stature within Indonesia’s national mythology, and in assuring Digul’s continued operation after the war he provided another talking point for Indonesians engaged in a struggle against colonialism, and another reason to fight. As far away as Cairo, a pro-independence newsletter from August 1946 decried the “hundreds of Indonesian patriots who are still being in banishment in Boven Digoel ... or sent back there after they had been brought to Australia in the wartime.”<sup>102</sup> While the Cairo-based activists exaggerated the number of Digulists at the time, it is remarkable that the knowledge on which their claims were based had travelled so far.

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<sup>101</sup> “Telegram to Governor General,” October 29, 1945, and “Telegram to Governor General and Prof. Posthumus, November 24, 1945, Collectie 251 Ch. O. van der Plas, Blok no. C22105, Toegang no. 2.21.266, Folder 179, Nationaal Archief.

<sup>102</sup> *Indonesia Republic*.

The activists also had something new to work with: drawing on the new and more sinister connotations given to the vocabulary of concentration camps from the Second World War, they could now refer to Boven Digul as the “Dutch Belsen concentration camp” and claim that its very existence was “sufficient to prove that the Dutch government in Indonesia was the same as those of the Fascists.”<sup>103</sup> It is ironic then, that NEFIS’ investigation, directed by Spoor, returned forty Digulists to Tanahmerah based on accusations of disseminating fascist propaganda.<sup>104</sup>

Just as the Digulists were, for the most part, freed and repatriated to Indonesian territory from Australia (albeit after a long, arduous diplomatic process),<sup>105</sup> the Dutch administration hastily set up new prison camps throughout Java for P.O.W.s. A police commissioner assigned to inspect the camps was astonished at the disarray of some of them in Java, noting that they regularly were only run by two investigators with no administrative staff, the offices had no paper, writing material, or lockable cabinets, and therefore there were no records of prisoners’ arrests.<sup>106</sup>

Meanwhile, “administrative internees,” mostly political prisoners, were held in local prisons and jails while Dutch authorities sought more suitable long-term solutions to their confinement. In discussions relating to the creation of more permanent camps, the Dutch explicitly sought out islands or other isolated places, such as sites on Morotai and Onrust.<sup>107</sup> Onrust, which was located in Batavia harbor and had intermittently been used as a site of

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Director of NEFIS to Governor of the Far East, “Subversive Activities of Indonesians in Heliodon,” Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, NEFIS/CMI 1942-1945, folder 231A, Het Nationaal Archief.

<sup>105</sup> Bennett, *The Return of the Exiles*.

<sup>106</sup> Freddy Hulscher, “Report on Indonesian Political Prisoners,” December 3, 1946, Procureur-generaal bij het Hoogerechtsof Ned. Indië 1945-1950, folder 96, Nationaal Archief. Police Commissioner Freddy Hulscher made these observations in a report on visits to several POW camps in East Java in December, 1947.

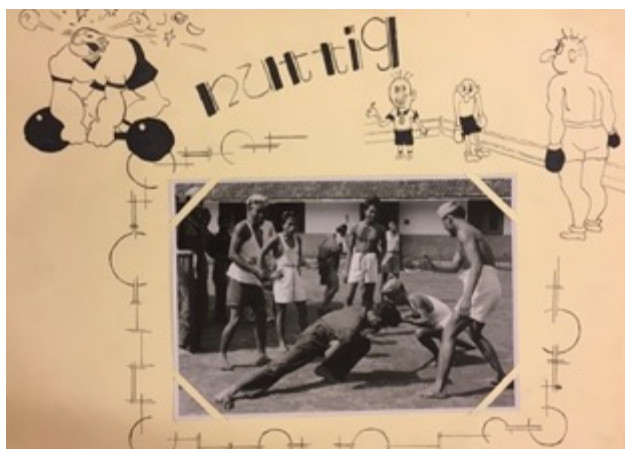
<sup>107</sup> Procureur-generaal bij het Hoogerechtsof Ned. Indië 1945-1950, folder 96, Nationaal Archief.

The document refers to a group of German women who had just departed from the island.

Onrust was a minor site of incarceration and at any given time never had many more than thirty political prisoners, all subjected to administrative internment as potential security risks.

incarceration, was eventually designated as a site of internment, while sites in Papua including Digul and Merauke were ruled out in fear that communist prisoners would incite rebellions.<sup>108</sup> Some new camps were built that were more permanent in nature, such as Gloeoger in Sumatra, but most were simply established at sites of former internment camps, such as Sukabumi and Ambarawa.

At some point, by 1948 at the latest, a relatively large P.O.W. camp was established on Nusakambangan. By then, the Indonesian National Revolution had progressed through many stages. Each negotiated ceasefire led to large prisoner exchanges, after which Indonesian



*Figs 3.10, 3.11, and 3.12: Towards the end of the war, Dutch P.O.W. camps attempted to “rehabilitate” prisoners in order to dissuade them from rejoining revolutionary forces upon their release. From left to right, top to bottom, prisoners are depicted playing ping pong, chess, and wrestling.  
Ch. O. Van der Plas, “Klakah Rehabilitation Center,” September 9, 1950, Collectie 251 Ch. O. van der Plas, Blok no. C22105, Toegang no. 2.21.266, Folder 186, Nationaal Archief.*

<sup>108</sup> Telegram to Governor General, October 29, 1945, Collectie 251 Ch. O. Van der Plas, Blok no. C22105, 2.21.266, folder 179, Het Nationaal Archief.

P.O.W.s and political prisoners would simply rejoin the ranks of the TNI. Determined to reverse this trend, the colonial government began to introduce an element of social engineering into many of the camps. A body called the Military Authority for Provisional Detainees (Voorlopige Arrestanten Militair Gezag, or VAMG) was created to work closely with the Bureau of Social Affairs to manage all de facto P.O.W.s, i.e. prisoners who were armed at the time of their arrest. A memorandum sent to all regional commanders in Java and Sumatra by Lt. Col. Van Lier on November 5 outlines this scheme,<sup>109</sup> notifying them that “the military must work with Social Affairs to determine the conditions of release, [as] making sure they can fend for themselves may prevent them from rejoining enemy ranks.”<sup>110</sup>

Initially, prisoners under the VAMG’s jurisdiction were sent to a number of specialized camps that attempted to “rehabilitate” them through vocational training and educational programs. Klakah was regarded as a sort of flagship camp which VAMG used to showcase their efforts to Dutch military and colonial authorities. Photographs prepared by Dutch officials in the camp, created to demonstrate the effectiveness of the new “rehabilitation” scheme, look easily like something that one could find posted on a bulletin board in a primary school corridor, with colorfully illustrated cartoons accompanying photographs of chess, wrestling, and ping pong matches among other activities (see figs. 8, 9, and 10).<sup>111</sup>

By December 28, 1948, Maj. Gen. Meyer had drafted a decision stipulating that all VAMG prisoners should be sent to a camp on Nusakambangan.<sup>112</sup> By March 1949, the camp had

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<sup>109</sup> Lt. Col. Van Lier was Gen. Simon Spoor’s intelligence chief. George McT. Kahin, who encountered him in Indonesia, refers to Van Lier as “surly and exceedingly arrogant.” George McT. Kahin, *Southeast Asia: A Testament*, (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2003), 29.

<sup>110</sup> Lt. Col. Van Lier to all Territorial Commanders in Java and Sumatra, Memorandum, November 5, 1948, Ministerie van Defensie, Strijdkrachten in Nederlands Indië, 2.13.132, Folder 639, Nationaal Archief.

<sup>111</sup> Ch. O. Van der Plas, “Klakah Rehabilitation Center,” September 9, 1950, Collectie 251 Ch. O. van der Plas, Blok no. C22105, Toegang no. 2.21.266, Folder 186, Nationaal Archief.

<sup>112</sup> Maj. Gen. J.K. Meyer, December 28, 1948, Ministerie van Defensie, Strijdkrachten in Nederlands Indië, 2.13.132, Folder 639, Nationaal Archief.

come to incarcerate at least 1,422 P.O.W.s.<sup>113</sup> Yet, the VAMG camp on Nusakambangan was short-lived as a January 5, 1949 ceasefire led to prisoner exchanges that was likely a factor in Lt. Gen. Spoor's 11 January directive that all VAMG prisoners must be released from Nusakambangan.<sup>114</sup>

Detailed plans had been drafted to facilitate the release of these POWs starting on March 1, 1949. These plans also reveal that the POWs on Nusakambangan reveals that the camp incarcerated Indonesians from across the archipelago. Only thirty-five lived in the neighboring residencies of Banyumas and Kedu, while the rest came from distances great enough to necessitate seaborne voyages. 715 came from West and Central Java, 513 from East Java, and 123 from the eastern archipelago and Kalimantan.<sup>115</sup>

Just three days before their intended release, however, Lt. Col. Van Lier decided to postpone their release, citing ongoing fighting in East and West Java, an unwillingness to undertake a partial prisoner release due to its potential impact on remaining prisoners' morale, and logistical problems.<sup>116</sup> More likely, Van Lier was less concerned about prisoners' safety than the prospect of them joining the fighting on the TNI's side during the final phase of a war in which a resounding Indonesian victory seemed imminent. Van Lier only managed to stall the prisoners' release for eighteen days when the NEI's procurer general appointed in 1946, H.W.

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<sup>113</sup> Cptn. H. Vader, "Scheme for Releasing ex-TNI Prisoners from Noesa Kembangan," February 12, 1949, Ministerie van Defensie, Strijdkrachten in Nederlands Indië, 2.13.132, Folder 639, Nationaal Archief.

<sup>114</sup> Lt. Gen. S.H. Spoor to Territorial Troop Commandant of Central Java and Semarang, January 11, 1949, Ministerie van Defensie, Strijdkrachten in Nederlands Indië, 2.13.132, Folder 639, Nationaal Archief.

<sup>115</sup> Vader, "Scheme for releasing Ex-TNI Prisoners." These figures exclude nineteen POWs with leprosy whose fates were not fully divulged in the document.

<sup>116</sup> Lt. Col. Van Lier to Secretary of State of the Department of Social Affairs and Secretary of State of the Department of Justice, letter, February 27, 1949, Ministerie van Defensie, Strijdkrachten in Nederlands Indië, 2.13.132, Folder 639, Nationaal Archief.

Felderhof, objected in a stormy memorandum that just stopped short of openly calling Van Lier's action a war crime.<sup>117</sup>

Directly referring to the captives on Nusakambangan as "political prisoners," Felderhof held that delaying their release was a "fundamental violation of their rights" as they continued to be "held without trial, against wartime regulations." Felderhof's memorandum further provides a point of reference for understanding the scale and significance of the POW camp on Nusakambangan. The Office of the Procurer General officially held that 3,000 political prisoners remained incarcerated by Dutch authorities (though this estimate is likely conservative).<sup>118</sup> Following official estimates, the camp on Nusakambangan held around half of all Indonesian political prisoners and P.O.W.s in the archipelago (or almost one third, following numbers cited by the press).<sup>119</sup> In the final months of the war, Nusakambangan had been transformed into what was unambiguously the largest prison camp in the archipelago.

While Nusakambangan appears to have been overlooked as a site for P.O.W. camps throughout much of the revolution, it became a major site of incarceration once the Netherlands' military position grew desperate. Dutch-run P.O.W. camps clearly suffered from a critical lack of organization and security which not only resulted in poor conditions for prisoners, but also infiltration and escape. One camp in particular near Surabaya, Bebutan, was regularly infiltrated and raided by Indonesian agents and forces, leading to its eventual closure in December 1948 as

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<sup>117</sup> Procurer General H.W. Felderhof to R.S.N. Van der Feltz, memorandum, March 18, 1949, Ministerie van Defensie, Strijdkrachten in Nederlands Indië, 2.13.132, Folder 639, Nationaal Archief.

<sup>118</sup> The memo also states that the international press generally agreed that the Dutch held 5,000 political prisoners in Indonesia and is likely more accurate than the Procurer General's numbers which are likely tainted by an obvious conflict of interest.

<sup>119</sup> Felderhof to Van der Feltz.

prisoners were moved to Kamp Van Deelden in Sukabumi (where Oey spent much of his incarceration) and Klakah which was considered a model P.O.W. camp.<sup>120</sup>

By the end of the Indonesian revolution, camps for political prisoners and P.O.W.s had been mostly abandoned in favor of more traditional prisons. Besides Nusakambangan, sites holding large numbers of political prisoners listed in Felderhof's memorandum include some of Indonesia's largest colonial prisons, such as Glodok, Purwokerto, and Bukit Duri.<sup>121</sup> The numbers given by Felderhof, moreover, suggest that by March 1949, all remaining Indonesian P.O.W.s and political prisoners were incarcerated in this handful of prisons.<sup>122</sup>

While it seems that the military had always been categorically against using the term "political prisoner," the Justice Department's position was less consistent. While Felderhof agreed with the military's position, he remarked that his predecessor had accepted a broad definition of the term which resulted in the normalization of its use within the department.<sup>123</sup> Thus, while Police Commissioner Freddy Hulscher readily uses the term in an official report from December 1947, military authorities notably tend to adopt a mixture of circumlocutions, euphemisms, jargon, and acronyms, which included "VAMG," "de facto P.O.W.," "ex-TNI Prisoner," and "internees,"<sup>124</sup> among others. In agreeing to officially use the term "VAMG," Felderhof could go instantly from enumerating thousands of political prisoners to "object[ing] to the fact that we know of the existence of a group of 'political prisoners,' i.e. prisoners [taken]

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<sup>120</sup> Telegram, December 18, 1948, Procurer-generaal bij het Hoogerechtshof Nederlands Indië 1945-1950, Folder 92, Nationaal Archief.

<sup>121</sup> The memo also mentions 600 prisoners in Batavia, but it is not specified what facilities in which these prisoners were held.

<sup>122</sup> While Felderhof's numbers are likely to be underestimates, it is less likely that he excluded any sites of incarceration from his list. If adding the approximately 1400 prisoners on Nusakambangan to those he cites for Glodok (550), Purwokerto (150), Bukit Duri (150), and Batavia (600), the total comes very close to the figure of 3,000 he gives for the approximate total number of remaining prisoners.

<sup>123</sup> H.W. Felderhof to High Representative of the Crown in Indonesia, correspondence, March 30, 1949, Ministerie van Defensie, Strijdkrachten in Nederlands Indië, 2.13.132, Nationaal Archief.

<sup>124</sup> Hulscher, "Report on Indonesian Political Prisoners."

solely for their political convictions, which in principle we do not have.”<sup>125</sup> But by the time Felderhof made this distinction in March 1949, the conflict had entered its final stages and Indonesian victory was imminent.

### **The Relationship between Nusakambangan and Political Prisoner Status**

While during the final months of the war Nusakambangan appears to have been the primary site of incarceration for Indonesian P.O.W.'s and political prisoners, this experience has left a surprisingly light imprint on Indonesian historical memory of the revolution. Nusakambangan remained a prison island as before long after the revolution ended. By contrast, Digul ceased to be a prison island following the end of the revolution. After the Netherlands retained control of West Papua, Indonesia's leadership cited the suffering of political prisoners there from 1926 to 1947 as a major justification for claiming it.

As early as 1950, the Indonesian government began *expanding* prison facilities on Nusakambangan with the construction of Kembang Kuning prison with a capacity for 1,000 inmates.<sup>126</sup> New construction continued as all of the island's prisons were expanded and rebuilt, along with a new agricultural unit in 1970.<sup>127</sup> In 1969, 14,000 political prisoners, Pramoedya Ananta Toer among them, would spend a month imprisoned on the island awaiting their exile to Buru. Still, the political prisoners' brief time on the island appears insignificant compared to their confinement in prisons throughout Java and their ten-year exile on Buru.

Nusakambangan instead grew into a symbol of Indonesia's strict anti-drug policies as it became the destination for drug traffickers, many sentenced to death. Harkening back to the prison's origins in 1905, in the 1980s Nusakambangan also became a site of confinement for

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<sup>125</sup> Procurer General H.W. Felderhof, memorandum, March 30, 1949, Ministerie van Defensie, Strijdkrachten in Nederlands Indië, 2.13.132, Folder 639, Nationaal Archief.

<sup>126</sup> Sulton, Sodiq, and Suryadi, "Perkembangan Lembaga Masyarakatan Nusakambangan."

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

Acehnese rebels waging a war of independence against the Indonesian state. Even after Suharto's fall from power in 1998, the Nusakambangan's prisons continued to operate seemingly unchanged as it soon became the site of imprisonment and execution for the perpetrators of the 2003 Bali nightclub bombing by Al-Qaeda affiliates. It is clear that the kinds of prisoners sent to Nusakambangan in recent decades elicit little sympathy within Indonesian society.

Nusakambangan has primarily received criticism from Australian activists decrying death sentences carried out on the island, which is the only site in Indonesia where prisoners are executed. While the death penalty has long been abolished in Australia, the Indonesian policy of sentencing drug traffickers to death generally elicits few objections among the Indonesian public.

Nusakambangan remains the most formidable and fearsome prison in Indonesia, though the government did once consider discontinuing its executions of drug traffickers there. The fantastical scheme proposed by Budi Waseso of National Narcotics Bureau (BNN, for Badan Narkotika Nasional), in 2015, would have had prisoners on death row for drug-related offenses removed to another smaller island whose beaches would be lined with crocodiles.<sup>128</sup> The scheme – perhaps even too outlandish for a James Bond plot – was unsurprisingly abandoned, but it does reveal the significance of prison islands in the Indonesian context.

This overview of Nusakambangan's more recent history brings us back to the relationship between the island and political prisonerhood in Indonesia. By comparing Digul narratives to Oey's memoir of his time on Nusakambangan, it becomes clear that Digulists together framed the idea of the idealized political prisoner in Indonesian society while Oey, who seemed to consciously emulate Digulists' narratives in his own writings, did not. While Oey's fascist sympathies and social Darwinist views as well as the Japanese occupation government's

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<sup>128</sup> BBC Indonesia, "Budi Waseso ingin Terpidana mati Narkoba 'Dijaga Buaya' [Budi Waseso Wants Death Row Drug Convicts to be 'Guarded by Crocodiles']," November 10, 2015, [https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita\\_indonesia/2015/11/151110\\_trensosial\\_buaya\\_waseso](https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita_indonesia/2015/11/151110_trensosial_buaya_waseso).

endorsement of his claim to political prisonerhood may have played a role, one factor that has yet gone unexamined is a comparatively simple one: Nusakambangan.

Mohammad Amanoe, under the pen name Homo Sum, wrote a provocative series of articles published in *Swara-Oemoem* in July 1930 titled “The Difference Between Mecca and Digoel.”<sup>129</sup> In the series of articles, Amanoe compares pilgrimage to exile, recognizing the inherent value in both. He argues that although conviction is a requisite for undertaking both journeys, each results in different outcomes. While people commonly assume that belief leads one to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca and that politics leads to one’s exile to Digul, in reality it is conviction that leads one to Digul.<sup>130</sup> Amanoe sees conviction as the outcome of experiencing truth through the exercise of faith, therefore his claims that Digulists already have conviction holds them in high esteem. Semantics aside, Amanoe’s views are reflective of a broader sense among his peers that Digulists are willing to endure the hardships of exile because they have come to a realization so unshakeable that they submit themselves to exile. They accept exile because they are so convinced of their truth that they know their suffering will help create an independent Indonesia.

Amanoe implies that Indonesian nationalism is not political, but religious in nature, foreshadowing a thesis Benedict Anderson would put forward in *Imagined Communities* almost fifty years later. Of course, it is no surprise that Anderson would come to this conclusion since he was first a scholar of Indonesian nationalism, and it would be surprising if he had not read Amanoe’s series of articles. As mentioned earlier, Digul was established at a formative moment in Indonesian national identity, and as such, some of the first shared discussions of the idea of the political prisoner in Indonesian society revolved around the Digulists. The Acehnese rebels

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<sup>129</sup> Paul W. Van Der Veur, “‘The Difference between Mecca and Digoel’ by Moh. Amanoe: An Introduction and Annotated Translation,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 17:2 (Sept. 1986), 268-281.

<sup>130</sup> Van Der Veur, “The Difference Between Mecca and Digoel,” 277.

shipped to Nusakambangan in 1905 had no such support and thus their exile equated to their total social extinction.

The Acehese rebels may have acted on convictions just as strong as those of the Digulists, but with no Acehese-language press or otherwise in which their fates could be discussed and debated, they had no chance of becoming political prisoners. The prisons of Nusakambangan were constructed before the birth of the Indonesian political prisoner, and combined with Dutch efforts to censor discussion of it, the sense of social extinction that came to be associated with the island from the start could not easily be supplanted. If one is sent to Digul because of a deeply-held conviction to return a martyr, one goes/sent to Nusakambangan because of a criminal conviction to be ever consumed by its void.

So strong was the island's association with social extinction that it became difficult to redirect its association in popular imagination to a place of political imprisonment, even at times such as the late 1920s when it held more than 500 participants in a communist uprising and in 1949 when it held more Indonesian P.O.W.'s and political prisoners than any camp in the archipelago.

This comparative investigation of Nusakambangan and Digul has outlined some features of Indonesian political prisoner narratives and how they developed, the social and political conditions that allowed for the creation of the concept of the political prisoner in Indonesia, and finally, the significance of place which creates strong associations between particular prison islands and prison narratives.

## Chapter 4: Political Prisoners of Buru: Indonesia's Cold War Prison Island

*Fig. 4.1.* With an area of 4,485 sq. mi. (12,665 sq. km.), Buru is an island of considerable size, yet it has always existed in relative isolation despite its proximity to Ambon. Buru's thin coastline that abruptly climbs into a mountainous, forested interior has ensured a societal divide between the outward-oriented peoples of the coasts, and the subsistence-oriented peoples of the interior. Coastal peoples lived off trade, while

those of the interior lived off sago. The Way Apo Valley cuts a plain deep into the island, yet it had never attracted settlement due to the prevalence of malaria and the unpredictability of the river's course. Suharto's regime chose this as the site for an enormous penal colony for political prisoners.



In 1998, Suharto's authoritarian regime fell from power in Jakarta after thirty-five years while, just one year later, religious and ethnic conflict set the Malukues aflame from 1999 through 2002. These events, coinciding with the end of the 20th century, represent a change in the trajectories of the three main groups that occupied Buru Island during its time as a penal colony from 1969 to 1979: the Indonesian army (TNI), the intellectual element of the Javanese petit bourgeoisie, and the indigenous Burunese. During the authoritarian New Order regime, which lasted from 1965 until 1998, the Javanese military elite displaced a burgeoning progressive middle class as the driving force of Javanese society. In Indonesia as a whole, the New Order intensified state-led efforts to more completely integrate the society of Indonesia's outer islands under the banner of a Java-centric vision of nationalism, in a project of internal colonization<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Pancasila comprises five characteristics that define Indonesian nationalism and citizenship that were set forth in 1945. They are: 1) the belief in on almighty God, 2) humanitarianism, 3) national unity, 4) democracy and consensus, and 5) social justice.

These efforts of internal colonization, intensified under the New Order, took a variety of forms, from the transmigration program, as was common in areas such as Kalimantan and Sulawesi, to direct military conquest, as experienced in the bloody invasion of Portuguese Timor L'Este and pacification of Papua. The Buru Island Penal Settlement (Tefaaf Buru) was an example of transmigration, though a special one. In 1969, the Operations Command to Restore Safety and Order (Kopkamtib) undertook a "special transmigration" project whereby around 12,000 political detainees (tapol) held under its authority were forcibly moved to Buru<sup>2</sup>. These tapol were all members of the aforementioned abangan petit bourgeoisie, Java's rising professional and intellectual middle class, shattered by Suharto's violent rise to power<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, the members of the abangan petit bourgeoisie that were "transmigrated" to Buru would simultaneously develop a critique of the New Order based on their experiences and observations of oppression in the penal colony while partaking in a process of internal colonialism, whereby the economic and cultural elements of a conservative authoritarian Java-centric state would be imprinted upon the Burunese landscape and people - thus the tapol occupied an ambiguous position within the hierarchy of power on the island whereby they were simultaneously a subject of and a vehicle for discipline and national integration. On the other hand, incongruities that spurred tapol's criticism of the New Order originated from the contradictions that the penal settlement posed to the Pancasila ideology that purportedly underpinned it, most apparently through religious indoctrination programs and tangible ethnic

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<sup>2</sup> Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, tr. Willem Samuels, (Hyperion: NY, 1999).

The term "tapol" is used to refer to political detainees of the New Order in this paper as the term carries with it connotations of a group identity in Indonesian that cannot be communicated through the English equivalent. Tefaaf Buru is the name of the penal colony on the island, a contraction of "*Tempat Manfaat*," or "Place of Benefit," though a less direct translation that better reserves meaning would be "Humanitarian Project," as Tefaaf Buru was intended to "reeducate" leftists as well as "allow" them to work - a sort of New Order doublespeak.

<sup>3</sup> Abangan petit bourgeoisie is used to describe the particular position of a rising progressive intellectual and professional middle class within independent Indonesia. While petit bourgeoisie denotes an occupationally and culturally defined class identity, the term abangan denotes a traditional Javanese social class with generally heterodox religious and cultural practices and world view.

ordering. Through this “humanitarian project,” Buru, both its land and people, were transformed by the tapol’s introduction of wet rice cultivation and modern infrastructure as well as new modes of economic exchange, religious beliefs, social values, and cultural practices ranging from marriage to television - all with a Javanese inflection.

Tefaaf Buru was a critical juncture in these divergent societal trajectories in Java and Maluku, looking specifically at the narratives produced by the tapol on the island, with an eye towards their complicity in processes of cultural imperialism. However, with another eye towards Buru, it is also necessary to sketch a history of the island itself, with a focus on the importance of forced movement and relocation as a recurring and dominant historical theme. Thus, the use of the island itself as a penal colony does not represent a historical rupture per se (as suggested in human rights discourse literature), but the augmented scale and ideological objectives of movement enacted by the New Order introduces an element of rupture in the island’s patterns of life and cultural fabric. Consequently, as Tefaaf Buru helped solidify the legitimacy of the role of a Javanese abangan petit bourgeoisie in Indonesian society, Burunese society experienced unprecedented upheaval.

This chapter is centered on colonization and how prisoners can at times find themselves as unwilling or unknowing participants in colonial projects on prison islands. Through their interactions with Buru’s Indigenous peoples and natural environment, the tapol effectively reoriented the island toward the Indonesian nation.

### **Buru Island from 1657-1969: Coercion and (Il)legibility in a Periphery**

Historical accounts of Buru Island have relegated it to a peripheral role on the political and economic stage of Maluku. While Buru’s early history is marked by its status as a tributary to shifting regional powers with a considerable degree of autonomy, 1657 represents a watershed

as the VOC put an end to this political pattern by installing a fort on the island and relocating the coastal villages. From this moment onwards, the convergence of a number of processes on the island become apparent, namely colonialism, punishment, and movement, articulated by contested efforts at rendering the island and its inhabitants legible, and thus controllable, to the colonial state. Legibility, however, rarely reached beyond the coast. By tracing this history, the establishment of Tefaaf Buru in 1969 becomes not an anomalous machination of an authoritarian state, but an intensified effort in the ongoing process of state integration, mediated by colonialism, movement, and punishment that had been in motion on Buru since the mid-1600s.

Since around 1475, Buru's population has been generally described as consisting of two societies, one living inland and another on the coasts. The inland population has lived semi-nomadically since they migrated to the island and fled inland from the coast due to aggressive incursions from Ternate, practicing subsistence swidden agriculture in sago palms and various tubers ever since.<sup>4</sup> Until the 1960s, most inland Burunese practiced a form of Shamanism, with little influence of organized religions, based on clan (*soa*)-specific ancestral worship (the *pamali*) as well as shared worship of spirits found in nature (*tete-tete*). Usually, villages are comprised of a single *soa* practicing strict clan exogamy, led by a *soa*-head selected by the community for leadership attributes along with a shaman selected for their ability to interpret spirits. Until the 1960's, the economy of inland Burunese operated on a system of barter and communal land and natural resource use regulated by the *soa*-head, who was also been responsible for conducting trade with other *soa* as well as with coastal settlements and external traders who sought forest products, such as cajeput oil and handicrafts<sup>5</sup>. Through the mid-1600s, wild clove trees on the

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<sup>4</sup> I.G. Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik di Pulau Buru: 1969-1979*, (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2001), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Roy F. Ellen, reiterated in Richard Chauvel, *Nationalists, Soldiers, and Separatists* (Amsterdam: KITLV Press, 1990), 17, claims that Buru played a major role in providing rice to support the population of Ambon from the

island were an especially lucrative forest product that would beckon traders from throughout the region and the world<sup>6</sup>.

Coastal settlements on Buru tended to be more stationary and prospered through trade, often acting as intermediaries between the inland Burunese and regional traders, mostly Butonese and Buginese. Coastal populations acted not only as economic intermediaries, but as brokers of political power, as well, using alliances with more powerful regional rulers established through tribute as a means of fostering commercial relationships and ensuring military protection from regional threats. Violent threats during the 1500s were presented from raiding pirates, Papuan raks (headhunting expeditions), and polities seeking to exert their influence regionally through displays of military force.<sup>7</sup>

By the turn of the 16th century, Buru had become a tributary of Ternate, whose ascendancy had eclipsed Majapahit's power in the Malukus.<sup>8</sup> The early 1500s also witnessed the incursion of Portuguese ships in the Malukus, seeking the source of spices. Buru, despite nominal Portuguese claims, actually opposed their interests in the region, as leaders from the island supplied troops to support Ternatean efforts against Portugal from 1575-80 in fulfillment of the tributary obligations<sup>9</sup>, illustrating a considerable degree of political autonomy among the

1500's onwards. This claim, however, is unlikely since rice cultivation on the island was practically non-existent before the 1970s.

<sup>6</sup> T.J. Willer and Cornelis de Groot, *Het Eiland Boeroe*, (Amsterdam: Frederik Muller, 1858).

Hersri Setiawan, "Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan: Warna-warna Dewasa di Pulau Buru [Two Faces in a Single Bosom: the Colors of Adulthood on Buru Island]," *Prisma*, v. 8, no. 10, (October 1979: 15-34).

Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 14-28.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard Andaya, *The World of Maluku: Eastern Indonesia in the Early Modern Period*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), 192.

The Papuan raids also form an important basis for the inland Burunese, as there is a the myth of the *Noro Pito*, or seven warriors who brought the people together and fought bravely against the Papuans. It is said that the *Noro Pito* went on to establish the seven clans found in the mountains of Buru. The story can be found in Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Perawan remaja dalam cengkeraman militer: Catatan Pulau Buru [Teenage Virgins in the Military's Grasp: A Report from Buru Island]*, (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, 84.

<sup>9</sup> We can see in de Bartholomeo Leonardo Argensola, *The Discovery and Conquest of the Molucco and Philippine Islands*, tr. John Stevens, (London, 1708), 56 (originally published in Spanish in 1609), how in 1575, Buru supplied

islands' leaders. Portuguese meddling in Ternatean political affairs eroded Ternate's regional political clout, weakening the tributary relationship Ternate established with Buru and other islands faded.<sup>10</sup> Despite Portuguese proximity and nominal claims over Buru, the Gowa Sultanate (present-day Makassar) began to exert actual political power over Buru,<sup>11</sup> Gowa drew Buru into its tributary network by establishing a fortified outpost by 1636 at the latest, concealed inland along the Wai Apo.<sup>12</sup>

### **Forced Movement and Surveillance on Buru under the VOC: 1657-1799**

When the VOC superceded Portuguese power in the region, they concentrated control on Banda and Ambon, designating them as the sole centers for nutmeg and clove production, respectively. mandating that the VOC destroy all other sources of these spices, primarily through political influence and cooperation, employing military force should diplomacy fail.<sup>13</sup> The Gowan presence on Buru represented a dual threat to the VOC, challenging their political and economic foothold in the region. By 1648, the VOC had discovered the Gowan outpost, launching an attack that destroyed it along with 3000 clove trees.<sup>14</sup> Burunese leaders further antagonized the Dutch when in 1655 they offered refuge to an anti-Dutch contender to the Ternatean throne.<sup>15</sup> They submitted to the VOC in 1657, and signed a treaty by which the leaders of Buru's coastal settlements would be pardoned if they granted the VOC a trade monopoly and relocated their villages to Kayeli, near the mouth of the Wai Apo, where Fort Mandar-sja was

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a substantial 4000 troops to support Sultan Babullah's rebellion against Portuguese rule in Ternate. Portugal's meddling in political affairs of Ternate, as well as missionary activities, played a key role in instigating this conflict, so it can be said that by providing military assistance to Ternate, Buru was indirectly opposing Portuguese interests, though nominally claimed by Portugal. Considering the population of Buru at the time, it is near certain that coastal leaders mobilized inland peoples in such instances.

<sup>10</sup> Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, 115.

<sup>11</sup> Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, 84.

<sup>12</sup> Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, 164.

<sup>13</sup> Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, 201.

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Dix Grimes, "Mapping Buru," in Thomas Reuter, ed., *Sharing the Earth, Dividing the Land: Land and Territory in the Austronesian World*, (Canberra: ANU E-Press, 2006), p. 144.

<sup>15</sup> Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, 165.

constructed to oversee the population<sup>16</sup>. Limited clove production was also carried out near the fort under VOC supervision<sup>17</sup>.

The forced resettlement of coastal Burunese villages in 1658 represented a major rupture in the history of the island. Whereas previously, political power over the island had been mediated through reciprocal tributary relationships, the establishment of a Dutch garrison and resettlement represented the first attempt to exercise overt political and economic control over the island - a leap from nominal to real sovereignty exercised by an external power. This real integration of Buru into the VOC's maritime empire resulted from intensifying attempts to police the trade in cloves once it was monopolized by the VOC.<sup>18</sup> Lacking in manpower, the VOC maximized its control over the population through relocation; concentration of the population thus rendered them legible to the state, making more easily governable.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, this state of affairs dominated Buru Island, during which time the Dutch gained a colonial knowledge of the population. VOC rulers differentiated between the inland and coastal populations of Buru, designating the former as Alufuru People and the latter as Burunese People<sup>20</sup>. The VOC presence on the island consisted of a Resident,<sup>21</sup> a few European officers and a small garrison of troops recruited from other

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<sup>16</sup> Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, 165.

Reuter, *Sharing the Earth, Dividing the Land*, 145.

Willer and de Groot, *Het Eiland Boeroe*, 93, 97. According to this account, the first fort was very rudimentary and named in honor of Mandar, the Sultan of Ternate. A more substantial fort was constructed on the same site in 1664 and named Fort Cosburg. The name was soon changed to Fort Oostburg in 1668. In 1778, the fort was upgraded to a five-sided star fort with 6-8 artillery pieces, receiving the new name, Fort Defensie.

<sup>17</sup> Reuter, *Sharing the Earth, Dividing the Land*, 145.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Reuter, *Sharing the Earth, Dividing the Land*, 146. Alufuru was a blanket term used to apply to indigenous peoples throughout Maluku, characterized by a semi-nomadic subsistence lifestyle and Animist religious practices. Willer and de Groot, *Het Eiland Boeroe*, 96.

<sup>21</sup> Admiral Rainier, who visited in 1795 to issue a proclamation of English occupation, describes the governing structure of the island: one Dutch Resident, a Raja, and thirteen "chiefs." Walter Caulfield Lennon, *Journal of an*

islands.<sup>22</sup> Throughout this period, the VOC oversaw the flow of commerce between Buru and visiting traders at Kayeli while the coastal Burunese retained their position as intermediaries between the inland peoples and the outside world. During this time, the Dutch also used Buru as a place of exile for Ambonese.<sup>23</sup>

### **Spatial Rationalization under the Dutch East Indies, 1824-1880s**

The 19th century saw major changes in the administration of Dutch interests in the archipelago and hence the introduction of new forms of control and administration, which impacted Buru. The VOC's 1799 bankruptcy prompted the company's dissolution and the territories were put under direct crown rule with the formation of the Netherlands East Indies (NEI). Political instability in Europe resulting from the Napoleonic Wars delayed major policy changes, however, and in 1811, Britain occupied the NEI until a settlement was reached in 1824. During this time, the Dutch clove monopoly was also abolished, negating the original purpose of the relocation of coastal Burunese to Kayeli. The reconstitution of the NEI saw considerable administrative and territorial reorganization, bestowing the thirteen clan heads in Kayeli with the title of raja, giving them greater control over inland Buru vis-à-vis the responsibility of levying taxes<sup>24</sup>.

The Dutch did not understand the social dynamics of the island and that many of the leaders of coastal villages to whom the Dutch delegated leadership were ethnically and culturally distinct from the inland peoples, influenced by centuries of commerce and intermarriage with traders from other around the region and world. As the Rajas of Kayeli began to extract taxes and

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*Expedition to the Molucca Islands under the command of Admiral Rainier*, unpublished manuscript, 1796. In British Library, Archives of the Home Office, Miscellaneous, 441.

<sup>22</sup> Willer and de Groot, *Het Eiland Boeroe*, 97.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Caulfield Lennon, *Journal of an Expedition to the Molucca Islands under the command of Admiral Rainier*, unpublished manuscript, 1796, Archives of the Home Office, Miscellaneous, 441, British Library.

<sup>24</sup> Reuter, *Sharing the Earth, Dividing the Land*, 146.

corvée, the burden fell disproportionately upon the indigenous Burunese, who maintained a subsistence economy through swidden agriculture, hunting, and foraging.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the Rajas claimed ownership of all sago palms in the Kayeli Regency. Indigenous Burunese would often choose not to recognize this aspect of the raja's authority, however, planting sago palms outside of the village where they were easier to conceal from officials<sup>26</sup>. Since sago to this day comprises an important source of caloric intake for indigenous Burunese, such demands would have been especially unpopular<sup>27</sup>. The rest of the nineteenth century saw the decline of Kayeli as the spice trade lost its importance and lucrativeness, and by the 1880s Fort Defensie had been abandoned while the thirteen rajas in Kayeli returned with their clans to their ancestral homelands on the coasts.<sup>28</sup>

### **From Imperial Backwater to Frontline in a World War: Buru from the 1880s-1942**

As the spice trade declined, the importance of other cash crops requiring sprawling plantations, such as coffee, palm oil, and rubber, were increasing, sparking wars of conquest in Sumatra and the establishment of the transmigration program in 1904 whereby Javanese and Balinese were moved through incentive and coercion, to sparsely populated areas with economic potential to grow cash crops. Or, as Pramoedya eloquently but cynically describes the program, transmigration was the practice of “scooping-up of all undesirable inhabitants and dumping them elsewhere”<sup>29</sup>.

From the 1880s through the 1930s, Buru remained a quiet backwater of the NEI. More Dutch did find their way into the interior of Buru as missionaries and naturalists, but while they produced more knowledge about the interior of Buru, the lifestyle and outlook of the inland

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Reuter, *Sharing the Earth, Dividing the Land*, 490.

<sup>27</sup> Reuter, *Sharing the Earth, Dividing the Land*.

<sup>28</sup> Reuter, *Sharing the Earth, Dividing the Land*, 147-148.

<sup>29</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, 319.

Buruneses remained largely unaltered.<sup>30</sup> Although cartographers would color the island with the orange dye that represented Dutch dominion, this dye must have been barely visible from the interior of Buru where ancestral spirits, manifesting themselves in the green forests, blue sky, and red earth took precedence in matters of every day life. The power of the Dutch state could be felt, perhaps, in the edifices of Kayeli, but became diluted when traveling up the muddy waters of the Wae Apo, or whittled down on the slopes of the surrounding hills with their razor-sharp elephant grass. The NEI would only expend their efforts once again to integrate Buru more completely with the appearance of a red sun looming ever more largely over the northern horizon.

Starting in 1936, the NEI government grew concerned over intensifying Japanese militarism and expansion in East Asia. During this time, the NEI constructed a military airfield on the northern end of Kayeli Bay at a new settlement, Namlea which quickly became the political and administrative center of the island.<sup>31</sup> Buru was surveyed for transmigration in 1938, but the plans were put on hiatus as war broke out in Europe the same year, and Nazi Germany occupied the Netherlands the next.<sup>32</sup> By this point, the NEI was certain that it was on a trajectory

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<sup>30</sup> The anthropologist Jan Petrus Benjamin de Josselin de Jong spent 1933-1935 in the interior of Buru conducting ethnological fieldwork. Archive of J.P.B de Josseling de Jong, KITLV Collection, Or. 385, boxes 6-23, Leiden Universiteitsbibliotheek.

A large team of naturalists carried out an expedition to Buru from 1921-22 and published their results in three volumes: *Boeroe Expeditie, 1921-1922*, vols. 1-3, published December 1925, November 1927, and November 1932. H. Hendriks and A.F. Schut both spent about a decade on Buru as missionaries, the former during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the latter during the first two decades of the twentieth century. They both went on to produce ethnographic publications, and Schut even published two travelogue-style books. See: H. Hendriks, *Het Burusche van Maserate [The Burunese of Maserate]*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1897). A.F. Schut, *Van Storm en Strijd op Boeroe's Kust [Of Storm and Struggle on Buru's Coast]*, (The Hague: Bookhandel van het Zendingsstudie Raad, 1918).

A.F. Schut, *Boeroe-Idylle [Idyllic Buru]*, (Rotterdam: N.V. Van de Rhee's Drukkerij, 1918).

<sup>31</sup> Peter Post, "Historical Overview," in *The Encyclopedia of Indonesia in the Pacific War*, ed. Peter Post, (Brill: Leiden, 2010), 7.

<sup>32</sup> Djamal Marsudi, *Laporan Pertama dari Pulau Buru [First Report from Buru Island]*, (Jakarta: P.T. Intibuku Utama, 1971), 19.

General Secretary of the Netherlands Indies Government and Deposited Archives, Folder 5138, *Nationaal Archief*, The Hague, Netherlands.

towards war with the Japanese Empire. The awaited invasion came in December 1941, ending 300 years of Dutch rule within months<sup>33</sup>.

### **Warfare and Rebellion on Buru, 1942-1964**

Buru was quickly occupied within a month of the invasion and Japanese forces quickly began efforts to develop the capacity of Namlea Airfield, which ushered in an influx of *romusha*, or forced civilian laborers, and “comfort women.”<sup>34</sup> Although many of the *romusha* came from Java, some locals were also recruited, such as Lige, the village head of Utaramalaheng.<sup>35</sup>

Although there were pro-Republic sentiments in Namlea after the war and some minor military action connected to the revolution, much of the interior of Buru appears to have been untouched by the political upheavals in Java and Sumatra<sup>36</sup>. After independence, Buru was briefly claimed as part of the breakaway Republic of South Maluku (RMS) in 1950 but was quickly reclaimed when the TNI landed in Namlea in July<sup>37</sup>. Apparently, some inland villages professed their allegiance to the long-dissolved RMS into the 70s, to the shock of many *tapol* who spoke with them.<sup>38</sup>

The 1950’s, then was a period of rebuilding and reconciliation for Buru. However, rebuilding and development would prove difficult considering the lack of labor, infrastructure,

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<sup>33</sup> Post, *The Encyclopedia of Indonesia in the Pacific War*, 13.

<sup>34</sup> Shigeru Sato, “Relocation of Labor and the Romusha Issue,” in *The Encyclopedia of Indonesia in the Pacific War*, ed. Peter Post, (Brill: Leiden, 2010), 245-260.  
Pramoedy, *Perawan remaja*.

M.A. Zaelani, “Selayang pandang tentang kehidupan penduduk dataran Way Apu, Pulau Buru., [A quick Look at the Way of Life of the Inhabitants of the Way Apu plains, Buru],” unpublished manuscript, Jakarta, 1980, Jap Erkelens Collection, Box 1, Archives of the International Institute for Social History (IISG), Amsterdam.

<sup>35</sup> Pramoedy, *Perawan Remaja*, 112.

<sup>36</sup> For details on the “Namlea incident” in which small guerrilla units in motorboats flying the RI flag clashed with Dutch troops in Namlea in 1946, see Archives of the Netherlands Forces Intelligence Service and Central Military Intelligence Service in the Netherlands East Indies, Folder 2909, Nationaal Archief..

<sup>37</sup> “Indonesian Landing,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1960, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Pramoedy, *Perawan remaja*, 94.

and knowledge of the land. Following transmigration plans for Buru drawn up by the NEI,<sup>39</sup> Sukarno resumed the transmigration program to a minor extent and the Rajas of Kayeli and Lialali saw this as an opportunity to rebuild, develop, and, perhaps, show loyalty and commitment to the Indonesian government in the aftermath of the RMS rebellion. So in 1964, the Rajas turned over their land titles to the Maluku provincial government, who sought to use the upwards of 1000 km<sup>2</sup> of vacant land as a destination for transmigrants to spur regional economic development and create rice surpluses to address the looming threat of shortages in Ambon<sup>40</sup>.

### **Buru Island and the New Order**

Meanwhile, in Java, growing political contestation between nationalists and communists was careening towards civil war. On October 1, 1965, the PKI launched a botched coup and, using the resulting murder of six right-wing generals as a pretext, General Suharto launched a pre-meditated and systematic campaign of mass killings and terror aimed at exterminating the Indonesian left<sup>41</sup>. Suharto also created Kopkamtib, an all-powerful military government body which he used to exercise dictatorial power<sup>42</sup>. By March 1966, upwards of 500,000 Indonesians had been murdered, and more than 1.8 million detained without due process<sup>43</sup>. About 34,000 of these tapol were eventually given a class B designation, meaning that they had been members of

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<sup>39</sup> The NEI government conducted one survey for a transmigration project for the Wai Apo Valley in 1939 that was interrupted by the war and another in 1947 that was halted due to independence. The former intended to send Javanese farmers to Buru while the latter intended to settle veterans from French Indochina on Buru. See: General Secretary of the Netherlands Indies Government and Deposited Archives, Folders 5137-5138, Nationaal Archief.

<sup>40</sup> *Proyek Pemukiman Transmigrasi Pulau Buru [Buru Island Transmigration Resettlement Project]* (Ambon: Departamen Tenaga Kerja dan Transmigrasi, Kantor Wilayah, Direktorat Jenderal Transmigrasi Propinsi Maluku, 1980), 5.

<sup>41</sup> John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006). Zhou Toumo, "China and the Thirtieth of September Movement," *Indonesia*, 98, (October, 2014).

<sup>42</sup> Douglas Kammen and Katharine McGregor, eds., *The Contours of Mass Violence in Indonesia, 1965-68*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>43</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 77.

the PKI or affiliated groups, but for whom there was not enough evidence to try them for their involvement or knowledge of the coup (that is, in fact, because none of them did know about it). Around 12,000 of these category B tapol would be “transmigrated” to Buru, starting in 1969, taking the burden off a prison system in Java that verged on crisis.<sup>44</sup>

### **Ethnic Ordering and the Development of Indigenous-Tapol Interactions**

Meanwhile, two TNI divisions, were dispatched to Buru to make preparations for the tapol’s arrival, including securing the land and establishing bases of operation<sup>45</sup>. Such preparations also involved the removal of indigenous Burunese from the land, resettling them in at least two villages.<sup>46</sup> This process of dispossession was accompanied by propaganda, warning indigenous Burunese that the tapol were treacherous convicts<sup>47</sup>. The *tonwal*, as the soldiers came to be called, however, did not gain the trust of the indigenous Burunese, either, as they quickly gained a reputation for violence and theft.

The tapol, as well, harbored prejudices and misconceptions regarding the indigenous Burunese stemming from ideas of Javanese cultural superiority. As the indigenous Burunese were conceived as more “primitive” people, many tapol feared that they would prove unfriendly and possibly violent. Gumelar explains how prisoners initially feared the indigenous Burunese, associating them with stone age peoples due to the simplicity of their weapons and tools, lack of hygiene, and disease, most notably leprosy<sup>48</sup>. Government reports also reproduced notions of

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<sup>44</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute’s Soliloquy*.  
Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 101. The Pattimura Division was based in Ambon and comprised largely of Ambonese soldiers, who were often treated poorly by Javanese officers, as mentioned in Pramoedya, *The Mute’s Soliloquy*, 279.

<sup>46</sup> Hersri, “Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan,” 19.

Contrary to the government’s claim that the land was largely unsettled, a map from the late 1940s show *at least* twenty villages within the area demarcated for transmigration. “Map: Eiland Buru,” General Secretary of the Netherlands Indies Government and Deposited Archives, Folder 5137, Nationaal Archief.

<sup>47</sup> A. Demokrasno Gumelar, *Dari Kalong sampai Pulau Buru [From Kalong to Buru Island]*, (Yogyakarta: Pusat Sejarah dan Etika Politik, 2006), 56.

<sup>48</sup> Gumelar, *Dari Kalong sampai ke Pulau Buru*, 56.

indigenous Burunese primitivity and inferiority, one condescendingly referencing an indigenous Burunese who asked a tonwal, “Sir, how can someone become a tapol?” a question that is simple and honest and without an understanding of politics<sup>49</sup>.” Thus, while the officers running the penal settlement saw the tapol as outcasts of Indonesian society for their politics, in many ways, they were still viewed as possessing more humanity than the Burunese because the tapol were, after all, Javanese.

Thus, the penal settlement brought to expression an intensive Java-centric ethnic ordering that permeated Burunese society. This ordering, which seemed at odds with the mantra “unity in diversity,” was put into practice subconsciously not only by military personnel, but by the tapol as well. The tapol and all TNI officers and Bapreru official were Javanese, though most soldiers Sulawesi and Maluku, and Pramoedya describes how Javanese officers would often order Ambonese soldiers to beat one another as a means of disciplining them<sup>50</sup>. Although the tapol were Javanese, their alleged association with the PKI placed them, in the eyes of the tonwal, at a lower level of this order, as they considered communism a more “primitive” mode of political thought, hence one of the Inrehab’s goals was to induce the tapol’s “mental development.” The internal structure of Javanese society must not be ignored, either; while the prisoners tended to hail from the abangan class, TNI officers often had more conservative santri backgrounds. In Java, the santri class is associated with bureaucratic service and doctrinal interpretation of religion<sup>51</sup>. Hersri, who identifies himself as abangan, remarks disapprovingly that religion “became the obligation of the vanquished towards the powerful” and “authorities on Buru stressed putting into practice the vertical relations between maker and creator, and the horizontal

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<sup>49</sup> Marsudi, *Laporan Pertama dari Pulau Buru*, 31.

<sup>50</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute’s Soliloquy*, 323.

<sup>51</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

relationship among human beings<sup>52</sup>.” Thus, the power struggle in Java that brought the santri bureaucratic and military middle class into power in 1965, continued to play out on Buru, expressed through ethnic ordering. While the coastal Burunese, considered descendants of Buginese and Butonese seagoing merchants, were afforded higher status than the tapol, the indigenous Burunese were considered even lower than both - so primitive, in fact, that they were incapable of participating in the political or economic life of the nation.<sup>53</sup>

Although TNI units had secured the sites for the 22 prison units on the island, the tapol were required to clear the land, build their own barracks, the officers’ quarters, arts buildings, places of worship, rice paddies, roads, and other supporting facilities. Each group of tapol was given six months’ rations (though less after the tonwal took their “share”), after which their unit was expected to be self-sufficient in rice-production; other economic functions, such as repair, iron-working, etc., were delegated to specific units<sup>54</sup>. Very few units, if any, were able to become self-sufficient in this time period due to a combination of Buru’s natural environment and tapol’s lack of agricultural experience. Pramoedya describes the ferocity of Buru’s natural environment, how wildfires in the dry season and floods in the wet season would often destroy the roads the tapol had worked so hard to build, how insects would ravage paddy and tapol alike, and how tapol were especially unprepared for these challenges because “most were city people unaccustomed to using brawn in their work<sup>55</sup>.” Furthermore, most Dan decided that tapol should “buy” agricultural implements provided by the government for free.<sup>56</sup> Swamps were drained, virgin forests cleared, irrigation channels dug, paddies flooded, and weeds pulled largely by

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<sup>52</sup> Hersri Setiawan, “Between the Bars,” *Manoa*, v. 12, no. 1: 5-34.

<sup>53</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute’s Soliloquy*, p. 32.

<sup>54</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 101.

Hersri, “Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan,” 21-22.

<sup>55</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute’s Soliloquy*, 29, 295.

<sup>56</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute’s Soliloquy*, 26.

Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 126.

hand. Overwork, insufficient rice yields, and tropical disease - especially malaria - became tremendous threats to tapol's survival, prompting them to search elsewhere to fulfill their caloric and nutritional requirements<sup>57</sup>.

Barracks were closely supervised and roll-call was taken every morning and evening, but the open paddies, overseen by relatively few tonwal, afforded the prisoners opportunities, in small groups, to leave and forage in the woods<sup>58</sup>. These woods, of course, were also the hunting and foraging grounds of the indigenous Burunese who had been dispossessed of their land. The shared use of this land inevitably led to interactions. Many tapol's accounts suggest that this contact was slow to come and that both groups were initially aloof of one another due to propaganda and cultural biases.<sup>59</sup>

Although tonwal warned indigenous Burunese about the "dangerous nature" of the tapol and prisoners were technically prohibited from interacting with inhabitants of the island, such interaction was seemingly inevitable<sup>60</sup>. Interaction, however, was vital to the tapol's survival as they learned to use products from nature. In exchange, the tapol often instructed Burunese in modern agriculture and the Indonesian language.<sup>61</sup> Ecological knowledge allowed the tapol to supplement their insufficient rice rations with fish and tubers that could be planted and hidden in the woods.

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<sup>57</sup> Hersri, "Between the Bars," 25.

Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 127.

Gumelar, *Dari Kalong sampai ke Pulau Buru*, 55, 90.

<sup>58</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 115

Gumelar, *Dari Kalong sampai ke Pulau Buru*, 73.

<sup>59</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, 79.

Gumelar, *Dari Kalong sampai ke Pulau Buru*, 56.

<sup>60</sup> Gumelar, *Dari Kalong sampai ke Pulau Buru*, 56.

Hersri, "Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan," 31.

<sup>61</sup> Hersri, "Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan."

Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 131.

Gumelar, *Dari Kalong sampai ke Pulau Buru*, 57.

The authorities forbade contact between tapol and indigenous Burunese until 1977, and so it was not without risk that these liaisons were made<sup>62</sup>. Prisoners could be beaten, humiliated, or sent to Jiku Kecil, a disciplinary prison unit with higher security, poorer condition, and torture.<sup>63</sup> Even so, the Dan must have had a certain level of tolerance for indigenous-tapol interactions, as Burunese would periodically visit the units, including entire families<sup>64</sup>. This selective tolerance was rooted in Tefaat Buru's ideological goals, which translated for many New Order officials into a sort of "civilizing mission."<sup>65</sup>

To understand this "civilizing mission" (i.e., Javanization), it is necessary to understand the New Order's ideological justification for the camp as a "humanitarian project." Tefaat Buru was implemented by two specially created bodies of Kopkamtib: the Body for the Implementation of for Resettlement on Buru (Bapreru), in charge of logistics and administration, and Rehabilitation Installation (Inrehab), responsible for the "mental development" of the prisoners so as to form them into "pancasila citizens who would never again follow the ideology of communism<sup>66</sup>." Inrehab's function, then was political "reeducation." The forced labor requirements were spun as a humanitarian action, "allowing" prisoners to learn the virtue of economic self-sufficiency by "enjoying" the fruits of their own labor<sup>67</sup>. The two other major components of the program involved religious education and family life which, though directed at the tapol, also impacted indigenous Burunese.

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<sup>62</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 135.

<sup>63</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, xxxvii.

<sup>64</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 130.

Pramoedya, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, 80.

<sup>65</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 94.

<sup>66</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, . xiii, 9, 93.

Marsudi, *Laporan Pertama dari Pulau Buru*, 58.

<sup>67</sup> Marsudi, *Laporan Pertama dari Pulau Buru*, 58.

## Religious Change

Hersri refers to the first few months of religious education attempts as “the crusades,” in which Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant clergy administered tests on religious knowledge and competed to gain followers in each unit<sup>68</sup>. These efforts arose from the New Order interpretation of the principles of Pancasila, one which is the belief in one God. The prisoners’ association with communism led Inrehab officials to assume that they were atheists and, therefore, the establishment of strong religious belief would hasten their “mental development<sup>69</sup>.” Very few of the tapol, if any, however, characterized themselves as atheists. Their understanding of religion, rather, was often rooted in the often syncretic nature of Javanese religious practice as well as philosophical rather than doctrinal understandings of religion encountered through higher education. Following the screenings and tests, the clerics, Rev. Matatula, Fr. Rovink (a Dutch missionary), and a Javanese Imam, Dr. Pranowo all tried to gain converts. While most prisoners had identified themselves as Muslims, Inrehab officials noticed that more tapol were converting to Catholicism or Protestantism. Hersri explains that the Protestant and Catholic prisoners received more gifts and holidays off work.<sup>70</sup> On Buru, these seemingly small perks could mean the difference between life and death, and some tapol converted frequently to benefit from Muslim and Christian holidays.<sup>71</sup> The “crusades” came to an end when Maj. Harahap, a strict Muslim, banned conversion and successfully threatened prisoners in a number of units to convert back to their original choice<sup>72</sup>.

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<sup>68</sup> Hersri, “Between the Bars,” 31-32.

<sup>69</sup> Toeti Kakailatu, “Bekas Tahanan G30S/PKI - Studi Tentang Adaptasi Mereka terhadap Keluarga, Masyarakat, dan Habitat Baru, [Former G30S/PKI Detainees - a Study of their Adaptation to Families, Communities, and New Habitats],” (master’s thesis: Fakultas Hukum, Universitas Indonesia, 1984), 110-111.

<sup>70</sup> Hersri, “Between the Bars.”

<sup>71</sup> Toeti, “Bekas Tahanan G30S/PKI,” 129-132.

<sup>72</sup> Hersri, “Between the Bars,” 31, 33-34.

Within the doctrinaire interpretation of religion taken up by the New Order and imparted upon prisoners, the shamanistic practices and beliefs of neighboring indigenous Burunese also posed a problem. As the mosques and churches within the units were the only places of worship representing organized religions, the services held for prisoners were also open to indigenous Burunese families - and indeed, many came, if out of curiosity at first.<sup>73</sup> Although forms of Shamanism and Animism had long been practiced in many of the outer islands by indigenous peoples, these religious systems did not receive equal recognition by the state. Thus, officials in Tefaaf Buru encouraged indigenous Burunese to enter the prison units to receive “salvation” through Islam or Christianity.

The sermons and religious lectures provided by Inrehab largely failed to engage the interest of the tapol. Hersri remarked that religious education on Buru focused on dogma and unsubtly presented it as the antidote to the “evils of communist thought<sup>74</sup>.” Consequently, most tapol were unmoved as they found the fire-and-brimstone lectures intellectually unengaging. The religious education programs were planned and implemented by Center for Mental Development (Pusbintal), a unit of Inrehab, and evaluatory tests acted as metrics of tapol’s “mental development” as pancasila citizens<sup>75</sup>. A report from Nusakambangan issued by Inrehab provides some insights into the process employed to achieve “mental development.” Both nationalistic and religious propaganda were employed in the forms of visual and audio-visual presentations, lectures, nationalistic books, religious texts, and compulsory participation in Independence Day celebrations.<sup>76</sup> These efforts at religious education, however, found a more receptive audience

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<sup>73</sup> Hersri, “Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan,” 30.

<sup>74</sup> Hersri, “Between the Bars,” 4.

Toeti, “Bekas Tahanan G30S/PKI,” 130.

<sup>75</sup> Toeti, “Bekas Tahanan G30S/PKI,” 110.

<sup>76</sup> Team Bintal Inrehab XI Nusakambangan, *Laporan Pembinaan Mental Tahanan G30S/PKI [Report on G30S Detainees' Mental Development]*, (Nusakambangan: Inrehab XI Nusakambangan, 1979).

among the indigenous Burunese as the spiritual and cultural basis of their traditional society unraveled.

### **Sex and Marriage**

Besides religion, a number of New Order officials believed that family life was essential to tapol's "mental development," and so they were allowed to bring their families to Buru<sup>77</sup>. Unit IV Savanajaya was built specially for tapol with families and provided a number of benefits. Opposed to barracks 50 meters in length that housed 50 tapol, each family could live in an individual homes of 54 square meters with 2 hectares of land with reduced work requirements.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, their children to attend public schools - a privilege denied children of tapol elsewhere in the country<sup>79</sup>. Despite the benefits and luxuries offered by Savanajaya, only 209 families came to Buru, as there were heavy strings attached - any prisoner who brought his family to Savanajaya had to sign a contract never to leave island. Most tapol saw through this ruse and did not want to subject their families to the difficulties of life as a transmigrant and farmer.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, most tapol were convinced that their detention on the island could not last indefinitely and that they would be able to reunite with their families once again, perhaps even soon, on Java<sup>81</sup>.

Although the official rationale for allowing tapol's families to come to Buru claimed that family life was necessary to adhere to Pancasila, the policy can better be understood as a response to homosexuality among prisoners. Most accounts from tapol recall homosexual relationships among prisoners, but often with a sense of pity, considering it a "psychological

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<sup>77</sup> Team Bintel Inrehab XI Nusakambangan, *Laporan Pembinaan Mental Tahanan G30S/PKI*, 95.

<sup>78</sup> Team Bintel Inrehab XI Nusakambangan, *Laporan Pembinaan Mental Tahanan G30S/PKI*, 109-112.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, 39, 293.

Gumelar, *Dari Kalong sampai ke Pulau Buru*, 102.

<sup>81</sup> Gumelar, *Dari Kalong sampai ke Pulau Buru*, 39.

disorder.”<sup>82</sup> The psychologists on Buru’s Inrehab team viewed homosexuality even more severely, considering it a contagious disease.<sup>83</sup> In 1972, the commandant’s response was to send sex workers from Jakarta to Buru to redirect tapol’s sexual desire. Besides state anxieties over homosexuality, this proposal also intended to remediate conflict with indigenous communities that arose from sour relationships between tapol and indigenous women as well as control the transmission of syphilis, which had been spreading within the Tefaaf Buru units as well as indigenous villages.<sup>84</sup> When the plan reached a stage of maturity, the Chief Commandant (Mako) announced it at morning roll-call. The plan was foiled, however, when Dr. Pranowa, one of the ulamas, raised serious moral objections, instead insisting that plans move forward to bring more family members to Buru.<sup>85</sup> The first families arrived on Buru and settled at Savanajaya in 1972.<sup>86</sup>

The transmigration of tapol’s families to Savanajaya failed to meet the project’s goals, as only 206 families arrived. Furthermore, families were unused to agricultural labor and the unfamiliar and restrictive conditions of life there often led to the deterioration of marital relationships. Thus, many women in Savanajaya who were wives of tapol had affairs.<sup>87</sup> The children of tapol living in Savanajaya were a particular subject of tensions, as they would often marry tapol or local men while still in middle school, both which parents almost universally objected to as they usually resulted in the girl leaving school to play the role of a housewife.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute’s Soliloquy*, 67.

Hersri, “Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan,” 24.

According to Hersri, about 15% of tapol on Buru had homosexual relationships at one point or another.

<sup>83</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, xxxi, xxxvii.

<sup>84</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 28.

<sup>85</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, xxxi.

<sup>86</sup> Gumelar, *Dari Kalong sampai ke Pulau Buru*, 102.

<sup>87</sup> Hersri, “Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan,” 24.

<sup>88</sup> Gumelar, *Dari Kalong sampai ke Pulau Buru*, 124-126.

Marriage with local men usually met stiff resistance, too, since most Javanese worried about the “primitive” nature of Burunese and that their daughter would be treated as property<sup>89</sup>.

Sexual relationships also developed between tapol and indigenous Burunese women, and some even led to marriage. The marriages, in fact, were even encouraged because, first, they were a vehicle for “civilizing” the indigenous population and, second, tapol who married indigenous Burunese women were forced to sign the contract to stay on the island for life.<sup>90</sup> Most relationships between tapol and indigenous Burunese women, however, were affairs with married women and so remained undisclosed. First, though, it is important to consider that Javanese (especially in cosmopolitan urban areas where most of the tapol came from) and indigenous Burunese understandings of sex and relationships were quite incongruous. To begin with, systems of marriage and courtship had many differences. In Java, marriage came later, usually in the late teens or early twenties, while on Buru women married between 12 and 16, while men married between 14 and 18.<sup>91</sup> Thus, most relationships between tapol and indigenous Burunese women would have been extramarital affairs. Indigenous Burunese society also conditionally tolerated premarital and extramarital sex, unlike in Javanese society.<sup>92</sup>

What many tapol did not understand about this system, however, is the harta, a type of bride price that had to be paid both in cases of marriage or sexual transgressions. In many cases tapol misunderstood the harta as a form of prostitution rather than a form of compensation for moral transgression, which contributed significantly to the view that married indigenous women were “property” of their husbands. When husbands or Dans found out, however, a number of

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<sup>89</sup> Hersri, “Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan,” 24.

<sup>90</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, 293.

Gumelar, *Dari Kalong sampai ke Pulau Buru*, 116.

<sup>91</sup> Hersri, “Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan,” 26. Hersri gives the age range as 12-14 for females, and 14-16 for males. Another conflicting report published around the same time, however, gives 16 as an average age for females and 18 for males. See *Laporan Orientasi/Observasi Suku Terasing Rana di Buru*, (Ambon: Social Service of Maluku Province, 1974), 15.

<sup>92</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 133.

possible consequences could occur. Tapol may also have not understood that premarital and extramarital sex were merely tolerated, not embraced, and so males who engaged in these acts with indigenous Burunese women were subject to the harta, if caught in the act<sup>93</sup>. A harta was decided by the head of the soa and depended on the woman's social status, her ability to work, her beauty, as well as the form of sexual transgression, usually paid in kind<sup>94</sup>. Tapol, of course were often either unable to pay the harta or did not understand its significance. Traditional penalties for women for extramarital sex sometimes involved violence, but most often it was a form of public humiliation.<sup>95</sup> Unpaid harta either resulted in the Dan settling the dispute as a mediator or, often, the murder of the debtor. As the Dan were also Javanese, they would have also likely misunderstood the indigenous harta system, and so such mediations often worked in the tapol's favor due to shared cultural understandings of sexual transgression, denying the indigenous Burunese men a sense of justice. Historically, failures to pay a harta have sparked warfare between soa, and tapol proved no exception to this trend.<sup>96</sup>

Sexual relationships on Buru, then, constituted a field of contestation over the bodies of tapol and indigenous Burunese. Tonwal, as well, engaged in relationships with indigenous Burunese and local Buginese women, as Pramoedya comments that the Mako lived with a number of mistresses in Namlea.<sup>97</sup> Cultural incongruity and misunderstanding marked these relationships and encounters and exacerbated tensions. While tapol and tonwal exoticized the bodies of indigenous Burunese women, the same can be said in reverse. While mediating a conflict over an unpaid harta, a Dan asked a Burunese woman, "Why, if you're already married,

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<sup>93</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, 81.

Hersri, "Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan," 21-28.

<sup>94</sup> Hersri, "Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan."

<sup>95</sup> Hersri, "Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan," 28.

<sup>96</sup> Hersri, "Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan," 30

Pramoedya, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, 81.

<sup>97</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, 44.

did you have sex with with a tapol?” And, she replied, “I really like them, sir... The tapol know all sorts of sexual ways...<sup>98</sup>” Without delving into too much detail, sex in indigenous Burunese culture followed a number of strict rules which many women found mundane compared to the more varied sexual behaviors of the Javanese men, and rumors must have begun circulating among indigenous Burunese women of their sexual prowess.<sup>99</sup> Thus, there were indigenous Burunese women and tapol alike sought sexual encounters with one another,<sup>100</sup> and these relationships and encounters began to erode traditional conceptions of gender relations in indigenous Burunese society, undermining the means by which men had exercised control over and understood themselves in relation to women.

### **Economy and the Environment: Sago and the Spirits of Capitalism**

Sago palms became another point of strain in relationships between tapol and indigenous Burunese communities. Although found unguarded in the forests of Buru, soa heads regulated the harvesting of sago. Each soa held sago palms as common property as they provided indigenous Burunese communities’ primary food source as well as building materials. To regulate the use of sago palms and ensure their continued existence as a sustainable food source, soa heads collected manu, a kind of tax, usually 15% of what was harvested.<sup>101</sup> Indigenous Burunese often taught tapol how to harvest sago and tapol’s use of the sago was tolerated, so long as it was sustainable and reciprocated. As prisoners struggled to meet food production quotas, sago poaching became an increasingly contentious problem.<sup>102</sup> Next to unpaid harta, sago

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<sup>98</sup> Hersri, “Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan,” 23.

<sup>99</sup> Hersri, “Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan,” 23.  
Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 134.

<sup>100</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute’s Soliloquy*, 80.

Hersri, “Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan,” 25.

<sup>101</sup> Willer and De Groot, *Het Eiland Boeroe*, 490.

Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 24, 132.

Hersri, “Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan,,” 22.

<sup>102</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 131.

poaching represented the next most common cause of violent conflict in indigenous Burunese society, and so this led to more attacks on tapol.<sup>103</sup> And sago poaching was always detectable and usually anonymous, meaning that an individual transgressor could rarely be traced. Thus, conflict over sago poaching was directed against the tapol collectively resulting in retaliatory violence that the tapol misunderstood as bloodlust. Thus, most tapol attributed these killings to the “savage nature” of the “primitive” Burunese, though some understood how their presence had dispossessed many indigenous Burunese of their land and resources.<sup>104</sup> The issue of the tapol, in fact, often divided soa between supporters of violent opposition, and those who preferred peaceful interaction<sup>105</sup>.

The increasing monetization of Buru’s commerce further contributed to the breakdown of the manu system. As sago was being poached and its supply reduced, a number of indigenous Burunese believed that the only way to recover its value was to harvest and sell it immediately for cash - much like a bank run.<sup>106</sup> Unlike sago, cash could be more easily guarded from poaching and could likewise provide sustenance. The sale of sago on a monetized market undermined the manu system in the vicinity of the Wai Apo, which in turn weakened traditional village elites’ power. While the soa head had traditionally been the key economic mediator between the soa and outsiders, cash allowed individual Burunese to initiate exchanges.

While the soa head’s economic authority had been undermined, monetization also challenged the role of the shamans. The shamans had assured the proper mediation between people, *pamali*, and the *tete-tete*. Tapol’s foraging and poaching activities, however, put

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<sup>103</sup> Hersri, “Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan,” 30.

<sup>104</sup> Pramoedy, *The Mute’s Soliloquy*, 78.  
Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 132-133

Gumelar, *Dari Kalong sampai ke Pulau Buru*, 85.

<sup>105</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 130.

<sup>106</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 133.

incredible strain on the ecosystem, and shamans' efforts to appease the spirits seemed less effective. The introduction of money disenchanting the forests, savannahs, and swamps of the Wai Apo as the products of nature no longer represented the gifts of spirits mediated by the moral economy of the soa, but instead, each came to be evaluated in rupiah.

Amidst this disenchantment, the mosques and churches located within the prison units came to hold greater moral authority among the indigenous Burunese, shifting the center of social engagement slightly away from the village and towards the religious community. Mosques and churches also acted as a new means of regular inter-soa gathering, a privilege usually reserved for marriages and a number of other ceremonies.<sup>107</sup> Most prison units had also been able to pool together to buy television sets by 1974, and watching it was a social occasion in which Burunese visitors would often join.<sup>108</sup>

While watching television is usually considered a passive act, in this case, it allowed the indigenous Burunese to actively imagine an Indonesian national community and their place within it. Although the indigenous Burunese only had access to televisions on rare occasions, the experience prompted greater interest in other forms of media and, through the newly monetized economy, they bought consumer electronics, such as radios and tape recorders, and listened to music, news reports, and sports broadcasts in the Indonesian language.<sup>109</sup> Other consumer products entered indigenous Burunese society, such as bicycles<sup>110</sup> which replaced travel by foot and t-shirts which replaced traditional treebark clothing. New social practices, such as soccer and

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<sup>107</sup> Hersri, "Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan," 19-21.

<sup>108</sup> Hersri, "Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan," 22.  
Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 135.

<sup>109</sup> Hersri, "Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan," 32.

<sup>110</sup> In 1945, there were only 100 bicycles on Buru, half in Namlea (likely owned by the Japanese military). This means that in Namlea, there was one bicycle for 20 people, and elsewhere in the island one bicycle per 380 people. Numbers based on: "Special Report Number 84," Allied Geographical Section, September 4, 1945, Archives of the War Office, Folder 252/988, The National Archives at Kew (UKNA). The same report can also be found in the Archives of the Ministry of Defense, Naval Intelligence Service for the Netherlands Indies and New Guinea 1945-1963, dossier 1074, Nationaal Archief.

schooling, also became important realms of experience.<sup>111</sup> Through consumption and mass media, indigenous Burunese society and consciousness transformed through immersion in a newfound imagination of the Indonesian nation.

While Benedict Anderson argues that print capitalism - particularly the newspaper and the novel - allowed for a national imaginary through a shared language and temporality, the case of Buru modifies this claim.<sup>112</sup> In this case, television and radio allowed indigenous Burunese to imagine the nation, mediums more relatable within a society based on oral tradition. This process, however, was enabled only through considerable violence expressed through economic competition over the natural resources of the island and uprooting of the traditional social fabric. As the island's sustainability inland had been previously guaranteed through a moral economy mediated through spirits and based on the communally-held sago, land encroachment and poaching prompted monetization of this moral economy as the only means of survival. While the moral economy was largely based on the assumption of a stable and sustainable supply of sago, its breakdown occurred when the sago supply was threatened. The rupiah appeared more stable, and so a number of indigenous Burunese sold much of the remaining sago for cash, eliminating an important commons and forcing them to participate in an atomized consumer society mediated by money and consumer goods, undermining the economic role of *soa* head and shaman.

### **Tefaaf Buru: a Failed Colonization?**

A great social rupture occurred in the course of ten years through Burunese's economic and social interactions with the *tapol* and *tonwal* who inhabited the penal colony. While the *tapol* were the primary objects of Tefaaf Buru's mission of creating "pancasila citizens," the

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<sup>111</sup> Hersri, "Dua Wajah dalam Satu Haribaan."

<sup>112</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev.ed., (New York, NY: Verso, 2006).

indigenous Burunese were transformed more radically. Thus, the tapol played not only the role of forced migrant and political prisoner, but acted as a vehicle for colonization, as well, transforming the landscape and people of Buru to fit the mold of Java-centric conceptions of the Indonesian nation. As the swamps, forests, and hills of the Wai Apo valley were cleared for wet rice cultivation, these natural features were also drained of their spirits and distinctly Burunese sense of place. The prison units were planned in a grid layout with a central square that clashed with Burunese settlements that were laid out laterally, connected by wide roads that supplanted footpaths and trails, and monoculture rice paddies replaced the forests teeming with biodiversity. Furthermore, the prison units were bestowed with Javanese names, such as Unit IV Savanajaya, Unit XIV Bantalareja, Unit II Wanayasa, etc. Each of the twenty-two units displayed a Javanese name given by the tapol, usually a description of the surrounding landscape, as well as a number assigned by the military, a marker of its legibility within a rationalized state. As the tapol humanized themselves by giving their living environment a name that holds meaning to them, these new humanizing names also washed away the past names that gave the places meaning to the Burunese.

Bapreru intended each unit to eventually become an autonomous village where the tapol would choose to remain as transmigrants after their release, retaining the Javanese name. This plan failed overwhelmingly, however, as only 209 of Buru's 12,000 tapol chose to remain behind in the village of Savanajaya.<sup>113</sup> Recognizing that the tapol could not be held on Buru forever, Kopkamtib began investigating means for their release in 1975.<sup>114</sup> As the thought of tapol's return to Java proved undesirable to Suharto, who still viewed them as a potential source of political dissent and economic burden, Kopkamtib calculated that ten years' indoctrination

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<sup>113</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 185.

<sup>114</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 176.

combined with some social and economic incentives would be enough to convince the tapol to agree to remain on Buru of their own free will.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, if they stayed, this project would serve as an indicator of the New Order's domination over the abangan petit bourgeoisie.

On December 19, 1978, the first of three waves of tapol were officially released and sent back to Java.<sup>116</sup> Throughout their imprisonment, most tapol saw through the New Order's propaganda and motives. In fact, the injustices suffered on Buru appeared as fundamental contradictions to the New Order's nationalist ideology which only strengthened many tapol's resolve, as in Pramoedya's words, they came to "know the mind, the heart, and even the hypocritical face of the New Order regime," one that placed "greater value on weapons than they do on the rights of humankind."<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, a number of tapol also recognized that a regime born and maintained through the application of coercion and brute force was politically short-sighted and would be similarly short-lived. This sparked a sense of hope and prompted prisoners to begin imagining a new Indonesian nation, one antithetical to the New Order.

Although the tapol articulated a scathing critique of the New Order through their experiences on Buru, they simultaneously participated and accepted elements of its modernizing project that privileged Javanese culture and ethnicity, and thus were complicit in setting Buru on a troubled trajectory of integration into Indonesian society, as the economic and cultural transformations set in motion on Buru between 1969 and 1979 were not so easily reversed. The indigenous Burunese had long been able to evade attempts by outside groups, such as the VOC, NEI, Japanese Empire, and RMS, to subsume them under larger economic and political systems. By conceding some taxes and some corvée labor, indigenous Burunese's mobility and subsistence lifestyle allowed them to remain relatively autonomous. Namlea and Kayeli, on the

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<sup>115</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 10.

<sup>116</sup> Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik*, 176.

<sup>117</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, 315, 337.

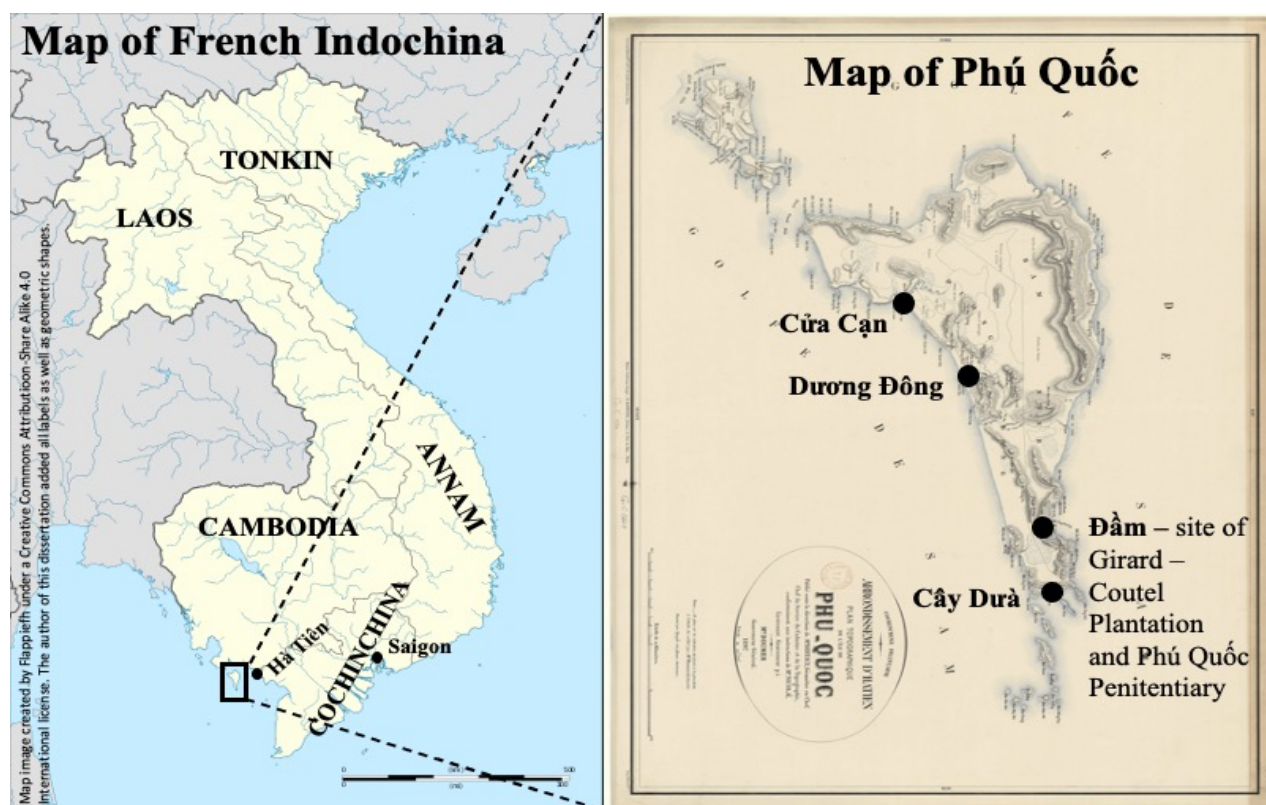
other hand, served as a point of regional and global connection whose history is punctuated by forced migrations, political intrigue, and warfare. The forced migration of tapol in 1969, however, proved disruptive to indigenous Burunese society by shattering its economic, social, and cultural bases. This crisis, instigated through interaction and conflict with tapol, led to rapid integration into the Indonesian nation through economic monetization and the creation of a national imaginary through mass media and conversion to Islam or Christianity. The Burunese were also subject to a society of strict ethnic ordering throughout the 1970s that led to the reevaluation of many cultural practices. While the turn of the 20th century saw the realization of the tapol's democratic national imaginary, conceived on Buru, the same era witnessed intense violence on Buru Island, when in 1999 Maluku erupted in a wave of Muslim-Christian violence which on Buru alone resulted in upwards of 165 deaths between 1999 and 2002.<sup>118</sup>

The tapol's decade on Buru had fundamentally altered ways of life on the island the causes for violence were no longer local, place-specific phenomena such as unpaid *harta* or poached sago, but they stemmed from identities whose roots were elsewhere. Moreover, the reports of religious violence now gripping the island would not have sounded out of place in other parts of Indonesia, or even the world.

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<sup>118</sup> AP, "Carnage on Buru Island as Mobs Ignore Police Pleas," *New Straits Times*, December 24, 1999. John Braithwaite and Leah Dunn, "Maluku and North Maluku," in *Anomie and Violence*, ed. John Braithwaite, (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2010), 147-242.

## Chapter 5: Imprisonment and Colonial Political Integration on Phú Quốc Island



*Fig. 5.1:* Phú Quốc is a 227.5 sq. mi. (589 sq. km.) island in the Gulf of Thailand located less than ten miles off the coastline of the Cambodian province of Kampot. The island's southeast and southwest-facing shorelines are lined with long, sandy beaches while the interior consists of craggy and lushly forested hills. The island's rock and soil are identical to that of the Elephant Mountains in Kampot, making rice cultivation nearly impossible; for this reason, inhabitants have historically turned to the sea for nourishment. The northern half of the island is more densely forested while the narrow southern half was dominated by wetlands until they were drained in the first decades of the twentieth century. While Phú Quốc is extremely close to the Cambodian coastline, its distance from historical centers of power and administrative seats has left it historically isolated. The island had been Cambodian territory until Mạc Cửu (who had been granted it as part of a fief by the Cambodian monarchy) switched loyalty to the Nguyễn dynasty. The recency of Cambodian sovereignty as well as its proximity to the Cambodian coast have fueled Cambodian claims to the island that persist into the present.

On July 21, 1888, under the double veil of darkness and monsoon rain, eleven shadows transversed the barrier separating the plantation-penitentiary and the outside world. Among the prisoners, now fugitives, were Thiều, Ân, Ông Đốc Tung, and a female prisoner who had become the latter's romantic partner during their confinement. While the three male prisoners had been corporals in charge of supervising and disciplining their peers who carried out the back-breaking work of the plantation, the woman had worked sewing and mending uniforms and

was therefore well-placed to furnish disguises so they could immediately replace their blue and tattered prison uniforms before filtering into a more populated place.<sup>1</sup>

The band of fugitives made the nearest village by sunrise despite having to trek through dense jungle and driving monsoon rain, obstacles that would impede their pursuers, as well.<sup>2</sup> Given the right conditions and contacts, they could have even set sail by dawn, anonymous and undetected among the fleet of small fishing vessels that leave port every morning. Then, by nighttime they would be on the mainland, well on their way to Châu Đốc before their former captors could even notify the mainland authorities (there was no telegraph on the island and mail service only came once a fortnight).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Nicolai/D’Argence Investigation on the Phu Quoc Penitentiary,” Nicolai/D’Argence Commission to Eileron de Blainville, Director of Local Services and Procurer General, Dec. 12, 1888, GGI 23738, ANOM.

Nicolai and D’Argence remark that the prisoners’ uniforms represented the worst material aspect of the prisoners’ lives, and were irredeemably tattered.

All early reports on Phú Quốc mention a nearly constant deluge of monsoon rains on the island from May to September, the time when the escape was staged. This prevented most fishing activities, but small coastal craft would have been able to make the journey to the mainland undetected.

A fishing village of about 150 also existed at Đầm (reported by Renaud in “Mouillages de Phu Quoc”) but presented fewer opportunities and greater risks than an escape via Hàm Ninh.

<sup>2</sup> At that time, the nearest village of notable size was Hàm Ninh which could have been reached from Đầm in a matter of hours by either trekking directly through jungled hills, or faster if traveling by boat (the latter also posed the danger of being sighted since it would require the fugitives to pass by Girard’s other piece of land at Bay Viem; Also note that the beach that French sources refer to as “Bay Viem” is most likely a corruption of the Vietnamese Bãi Vong). The overland route, however, would present higher likelihood of successful escape since the coastline was better-surveilled and a missing boat on the plantation would quickly alert guards or workers of an escape just as the reappearance of a missing boat in a particular settlement would provide a lead. Dương Đông was a larger population center at the time, but would have presented a longer trek from Đầm as well as require use of the road network. Furthermore, the town’s Garde Civile post which had been augmented after the establishment of the penitentiary was based in Dương Đông. A third option would have been to trek south to An Thới, a similar distance as Hàm Ninh but a more difficult route through swampy terrain; An Thới was also extremely small at the time and abutted the Procurer General’s plantation and was farther from the mainland in comparison to other villages.

<sup>3</sup> The mail route was established in 1899 as a branch from the Hà Tiên office. It was the only regular conduit for official communications between the island and the mainland, and the island lacked any telegraph station. Under normal conditions, the journey from Hà Tiên to Phú Quốc took two days, but the sea routes to Kampot or Kep in Cambodia were significantly shorter and could be reached in less than a day, suggesting that they would be the most viable routes of escape.

For information on the *gardes civiles* stationed on Phú Quốc, see: “Report on the Penitentiary Services of Cochinchina,” Sept. 28, 1885, HCOL 2026, ANOM.

For information on the postal service to Phú Quốc, see: *L’État de la Cochinchine Française en 1899* [State of French Cochinchina in 1899], (Saigon: Imprimerie commerciale Ménard & Legros, 1900).

For information on travel time to Phú Quốc, see: *Annuaire de la Cochinchine Française pour l’année 1881* [Directory of French Cochinchina for the Year 1881], (Saigon: Imprimerie du gouvernement, 1881).

As the fugitives looked back at Phú Quốc for the last time, they must have wished they could extinguish it from their memories just as easily as the tumbling monsoon clouds swallowed the coastline, glowing like a hellish ember as the sun struggled to break through. Making landfall, the fugitives parted ways, ready to melt back into the watery world of the Mekong Delta where they would try to live a simple and anonymous life far away from Phú Quốc. Few of them could have imagined that less than a year later later, they would have a hand in dismantling the penitentiary that nearly destroyed them.

The Phú Quốc Penitentiary was no ordinary prison, and Phú Quốc Island was no ordinary place. The island's history up to that point had been characterized by its isolation which contributed to its reputation as a forbidding place for settlers. Although the Phú Quốc Penitentiary started in 1882 as a small experiment in colonial penology and plantation agriculture, commencing a long process that would transform the entire island from a frontier island into a prison island. This chapter centers on the mechanisms and processes that transformed Phú Quốc from a frontier to a prison island, arguing that as failed private and public ventures and programs fail to achieve the desired development, the state turns towards increasingly unfree populations to achieve their goals.

Phú Quốc existed in what Li Tana calls “the water frontier,” a region that consisted of an interwoven patchwork of coastal and riverine environments comprising the Mekong Delta, the Chaophraya Delta, and the rocky Gulf of Thailand coast that connected the two.<sup>4</sup> The region had been constantly fought over but rarely fully integrated by regional states and in the 1600s began to develop a cosmopolitan frontier culture defined by the peaceful and violent interactions of Thai, Khmer, Cham, Vietnamese, and Chinese who made it their homes. Phú Quốc's isolation

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<sup>4</sup> Li Tana and Nola Cooke, eds., *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

from mainland centers of power as well as its unique geology beckoned settlers from far and wide, forming a cosmopolitan society with weak state control. Those who built their livelihoods on the resources of the sea thrived as long except for when piracy, and those who tried to live off the land survived until learning that the sandy soil could never sustain their rice crops.

The French arrival on the island was the beginning of a prolonged attempt to integrate the island which, after a series of failed plantation endeavors that failed over the course of the 1870s, turned towards a successive series of artificially-constructed carceral regimes. The 1882 penitentiary, Indochina's first experiment with a prison farm, set the stage for the importation of prisoners as agricultural laborers, followed by coolies who lived under unfree conditions. The island's carcerality came full circle with a brief Japanese occupation in 1941 which brought thousands of forced laborers to the island; the French regime followed suit the next year with the establishment of a series of "special labor camps," concentration camps where hundreds common and political prisoners were forced to develop the island's infrastructure. The scale of incarceration on the island only grew after the war as 30,000 KMT forces were interned in camps there between 1950 and 1953 which was immediately followed by a prisoner-of-war camp for Viet Minh and NLF guerrillas until 1975. Each of these carceral formations was characterized by incredible succession of cruelty across cultures and institutions.

The Phú Quốc Penitentiary was established in 1882 on the grounds of the Girard and Coutel Plantation at Đầm on the island's southeast coast. At a time of prison overcrowding that led to increased escapes and rebellions, the Penitentiary services sought out islands for the site of "a special penitentiary fulfilling the same role as the maisons centrales [but] with the correctional effectiveness of a metropolitan [penitentiary]." Yet, despite the lofty rhetoric of penal innovation, the Phú Quốc Penitentiary looked much more like a plantation than a prison because it was

indeed operated by and within a privately-owned plantation. Girard intended to profit from the deal as the penitentiary service paid him 0.06 piasters per day per prisoner.<sup>5</sup> The first batch of thirty prisoners were sent to Girard's land at Đầm on a trial basis in January 1882, allowing only prisoners with a two-year sentence. The Penitentiary Service deemed the program successful and in January 1883 approved up to 300 prisoners to work at the "penitentiary," this time allowing convicts with three-year sentences.<sup>6</sup>

In exchange for his payment, Girard simply had to send a monthly report to the Administrator of Hà Tiên, ensuring that prisoners were receiving rations, facilities, and treatment meeting the Penitentiary Service's standards. This task was handled by the plantation manager and co-proprietor, Coutel, who remained under Girard's employment while also serving as director of the penitentiary who also supervised a prison guard chosen by the administration.<sup>7</sup> The Penitentiary Service's sole responsibility to the prisoners was their transportation between the mainland and Phú Quốc. While the administrator who wrote the report about Phú Quốc Penitentiary seems to beam at the financial savviness of the arrangement which at first glance saved the penitentiary service 547.5 piasters per year,<sup>8</sup> the cost of transportation to the island to which there was no regular service and the stationing of twenty gardes civiles to deter escapes must have made the penitentiary much less a bargain for the Government of Cochinchina.<sup>9</sup> The enthusiastic preparer of the report also leaves out another important detail: 0.065 piasters per day

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<sup>5</sup> "Report on the Penitentiary Services of Cochinchina," Sept. 28, 1885, HCOL 2026, ANOM.

Peter Zinoman also makes note of the Phú Quốc Penitentiary in this particular report in *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 55.

<sup>6</sup> "Nicolai/D'Argence Investigation," GGI 23738.

<sup>7</sup> "Decision No. 10 of 3 Jan. 1882," *Bulletin Official de la Cochinchine Française*, no. 1, 1882, 29-30.

<sup>8</sup> "Report on the Penitentiary Services of Cochinchina," HCOL 2026, notes that while Girard is paid 0.06 per prisoner per day, the cost to feed each prisoner in the Maison centrale is 0.065 per prisoner per day, or 547.5 piasters per year in total.

<sup>9</sup> Another cost that the Penitentiary Service footed was the hospitalization of prisoners who contracted tropical diseases such as malaria and dysentery at rates much higher than the continental prisons due to the effect of grueling work in close proximity to malarial swamps.

was the *average* value of rations for *all prisoners* at the Maison centrale, a value that included European prisoners whose daily ration was worth 0.16 piasters as well as Asian ones whose ration was worth 0.053 piasters, and considering that all convicts sent to Phú Quốc were Indochinese, the penitentiary service was losing at least 766.5 piasters per year on the deal.<sup>10</sup>

While the Phú Quốc Penitentiary was inspired by recent penological concepts connecting labor with moral reformation, in practice it was run as a plantation that saw labor as nothing more than a means to a profit, creating a mismatch between vision and implementation. The idea of forcing prisoners to work on a plantation was by no means innovative, as seen through various forms of convict leasing, which was especially common in the antebellum U.S. South, and the use of convict labor in European overseas penal colonies such as Australia, New Caledonia, or Guiana. What was unique about the Phú Quốc Penitentiary is that it was a private plantation that had been officially designated as a penitentiary by the Cochinchina Government who delegated the corresponding powers and responsibilities to its proprietor. Moreover, the Phú Quốc Penitentiary was established two decades before other prison farms were developed in the first decade of the twentieth century, used notably in the US and Netherlands East Indies (NEI).

The U.S.' experiments with prison farms developed from two entangled streams, one branching out of northeastern reformism that saw labor as a moralizing instrument for troubled youth, and another stemming from the afterlife of southern slavery, using prison labor through a convict lease system as a stand-in for chattel slavery and as a means of returning freed slaves into a state of servitude. The U.S.' first prison farm, however, was the Iwahig Prison on the Philippine Island of Palawan. Palawan had long been a site of exile for political dissidents and rebels under Spanish rule, so when the jails of Manila faced overcrowding, the U.S.

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<sup>10</sup> 1885 values for daily rations in the Maison Centrale are given in Director of the Maison Centrale of Saigon, "Report on the Internal Operations of the Maison Centrale," Apr. 23, 1885, GGI 10541, ANOM.

administration founded Iwahig in 1904 as an open-air penal colony, intended as a place where offenders at the end of their sentences could prove their moral rehabilitation and gain parole.<sup>11</sup> The apparent success of the Iwahig model was applied less successfully in Sing Sing where a short-lived prison farm was installed,<sup>12</sup> but the model's successful demonstration in the Philippines and brief presence in New York, coinciding with the abolishment of the convict lease system in the south, was enough to gain the interest of southern legislators who in the second half of the decade created prison farms across the U.S. south which grew into notorious institutions such as Louisiana's Angola Prison and Mississippi's Parchman Farm. Unlike the carefully executed and organized experiments in the Philippines and northeast, the southern prison farms were infused with the institutional memory of slavery as white guards and prisoner-overseers supervised black laborers with great brutality. Phú Quốc Penitentiary certainly resembled Angola or Parchman more than Iwahig or Sing Sing.

In the NEI, various "labor prisons" were also created in the first decade of the twentieth century, such as Nusakambangan (est. 1908) which, like Phú Quốc, engaged in rubber cultivation.<sup>13</sup> Like the U.S. model, however, Nusakambangan was owned and operated by the state. The first convicts on Nusakambangan were Acehnese prisoners of war who were later joined by those with harsh sentences from Java.<sup>14</sup> All of the turn-of-the century island prison farms of Southeast Asia – Phú Quốc, Iwahig, and Nusakambangan – were in part created to alleviate overcrowding and potential rebellion in the central prisons of colonial capitals due to rebellions and states' high imperial expansion of definitions of criminality and a desire to profit

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Salman, "'The Prison that Makes Men Free:' The Iwahig Penal Colony and the Simulacra of the American State in the Philippines," in *Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State*, Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco A. Scarano, eds., (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 116-130.

<sup>12</sup> McCoy and Scarano, eds., *Colonial Crucible*, 116-130.

<sup>13</sup> "Decision no. 228 by the Governor General of the Netherlands Indies," *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië over het Jaar 1911*, (Batavia, NEI: Landsdrukkerij, 1912).

<sup>14</sup> "Decision no. 221 by the Governor General of the Netherlands Indies," *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië over het Jaar 1908*, (Batavia, NEI: Landsdrukkerij, 1909).

from prisoners' labor. Yet, slightly different visions justified the creation of each of these prison islands: Iwahig intended to prepare convicts already at the end of long sentences for social reintegration, Nusakambangan was primarily punitive, and Phú Quốc attempted to moralize convicts with short sentences from the start to the finish. It is also important to note that while Iwahig and Nusakambangan outlived the colonial regimes that created them, the Phú Quốc Penitentiary faded into abandon after fewer than nine years, leaving few traces as if it had been intentionally forgotten.

Girard was the second investor to be awarded a land concession on Phú Quốc by the Colonial Council, granted in 1874. The island had earlier served as Nguyễn Trung Trực's base who established himself and a band of guerrillas in the northern part of the island in 1867. Trực, born into a humble family of fishermen in Tan An, opposed French rule in Cochinchina from its outset and recruited an army of peasant guerrillas from the southern Mekong Delta who harassed French forces along the region's networks of waterways. His attacks posed such a threat to French forces in the region that they eventually organized an expedition against his guerrilla army, forcing him to flee to Phú Quốc.<sup>15</sup> A force of 125 militiamen and partisans was dispatched to Phú Quốc in September 1868, landing in Hàm Ninh. He immediately took the fight to the hilly interior where he put up a stiff resistance until lack of supplies led to his surrender in 1868 after which he was taken to Rạch Giá and beheaded.<sup>16</sup> Today, there are a number of temples and shrines in the northern part of Phú Quốc dedicated to him as well as a temple to his wife in Cửa Cạn.

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<sup>15</sup> *Lịch sử Phú Quốc qua Tài liệu Lưu Trữ [The History of Phú Quốc through Archival Documents]*, (Nhà xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia – Sự thật: Hanoi: 2012), 98-100.

<sup>16</sup> Counter-Admiral Ohier, "Monthly Report on the Situation in the Colony," 28 July 1868, FMAF 4, ANOM. *Lịch sử Phú Quốc qua Tài liệu Lưu Trữ*, 98-100.

While both sources note that 125 troops were transported to the island by the cruiser *Groeland*, the archival source mentions that the troops comprised seventy-five partisans and fifty militia, *Lịch sử Phú Quốc* refers to them as "a French force of 125 battle-hardened troops" (p. 99). I defer to the archival source's characterization.

According to legend, Trục's wife had just given birth before her husband's execution which caused her so much grief that she could no longer produce milk. She went from house to house to ask if any mothers were willing to help nurse her child, but they all shunned her as the wife of a former rebel. Her child soon died of hunger and before leaving the island, she placed a curse on all women who dwelled there that their newborn children should not survive which created a tradition of women leaving Phú Quốc to nearby islets or the Cambodian mainland to give birth. The myth was apparently rooted in an existing pathogenic character of the island since a maternity clinic was built in Dương Đông in the 1930s to combat an unusually high occurrence of infant mortality and stillbirths on the island.<sup>17</sup>

With the defeat of Nguyễn Trung Trục in 1869, the island opened to French investment in the 1870's. The first French investor to take advantage of the opportunity was Desgrois, the Procurer General of Saigon, who received a land concession at Cây Dừa located at the southern extreme of the island. By 1873, Pierre-Claude-Élie Girard was already an important figure among the Saigon bureaucratic elite, rising quickly through the ranks of the police force to achieve the highest police rank in Cochinchina of Central Commissioner in 1871, a position which placed him in the social circles of the Colonial Council, dominated by plantation capitalists, and the high echelons of the judiciary and penal services.<sup>18</sup> Though Girard may have achieved one of the highest ranks of the police force, his salary of 2,140 piasters, though high

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<sup>17</sup> Xuân-Tiêu, "L'île édenique, [The Edenic Isle]," *L'Effort Indochinoise*, special ed., (October 1938), 4-5. The high instance of stillbirths and infant mortality on the island was likely due to caloric and nutritional deficiencies. In 1938, a typical diet on Phú Quốc was particularly deficient in vegetables that provide key nutrients for maintaining pregnancy, deriving most calories from rice and starchy tubers and fish products. Average diets on the island were also deficient in calories for the maintenance of calories or milk production. For a description of local diets on Phú Quốc, see Nguyễn Văn Mẫn, "On the Diet of Natives, Village of Duong Dong, Phú Quốc," 31 Dec. 1938, Guernut 88, ANOM.

<sup>18</sup> *Annuaire de la Cochinchine Française [Directory of French Cochinchina]*, yrs. 1879 and 1881 (Saigon: Imprimerie du gouvernement). *Bulletin Officiel de la Cochinchine Française*, no. 10, (1884). Note that Girard's salary was reported as 2140 piasters in 1884 and was likely slightly lower in 1874 when he began his plantation venture.

even by metropolitan standards, disallowed him from maintaining the lifestyle of his peers in Saigon's municipal administrator. In 1874, he partnered with Jean-Baptiste Coutel, an experienced businessman in Saigon who had already established himself in the construction and plantation industry, and the Colonial Council readily granted the duo 1,200 ha of land on the southwest coast of Phú Quốc in two parcels: at Bãi Vong to the north and Đầm to the south.<sup>19</sup>

When Girard broke ground at Đầm, located on a small bay, he chose the north side as the south was already occupied by a small fishing village.<sup>20</sup> The only notable feature on the north side of the bay was a small pagoda/shrine dedicated by Nguyễn Ánh to one of his sons who died there at the age of three almost 100 years earlier. While the creek on the southern part of the bay made it an appealing site for the village, the presence of the pagoda which was in essence a tomb would have worked doubly to dissuade settlers from the northern shore, already inhabited by a the spirit of a child of noble blood who had died an early death, and the Vietnamese on the island knew that disturbing the resting place of a spirit could awaken its vengeance.<sup>21</sup>

Girard and Coutel started by planting coffee and vanilla, but their 55,000 coffee plants were only producing 250 kg of beans by 1879, their vanilla plants failed to produce anything, and seventy percent of the coconut trees planted in 1874 had died off, leaving only 5,000.<sup>22</sup> Renaud, who travelled to the island in 1879, remarked that the only reason that the coffee plants

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<sup>19</sup> No author, *Monographie de l'île de Phú-Quốc, province de Hatiên [Monograph on the Isle of Phú Quốc, Province of Hà Tiên]*, (Saigon: Imprimerie Saigonaise, 1906)

<sup>20</sup> John Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochinchina exhibiting a View of the Actual State of Those Kingdoms, vol. II, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*, (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830).

Crawford notes the existence of the same village in 1821 and it is likely the settlement dates back at least to Nguyễn Ánh's presence on the island as he stayed in the area for some time.

<sup>21</sup> This belief is commonly held today, as well, and is also demonstrated through the legends of Võ Thị Sáu, discussed in depth in a later chapter. Today, spirits' vengefulness is often explained in terms of decreased land value; for instance, on Côn Đảo, proprietors repeatedly opened businesses that failed on a plot of land in the center of town that should have been a prime location. Locals believe now that it was the former site of the French cemetery which Vietnamese forces bulldozed when taking control of the island. The ghosts of French prison guards now ensure that no one who builds upon their desecrated and forgotten gravesite shall succeed.

<sup>22</sup> This amounts to 0.0045 kg per plant, compared to the 0.45-0.68 kg per plant expected of an arabica bushes.

produced anything at all was the intervention of a Đền, local Vietnamese hired by Girard as a horticultural manager who introduced local techniques utilizing native shade plants.<sup>23</sup> Đền first came to Phú Quốc from the mainland as one of Nguyễn Trung Trực's partisans and was shunned by much of the island's population after Nguyễn's defeat, therefore that the Central Commissioner of Police, a symbol of French Authority, should hire an outcast symbol of defiance to save his plantation can only be read as a sign Girard's desperation.<sup>24</sup> Nguyễn Trung Trực drew his partisans from peasants of the Mekong Delta, so it is likely that Đền possessed firsthand agricultural experience unique among the fishermen while the island's Hainanese pepper planters were too occupied with their own lucrative pursuits to bother.

On top of Girard's horticultural woes, his small venture had only managed to recruit thirty-two coolies, compensated with one franc per day and a picul of rice per month;<sup>25</sup> the large-scale importation of labor required to make the plantation viable could not be easily affected by such a small enterprise considering the costs of recruitment agents, pay advances, transportation, etc. By 1881, the situation on the Girard – Coutel plantation had become even more dire as the proprietors began to accrue significant debt owed to the Government of Cochinchina who gave land concessions on the condition that grantees put most of the land into production.<sup>26</sup> Despite planting new cash crops each year, the area under cultivation only seemed to shrink which led to the government to demand payments while Girard and Coutel were forced to continue investing in crops in the face of increasingly negative profit margins.

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<sup>23</sup> M.J. Renaud., "Mouillages de l'île de Phu-Quoc, [Anchorage of the Island of Phú Quốc]," *Cochinchine Française: Excursions et Reconnaissances*, no. 1, (1879):. 117-135.

Renaud mentions the role of a Vietnamese horticultural manager hired by the plantation, but his name and history is only revealed in the Nicolai/D'Argence report in GGI 23778.

<sup>24</sup> "Nicolai/D'Argence Investigation".

<sup>25</sup> Renaud, "Mouillages de l'île de Phu-Quoc." While a picul has been standardized by various governments to a figure in the ballpark of 60kg, a picul has traditionally been defined as the maximum weight one can carry with a shoulder pole.

<sup>26</sup> *Procès-verbaux du Conseil colonial [Proceedings of the Colonial Council]*, 18<sup>th</sup> Session, Dec. 10, 1882, (Saigon: Imprimerie du gouvernement, 1882), p. 142.

Phú Quốc had long held a forbidding mythos that had been recorded in the canon of local myths and legends. While the most ancient artifacts found on the island date the Óc Eo era,<sup>27</sup> recurring attempts to settle the island by Khmer and Cham peasants resulted in repeated failure as each time settlers came to quickly discover that the island's sandy soil would not support rice. Furthermore, in the absence of strong military presence, the island of Phú Quốc, situated in a region of innumerable rocky islets ideal for pirate hideouts, suffered from endemic piracy that made any longterm, permanent coastal settlement unsustainable.

While French planters came to Phú Quốc with books laden with technical knowledge and pockets full of capital, local stories, transmitted orally, encapsulated generations of firsthand experience with the land, even if French travelers only understood them as superstitions. All of the legends contribute to the image of Phú Quốc as a forbidding place for agriculture and settlement, suitable only to those willing to live the hard and simple life of a fisherman.

Through the mid-twentieth century, Phú Quốc held a curious distinction within Indochina: large herds of wild water buffalo roamed the densely jungled interior, venturing out only at night to ravage newly-planted gardens, attacking anyone who got in their way. Locals tended to let the buffalo be and occupied themselves with the fishing industry. The locals not only let the water buffalo be out of fear, but respect, as well, for they were allegedly the descendants of Bà Kiêm Giao's herd. Bà Kiêm Giao (alternatively, Kim Giao) is the subject of a local legend and cult of worship that explains not only the existence of the aggressive wild buffalo, but the island's very emergence into recorded history through a story mingling observable phenomena and oral tradition. The legend of Bà Kiêm Giao originated from the remains of an abandoned village found at the site of present-day Cửa Cạn in the northwest of Phú Quốc. According to legend, Bà Kiêm Giao was a Cambodian woman who led a band of Vietnamese and Khmer settlers to Phú

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<sup>27</sup> These were found in the vicinity of Cửa Cạn in the northwest and are displayed at the Phú Quốc Museum.

Quốc where they grew rice and raised water buffalo. On her death bed, Kiêm Giao asked the settlers to leave the island and let her buffalo free. Vietnamese settlers found an abandoned town decades later with former rice fields and neatly planted sugar palms as well as a 1.5 meter post of a buffalo corral that had turned to stone set within a dense forest inhabited by large herds of wild buffalo.<sup>28</sup>

### **Phú Quốc's First Penitentiary**

While Girard lacked the business acumen required of a successful planter and failed to take Kiêm Giao's lessons seriously, he did take note of the Penitentiary Service's discussion of opening small penitentiaries on islands. Girard's role as the highest-ranking police commissioner of all Cochinchina placed him in a privileged position that allowed him to immediately volunteer his land for the project, hoping that he could work his way out of debt by gaining access to an endless supply of labor delivered at no additional cost. Besides, running a penitentiary was much closer to his own line of work.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> While most versions of the legend claim that Kiêm Giao was Khmer, numerous elements of the story as well as material evidence present in contemporary temples to Kiêm Giao on Phú Quốc point towards Cham origins of both the abandoned village and the legends which are rich in Shivaite imagery and mythology common to Cham culture. The 1.5 meter wooden post that had turned to stone is likely how Vietnamese settlers who stumbled upon the village made sense of a Linga while its association with a buffalo corral could be due to an associated statue of Nandi found alongside it. Another element of the story which has parallels to a uniquely Vietnamese Cham understanding of Nandi in which Nandi carries the souls of the dead to India upon their deaths. The association of Kiêm Giao's death with the departure of her buffalo could very well be the retelling of this legend through generations of modification and linguistic or cultural filtering. It would be peculiar to find a Shivaite temple with Nandi and a Lingga but no Shiva, so we must also consider the possibility that a found Shiva (or Yan Po Nagar, a Cham princess who came to be worshipped by the Cham after her death as an incarnation of Shiva who, after Vietnamese conquest, came to be worshipped by Vietnamese settlers as Thiên Y Thánh Mẫu) statue was the inspiration for Kiêm Giao. It is notable that her temples all show two elements peculiar to Vietnamese temples: one temple and most shrines have statues of laying buffalo outside and Kiêm Giao holds a staff that may be a reinterpretation of a trident commonly found with statues of Shiva. The reappropriation of found statues as saints in Vietnamese folk religion has not been uncommon in the "water frontier," as more notably the worship of Bà Chúa Xứ in Chau Doc began when Vietnamese settlers found an Oc Eo period Shiva statue and integrated into a local pantheon of folk deities.

<sup>29</sup> "Report on the Penitentiary Services of Cochinchina," HCOL 2026, ANOM.

Note that the Île de la Table was selected in Tonkin, similarly taking convicts who were not considered dangerous. While incorporating penal labor, the penitentiary was owned and operated by the state and lasted into the second decade of the twentieth century. At one point, it was also designated to hold convicts who were Chinese Nationals awaiting deportation. See GGI 4242, 4244, and 4247.

Even after the first shipment of penal labor, Girard had to request a subsidy of 2500 piasters in May 1882 to keep the plantation open. At the same time, Coutel also had to request 2650 piasters to keep one of his mainland sugar plantations open and soon after he left the business partnership, perhaps less business-savvy than Girard had first judged him to be.<sup>30</sup> The following year, the Government of Cochinchina sued Coutel after finding that his construction company, which had been employed for many of the colony's public works projects, was 35,000 piasters in debt.<sup>31</sup>

In Coutel's place, Girard recruited Genevoix who lived on site and simultaneously acted as business partner, plantation manager, and prison warden. Jean-Francois-Germain-Marie-Ernest Genevoix was born in 1852 in France and joined the military at the age of twenty as a sub-lieutenant in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Naval Infantry Regiment.<sup>32</sup> He was stationed in Brest until he was eventually sent to Cochinchina in 1878 as a detached officer and came into the role of tax collector for Long Xuyên province with the rank of 3<sup>rd</sup> class administrator, resigning in October 1882 after taking an intriguing offer from Girard.<sup>33</sup> When Genevoix came to Phú Quốc, he was tasked with operating the entire plantation, managing both free workers and prison laborers. His closest confidants were Đén who oversaw horticultural operations, and Dorressamy, a prison guard from Pondicherry who had been appointed by the administration. Genevoix also sent regular reports on the operations of the plantation to Girard in addition to the required monthly reports on prisoners' health to the administrator of Hà Tiên.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Bulletin Officiel de la Cochinchine Française*, no. 5, 1882.

<sup>31</sup> *Bulletin Officiel de la Cochinchine Française*, no. 2, 1885.

<sup>32</sup> *Annuaire de la marine et des colonies [Directory of the Navy and the Colonies]*, (Paris: Berger-Levrault et Cie., 1878).

*Annuaire de la Cochinchine Française pour l'année 1879*, (Saigon: Imprimerie du gouvernement, 1879).

<sup>33</sup> *Bulletin Officiel de la Cochinchine Française*, no. 1, 1882, 29-30.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Poulle to the Procurer General, Jan. 28, 1889, GGI 23738, ANOM.  
*Bulletin Officiel de la Cochinchine Française*, no. 1, 1882, 29-30.

Genevoix and Dorressamy evidently clashed over how prisoners should be managed, eventually leading Genevoix to fire Dorressamy, accusing him of actively facilitating prisoners' escapes by furnishing them with provisions. Not wanting to face prosecution, especially in a court system that would surely favor a white French citizen over a non-white colonial subject such as himself, Dorressamy prepared a written complaint against Genevoix, alleging mistreatment of prisoners. The fired guard visited Ferdinand-Louis Saintenoy, the administrator of Hà Tiên and asked for his assistance in conveying the complaint to Dussol, the administrator of Châu Đốc. Alarmed by some of the allegations, Saintenoy confronted Girard personally about the complaint and urged him to discipline Genevoix.<sup>35</sup> Saintenoy, as a trainee [stagiaire] administrator in a backwater province, of course yielded to the the man who was not only the Central Commissioner of Police, but also one of the largest landowners and investors in his province.

Within Saigon's countless bureaucratic offices, Girard was not the only one who was aware of Genevoix's treatment of prisoners; Charles Brisac, too, had viewed copies of the reports Genevoix had prepared for local administrators.<sup>36</sup> Brisac had been with the colonial administration since 1869 and quickly climbed the bureaucratic ladder, entering the 4<sup>th</sup> Bureau by 1874 and rising to the position of sub-chief by 1879. In 1880, he was transferred to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bureau, occupying the same role, when he certainly would have interacted directly with Girard. In 1885, Brisac was promoted to chief of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bureau, a position that would have given him access to incredible power to influence the colony's politics.<sup>37</sup> By the end of the 1880s, he had

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<sup>35</sup> Charles Pouille to the Procurer General.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Annuaire de la Cochinchine Française pour l'année 1874*, (Saigon: Imprimerie du gouvernement, 1874), *Annuaire de la Cochinchine Française pour l'année 1879*, *Annuaire de la Cochinchine Française pour l'année 1880*, (Saigon: Imprimerie du gouvernement, 1880), *Bulletin Officiel de la Cochinchine Française*: no. 7, 1882; no.9, 1883.

headed the 1<sup>st</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> bureaus, giving him deep knowledge and influence over almost every aspect of the colonial administration. Brisac likely became acquainted with Genevoix's reports from 1882-1883 when he was temporarily ordered to fill the role of Inspector of Prisons. Saintenoy had even brought potential instances of mistreatment in Genevoix's reports to Brisac's attention, but he quickly concluded that it was nothing serious.<sup>38</sup>

Genevoix continued to follow his own approach towards prisoner discipline, enabled by the silence of his business partner and administrators at the provincial and colonial level, preferring to turn a blind eye to Phú Quốc or yield to their superiors. The one figure who pushed the matter was Dorressamy, the former guard of the penitentiary. Now unemployed and facing imminent prosecution, he truly had nothing left to lose by exposing his former superior. No longer encumbered by the hierarchic obligations and unwritten formalities that prescribed his actions as a member of the colonial administration and driven by multiple strong motives – a combination of self-preservation, personal vengeance, and a sense of justice – he took his report directly to various figures of power within the administration.

Girard must have been surprised when Dorressamy confronted him in Hà Tiên, and even more surprised when he produced a dossier, a complaint alleging Genevoix's atrocious mistreatment of prisoners. When Saintenoy returned from a trip, Girard went to consult him only to find that he already had a copy of the same dossier.<sup>39</sup> While previous evidence of Genevoix's mistreatment of prisoners were produced, circulated, and suppressed within the confines of the colonial bureaucracy, now that a literate outsider had resurrected them and begun circulating them, Saintenoy and Girard both knew they had to act in order to diminish their own culpability.

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<sup>38</sup> Charles Poulle to the Procurer General.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Poulle to the Procurer General.

That day, both men agreed to respect Dorressamy's request to forward his report to Dussol, administrator of Châu Đốc, the location of the closest court and to whom Genevoix had submitted his legal complaint against Dorressamy. Along with Dorressamy's complaint, Girard ordered Dussol not to follow up on Genevoix's complaint against the former guard. Saintenoy took matters a step further and pressed Girard to immediately dismiss Genevoix, but he refused, citing the action as a breach of contract and insisted that Saintenoy must take responsibility and secure Genevoix's dismissal through administrative action.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps at this point, Girard thought he could still suppress Dorressamy's report first by appeasing him through securing his immunity to prosecution, and second by using his connections to dismiss Dorressamy's report once it reached the upper levels of administration in Saigon. This time, however, the report passed unscathed through a gauntlet of administrative offices, resting finally on the desk of the Procurer General of Cochinchina.

Dorressamy's complaint lacked the reserve and decorum that usually characterized colonial administrative reports, and when the procurer general read a graphic and credible account of how Genevoix had, as a disciplinary measure, hanged a prisoner by their genitals, he immediately appointed a Judge of Instruction, Charles Poulle, to direct an investigation into the "Genevoix Affair."<sup>41</sup> Poulle appointed two senior provincial administrators to lead an investigative commission to Phú Quốc, Ange-Eugene Nicolai of My Tho and Lefebvre d'Argence. Despite the outrageousness of some of Dorressamy's accusations, Poulle gave him the benefit of the doubt and proceeded to order an investigation which began when Nicolai and

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Under the French legal system, a procurer general may assign a Judge of Instruction who has sweeping investigative powers. Judges of Instruction sit in a Court of First Instance and are only appointed to potentially severe criminal cases and have the authority to decide what, if any, charges should be pursued as well as in which court they should be tried.

D'Argence disembarked at Đầm, the site of the Phú Quốc Penitentiary, on November 18, 1888 at 10am.<sup>42</sup>

Genevoix must have been surprised by the arrival of an inspector, but received Nicolai and d'Argence hospitably. In Dorressamy's place, the investigators found a new guard: Francois-Jouzot Bouchot.<sup>43</sup> Bouchot was the second guard hired since Dorressamy's departure, as his successor, Oisel, did not last long. Bouchot started working on on May 27, 1888 and had made his way to Indochina after serving a sentence for vagabondage in France and having been pursued multiple times by the police.<sup>44</sup> If Bouchot had any pressing reason for coming to Indochina, it was surely to make a new life for himself. Compared to other guards like Dorressamy and Oisel who were quickly dismissed, likely because they could not accept Genevoix's disciplinary methods, Bouchot and Genevoix developed a sense of camaraderie.

Upon the investigators' initial inspection, everything seemed in order: the 145 prisoners were kept in well-maintained and sanitary lodging that could have held 200; rations seemed at first glance to meet the standards of the penitentiary service, although prisoners alleged that they had only begun to receive standard rations since the investigators' arrival; the pharmacy was kept well-stocked to treat common ailments but was not equipped to handle more serious conditions.<sup>45</sup> All of these problems were noteworthy even if they were common in other Indochinese prisons. Only a few days prior, fifty prisoners had been evacuated to the hospital in Châu Đốc with illnesses that were most likely terminal, and upon further questioning the investigators learned that ill prisoners were forced to work until their condition left them bedridden, after which they would be isolated in huts along the beach, often suffering terminally from ailments that could

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<sup>42</sup> "Nicolai/D'Argence Investigation."

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Charles Poulle to the Procurer General, "Nicolai/D'Argence Investigation."

<sup>45</sup> "Nicolai/D'Argence Investigation."

have been easily cured if treated at their onset.<sup>46</sup> Yet, these abuses still did not meet the gravity of Dorresamy's complaint.

Ultimately, the investigators did not find evidence of the former guard's most serious complaint: that Genevoix had ordered a prisoner hanged by their genitals as a disciplinary measure. What they did discover, however, went even further beyond the pale of the imagination.

Staying until December 6, Nicolai and D'Argence took declarations from 120 prisoners along with Genevoix, Bouchot, and Đên. The commission concluded that Genevoix and Bouchot were responsible for the deaths of at least fifteen prisoners, twelve who were killed directly by Genevoix and Bouchot due to intentional abuse and three who committed suicide as a means of escaping their abuses.<sup>47</sup> The commissions' figures represent only what Nicolai and D'Argence could definitively confirm through their investigation and do not speculate as to the number of prisoners who endured and survived abuse at the hands of Genevoix and Bouchot, nor do they offer insights into how many may have died at Genevoix's hands before Bouchot's arrival. It is almost certain, though, that Genevoix was responsible for the deaths of dozens more unnamed prisoners.

The investigators first noticed some peculiarities and discrepancies in Genevoix's records, particularly the register of deaths and his daily journal. Of the thirty-three prisoners whose deaths were recorded in 1888, only three died before Bouchot's arrival in May. Furthermore, the death registry stopped recording causes of death from June 21 onwards. Genevoix's daily journal also made no mention of prisoners' deaths after Bouchot's arrival, a highly irregular practice that raised red flags for the investigators.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Nicolai/D'Argence Commission to Eilon de Blainville, Nov. 30, 1889, GGI 23738.

<sup>48</sup> "Nicolai/D'Argence Investigation."

Upon further questioning, Nicolai found that Le Van Thong who hanged himself was listed as having died of “injuries,” while Tu who also hanged himself on September 15 was listed as having died of “opium withdrawal.” Genevoix not only altered their causes of deaths, but when Nicolai confronted him, he replied “that death [in particular] was so funny, that is to say it was under comical circumstances because Thang’s [sic] feet were ten centimeters from the ground and he was swinging in front of his comrades.”<sup>49</sup> Three other prisoner suicides were also addressed later in the trial, that of Soi who strangled himself in the prison, Giang who broke into Bouchot’s office with the sole intention of finding the guard’s revolver which he used on himself, and Duoc who upon being assigned to work in the foundry hurled himself into the furnace. When investigators confronted Genevoix about Duoc’s death, he could only crack a joke about what a shame it was that he decided to “retire early.”<sup>50</sup>

The most shocking deaths resulted from elaborate forms of torture ordered and initiated by Genevoix and Bouchot with the enforced participation of prisoner-corporals, including An and Ong who had managed to escape in July. In the first variation, “The prisoners were taken before a column of a house and were secured there with the aid of two ropes which were brought around the back until they joined, and he was fixed solidly to the post in a way so as to disallow all movement.” Clearly placing the prisoners in stress positions, “this torment was endured sometimes while standing, sometimes while sitting. In the second case he was made to squat patiently on his heels, in the Vietnamese manner, and when the cords were fixed to the post, his legs were stretched so that his entire bodyweight pressed on his elbows.” The investigation found that Genevoix was not satisfied with merely inflicting pain and was constantly refining his

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

Charles Poulle to the Procurer General.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Poulle to the Procurer General.

methods, such as when “before the operation, he made the victim<sup>51</sup> climb onto a log placed at the foot of the post. This form of step was removed once the knots were secured. In this manner, depending on the size of the log, the body was completely suspended or only rested on the toes.” Genevoix designed the torture to act simultaneously on multiple body systems, as “after a few instants, all circulation to the forearms was cut off; the blood vessels compressed so strongly that, according to Corporal An, ‘The blood passed through the pores of the skin and dripped down over the hands.’”<sup>52</sup>

The investigation found that “the duration of this torment varied, but in general, the individual expired after two or three days, during which he was only detached [from the post] to pass nights in the camp [traï]; detached, he would slump down and could touch nothing but a few grains of the rice that he was given.” Through requiring the participation of other prisoner in the torture sessions, he simultaneously divided them and inflicted a secondary form of psychological torture as well. For example, “while [the prisoner] was attached to the post the corporals were ordered to give him lashes with rattan and place a gag in his mouth so that he wouldn’t scream too loudly... Hon, Xuyên, Dúc, and Thê died from these torments; the latter was attached to the pole again after his death.”<sup>53</sup>

In a second variation of torture, “A Chinese, Seng-Sung, was suspended by his elbows with the aid of a rope from the roof of a house and elevated sufficiently to allow his full body weight to rest on the tips of his toes. He died the second day.”

In the third method, which the judge called “the toad,” “The prisoner would be lain down on his stomach, while his arms and legs, attached to ropes, would be pulled strongly backwards; then his head would be lifted and a stick would be placed in his mouth at both ends which was

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<sup>51</sup> Literally “patient”

<sup>52</sup> Charles Pouille to the Procurer General.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

connected to the rope attached to his limbs.” The peculiar torture received its name because “When the victim is thus strung up, he resembles a toad and his whole body is bent in such a way that he can only rest on the point of his sternum.” Genevoix worked to refine this method, too, as “to intensify the suffering, the corporal would slide a large log beneath the poor man on which his stomach, supporting his entire body’s weight, would compress. This torment, which is an invention of Genevoix, did not bring death, but as it would last many hours, it would cause terrible stomach pains.”<sup>54</sup>

Genevoix and Bouchot most frequently applied the most extreme forms of torture as severe disciplinary measures and forced the corporals to participate, and sometimes even the common prisoners, as a way of turning them against each other, as exemplified when “on May 31, 1888, six prisoners who escaped were taken back and attached to the post.” When “all, with the exception of two, screamed gruesomely, the guard Bouchot rushed over immediately and noticed that the ropes of these two poor men were not tightened as the others’ were. Furious, he struck the corporals who had misexecuted their orders, they retightened the ropes, and the six prisoners cried out again in unison.”<sup>55</sup> The episode further indicates the extent to which the criteria for what constituted an infraction and punishment was left to the whims of Genevoix and Bouchot.

The judge found that “The most horrible death was that of Thanh, who after having been attached to a chain for two months on the order of Genevoix, succeeded in freeing himself, but was later returned to the plantation. Blows rained down on him until he was covered in blood, and he was bound to a post with his chain.” Then, “detached after about a half hour, the Corporal An, on the order of Genevoix and Bouchot, stepped on the chain and poured onto his [Thanh’s]

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

back bucket after bucket of water while the two men scrubbed him with a broom and sand to wash off the blood that covered him.” This was not enough for Bouchot who “then laid the prisoner on his stomach, and then while one prisoner pulled his arms and another his legs, he [Bouchot] continuously struck him with rattan to the point of fatigue.” Prisoners were again forced to participate as “Thanh, whose body was reduced to one giant wound, was dragged by his chain, all the way to the camp; there, Bouchot gave the order to ten prisoners under threat of punishment to hit Thanh around the arms, and he himself delivered blows with the rattan to those who did not strike hard enough... The third day, Thanh expired.”<sup>56</sup> The prisoners, most who had been sentenced for minor crimes, were forced into a hellish world of Genevoix and Bouchot’s making, witnessing, participating, and being subjected to a level of violence they could have never imagined, many dying in ways more gruesome than convicts sentenced to death.

Besides being subject to and witnessing such horrific tortures, prisoners were regularly beaten for minor disciplinary infractions, or even for simply not working hard enough. Indeed, witnessing and being forced to participate in the elaborate torture of their peers was a form of torture in itself. Two corporals in particular, Nhu and An, were forced to carry out many of the incidents of torture as well as regular beatings, though all corporals were forced to participate to some extent. Remember that An was among those fortunate enough to escape; he also found himself giving critical testimony in the chamber of Saigon’s Court of First Instance, once again facing his former captors whose faces he no doubt would have preferred never to see again.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

Nicolai and d'Argence left Phú Quốc for good on December 6, and concluded in a written report that Genevoix and Bouchot were dangerous and therefore should be arrested and placed under preventative detention once they left Phú Quốc.<sup>58</sup>

Charles Poulle left no rock unturned, and in addition to ordering the investigative commission, he interviewed Girard, subpoenaed his correspondence with Genevoix, and even tracked down the escaped prisoners, Thieu and An, taking their testimony while also asking them to simulate Genevoix's methods of torture before the Maison Centrale's doctor. While the former prisoners all independently produced identical depositions and simulations of Genevoix and Bouchot's methods of torture, Girard, Genevoix, and Bouchot presented the judge with a Gordian knot of lies, deflections, and misdirections.<sup>59</sup>

While among the three of them Girard was in the most secure position and unlikely to face prosecution, his reputation in the administration, in Saigonese high society, and as a planter were at stake, so he presented a narrative to the judge that minimized his own knowledge and involvement, even though his correspondence with Genevoix (which the judge had in his possession) suggested otherwise.<sup>60</sup> Genevoix and Bouchot cooperated with one another, both following the same agreed-upon story from the Nicolai-d'Argence investigation through the early stages of interrogation in Saigon's Maison Centrale. Both first attempted to scapegoat Den but when each realized that there were holes in their stories that investigators picked away at and lacking any means of synchronizing their accounts, they began to turn on one another, hoping to stick the other with the brunt of responsibility. Genevoix portrayed Bouchot as an unpredictable brute who had devised and carried out most of the atrocities in his absence, while Bouchot tried

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<sup>58</sup> Nicolai/D'Argence Commission to Eilon de Blainville, GGI 23738.

<sup>59</sup> Charles Poulle to the Procurer General.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

to evoke investigators' pity by arguing that he lacked the intelligence necessary to make his own decisions and that he committed all atrocities on Genevoix's command.<sup>61</sup>

The Judge of Instruction remarked that he had never heard of such methods of tortures and that they could have only been the inventions of Genevoix and Bouchot. He charged them each with intentional assault and battery and being accomplices to murder. He concluded his decision ominously, stating that Genevoix and Bouchot were only the beginning and that more indictments would follow, strategically placed directly after a lengthy quote from Girard's deposition that alluded to inconsistencies within it.<sup>62</sup> Even if Girard intended to distance himself from Genevoix, his conviction did not favor the Central Police Commissioner-turned-planter.

The trial began in the Saigon Criminal Court on June 4, 1889. D'Argence, who was the Procurer of the Republic as well as one of the members of the investigative committee, headed the prosecution and Pierre-Paul Paris organized Genevoix and Bouchot's defense. Among the five assessors was Charles Poulle whose decision had already been made in the Court of First Instance.<sup>63</sup> Without a doubt, the star witnesses were An and Ong Doc Tung, both among the July 11 escapees. From the stand they faced their tormenters once again and laid out their atrocities in vivid detail. Paris knew that by this moment that he could not prove his clients' innocence, so he focused on technical and procedural matters. His most energetic attacks attempted to discredit the translator, which if successful would have struck the most damning pieces of testimony, or at the very least delayed the trial.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, Paris' strategy failed and the trial was over by June 15, resulting in Genevoix and Bouchot's conviction.

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Ducos, Procurer General, to Govr. Gen. of Indochina, 5 June 1889, GGI 23738, ANOM.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

On the one hand, the conviction upset the colonial socio-racial hierarchy: the efforts of an Indian prison guard, fired for helping Vietnamese convicts escape a hellish island prison, brought their tormenters before a judge while Vietnamese fugitives testified before their former torturers to seal their fates. Not only that, but together they set in motion a chain of events that could very likely implicate figures such as the Central Police Commissioner and the chief of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bureau. Yet, the conviction also showed how entrenched colonial racial hierarchies were as Genevoix and Bouchot were only sentenced to five years of reclusion, amounting to less than one year per confirmed murder, indicating how little the French colonial state valued the lives of Vietnamese prisoners. The same year, Vietnamese were being shipped to Guiana and New Caledonia en masse, some among them convicted to ten years of forced labor for crimes such as theft.

What should have been a scandal that shook Saigonese society – even metropolitan France – never even made it to the press because Paris had immediately submitted an appeal, and law prohibited making court records public until the ultimate resolution of the case. On September 5, the Saigon Court of Cassation heard an appeal on procedural grounds and annulled the verdict. By law, the courts had to publish a day-by-day list of judges sitting at Genevoix's criminal trial by May 28, but the list was not published until 4:00am on May 29, a transgression that if ignored, argued the decision, could have negative implications for the rule of law throughout the French Empire.<sup>65</sup>

After the successful appeal, a new trial had been set for the beginning of 1890 with an entirely new set of judges and assessors which left enough time for powerful individuals such as Girard and Brisac to levy their influence within Saigonese high society. On 9 December a decision was issued in which Boyer, Lechelle, and a number of other attorneys successfully

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<sup>65</sup> *Bulletin des arrêts de la Cour de cassation rendus en matière criminelle*, vol. XCIV, no. 9, Sept. 1889, (Paris: Imprimerie nationale), 477.

blocked two out of three assigned judges from appearing on the case. The decision further reveals that the two blocked judges, one from the Court of Appeals and the other from the Civil Court of Saigon, had been called to sit on the Criminal Court suggests that the Judiciary Service was scraping the bottom of the barrel after most suitable judges could not sit on the case due to their previous involvement in the first criminal trial or their recusal due to close relationships with Girard who as the Central Police Commissioner of Cochinchina would have worked regularly with judges in the criminal court.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, Boyer and Lechelle were arguably the two most powerful attorneys in Cochinchina at the time, not to mention among the most influential members of the Colonial Council, and no doubt close associates of Girard. The Genevoix Affair ceased to be a question of justice the moment Genevoix's legal team began filing appeals. Then, it became a war of attrition in which Girard and Brisac mobilized powerful associates to their defense, whittling down the number of possible judges and assessors until they could stack the judges bench just how they wanted, or until they exhausted the roster of possible judges, rendering the trial impossible. Whether or not a second criminal trial ever occurred, no reports of any ever made it to the presses, nor did its records ever materialize, suggesting that Genevoix and Bouchot walked free. After all, a well-connected and influential figure in the administration would have had little trouble making sealed court records "disappear." Even the local population on Phú Quốc did not understand the scope of the atrocities that had unfolded at the Penitentiary, assuming that it been shut down due to the prevalence of escapes.<sup>67</sup>

Genevoix was truly cruel and sadistic, the type of person who revels inflicting pain on others. While the social constraints of a larger community would have suppressed his cruelty, or at the very least mitigated it, when isolated from society and placed in a position of absolute

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<sup>66</sup> *Bulletin officiel de l'indochine française*, Dec. 1889, 1096.

<sup>67</sup> Xuân-Tiêu, "L'île édenique."

power over a vulnerable and confined population, Genevoix began to exercise and develop his sadistic pastime, using his power to impose disciplinary measures for arbitrarily determined infractions as a pretext for pursuing his own sick passion, devising intricate tortures and punishments. It seems that the only real check on Genevoix's cruelty was the presence of a guard who could criticize or question his methods as Dorressamy did, and the high turnover rate for guards on the island must have been a constant reminder to Genevoix that his sadism was unnatural. Moreover, the way he made insensitive jokes to the investigators about prisoners' deaths shows in him a certain lack of empathy and understanding of how death and suffering are socially perceived.

The arrival of Bouchot, however, enabled Genevoix to release the full potential of his sadistic imagination because Bouchot likewise found joy in inflicting pain, so the penitentiary became their playground. While Genevoix was a mastermind who designed elaborate mechanisms (no doubt through repetition and elaboration) and forced others to enact them, Bouchot was more hands-on and derived pleasure simpler means to inflict violence, beating prisoners by day and reportedly visiting one of the female prisoners by night in a situation which could not have been consensual. The duo masked their desire to dominate the prisoners through violence through fabricating pretexts for punishment, and they demonstrated that they understood that the deaths were not unintended consequences of prison discipline but instead the results of their own macabre indulgence when they started consistently altering records. Genevoix and Bouchot tortured not to gain information, extract false confessions, or intimidate a segment of a society, but to satisfy their own bloodlust and desire to dominate others.

While the colonial administration justified the Phú Quốc Penitentiary as an experiment with innovative rehabilitative penal methods, it was in reality nothing more than a trading of

favors between the Penitentiary Service whose prisons were suffering from overcrowding, rebellion, and endemic evasion, and a high-ranking official who had wagered his savings on rubber and lost. The Penitentiary Service was content to give Girard a supply of prisoners as his personal labor force as long as it caused the administration no difficulties, willing to forego the normal administrative and bureaucratic oversight that prisons were subjected to which, in turn, allowed Genevoix to use the penitentiary as his personal torture workshop, and as long as Genevoix controlled the flow of all information leaving the penitentiary he could do as he pleased provided that everything looked correct on paper.

Dorressamy deserves more credit than anyone else for ending Genevoix's reign of terror and dismantling the Phú Quốc Penitentiary. He was able to do so because he was a literate voice who empathized with the plight of the prisoners more than he feared his employer's potential wrath. Countless studies on the psychology of prisoners and guards have shown that few people in the position of absolute authority or under orders to inflict undue pain, such as the Stanford Prison Experiment and Milgram Shock Experiment, would take pity or refuse.<sup>68</sup> Dorressamy not only openly disagreed with his superior's methods, but risked his job to help prisoners escape. The escaped prisoners had won freedom from Genevoix's brutality, but as illiterate fugitives they could do little to bring Genevoix to justice. Considering the help Dorressamy gave to prisoners, the legal complaint he wrote about Genevoix was at least in part motivated by his sense of justice, and the document created a window for former prisoners to testify on their treatment.

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<sup>68</sup> Both experiments were designed in part to test the limits of human obedience and deference to authority. Stanley Milgram designed and carried out the shock experiments starting in 1961 in which he asked participants to administer a "shock" to an actor playing as a subject in a research study. The study looked at how many participants continued to follow instructions to administer shocks, even when the actor  
The Stanford Prison Experiment was carried out ten years later in 1971 in which a set of volunteer participants were divided between "guards" and "prisoners." The guards began quickly engaging in abusive behaviors to the extent that the experiment had to be shut down well before its planned conclusion.

Even if Genevoix and Bouchot ultimately walked free, the trial led to the closure of the Phú Quốc Penitentiary while also assuring that the Penitentiary Service would not pursue the further development of plantation prisons. The end of the penitentiary also meant the end of Girard's plantation which he was forced to return to the government.

### Phú Quốc's Plantation Age

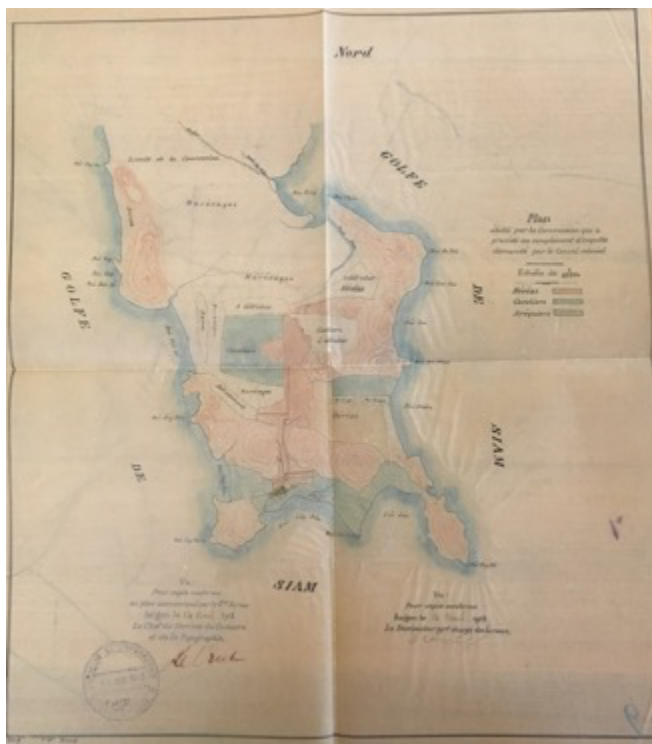


Fig. 5.2: A 1913 map prepared by the SAPQ showing the extent of their concession and future plans for planting from GGI 871.

By the first decade of the 1900s, all small French ventures on Phú Quốc had failed, each financed and managed by proprietors who had first established themselves in Saigonese high society. A new wave of prospective planters set their sights on Phú Quốc at this time, metropolitan investors who formed companies backed by tremendous amounts of capital. More than one of these companies were formed explicitly to establish plantations on Phú Quốc. By then, French planters in Indochina had learned Kiêm

Giao's lesson through their own trial and error, but books and articles enthusiastically advertising the island's economic potential began making their way to France, catching the eyes of wealthy businessmen while peddlers hawked the latest patent medicines to commoners on the streets and boulevards below.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>69</sup> For an example of promotional publications on Phú Quốc, see August Challamel, ed., *Notice sur l'île de Phuquoc*, [*Notice on the Island of Phú Quốc*], (Paris: Librairie Coloniale, 1891).

In 1897, a metropolitan architect, Joachim Sismonde, requested a the entire island as a concession from the Colonial Council which they amusedly rejected, sarcastically noting that it was the same size as Martinique.<sup>70</sup> Still, others followed with the Phú Quốc Company and the Societe Anonyme de l'Exploitation de Phú Quốc (SAPQ). Only the SAPQ was able to eventually succeed in gaining a concession in 1906, occupying 2,684 ha in the south of Phú Quốc that included all land south of Đầm, including the former Girard plantation.<sup>71</sup>

The SAPQ established itself on Phú Quốc in 1906, based in Cây Dừa at the southernmost tip of the island very near the former Desgrois plantation.<sup>72</sup> They hired contract laborers from Tonkin to grow rubber, coconuts, and areca palms, establishing state-of-the-art refining facilities on site. While previous planters on Phú Quốc experimented with various crops, the SAPQ came in with a definite plan. Their scientific planning, however, failed to anticipate the deer, boars, and buffalo that would devour sapling, the lack of regular transportation service that led to shortages of labor and supplies, the inconstant terrain that quickly changed from mountain, to swamp, to lagoon, and the prevalence of malaria which quickly cut down laborers. During the plantation's first few years, the efforts of the constantly shrinking labor force was directed not at planting and tending cash crops, but towards clearing swamps to prevent malaria and constructing a palisade from the east to the west coast of the island to deter hungry wildlife. Even after five years, only 600 ha of the 2700 ha concession had been planted.<sup>73</sup>

To address its chronic labor shortage, the SAPQ was the first venture in Indochina to recruit contract laborers from Java. The Indochinese Government began prolonged and

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<sup>70</sup> *Procès-verbaux du Conseil colonial [Proceedings of the Colonial Council]*, 4<sup>th</sup> Session, 7 May 1897, (Saigon: Imprimerie du gouvernement, 1897), 43-44.

<sup>71</sup> Decision by Lalande-Calan, LGCC, Dec. 5, 1906, GGI 871, ANOM.

<sup>72</sup> GCC to the GGIC, "Loan Request from the Societe for the Exploitation of Phu Quoc," July 9, 1915, GGI 17390, ANOM.

<sup>73</sup> GCC to GGIC, "Concerning a Concession of 12750 ha requested on the Island of Phú Quốc," Jan. 24, 1913, GGI 871, ANOM.

M.J Robin to the Administrator of Hatien, Jan. 9, 1913, GGI 871, ANOM.

contentious negotiations with the Netherlands East Indies in 1906 which resulted in the first group of 262 Javanese laborers arriving on the island in December 1909 to work alongside 30 Tonkinese coolies who were already employed by the plantation.<sup>74</sup> Although the cost of importing labors from Java was no cheaper than importing them from Tonkin, the investors of the SAPQ were moved by the enthusiastic sales pitches of Rossi, the Indochina representative for the Falkenberg Emigration Agency based in Java. He sold SAPQ on the idea that “the Javanese is formal and honest, sober, a submissive worker... [who] has over the Vietnamese and Chinese this advantage, that he scrupulously respects arrangements freely taken, and the employer who has consented to give him advances guarantees against all danger of desertion,” who was moreover “a big child.”<sup>75</sup> The racist essentialisms trumpeted by Rossi immediately appealed to the SAPQ who had recently had difficulty maintaining Tonkinese laborers due to desertion, believing that the coolies left due to ethnically-specific defects in character instead of the harsh and unforgiving conditions of plantation life.

Although the Javanese coolies working for the SAPQ were not prisoners as most of the laborers on Girard’s plantation were, they were far from free and lived under carceral conditions. They could not leave the plantation, and even if they did they would find themselves in an alien land where they could neither communicate nor blend in with the locals. The SAPQ paid their workers only in scrip redeemable for items whose price was placed well above their market value, a practice which led the administration to prosecute the SAPQ as payment in scrip had been outlawed, even while SAPQ investors defended the practice by arguing that it would “simplify the operations of payment and to protect through permanent [monetary] control these

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<sup>74</sup> Files detailing the process of negotiations between the NEI and French Indochina Governments over establishing the recruitment of Javanese labor can be found in GGI 54294, ANOM.

Ernest Outrey to the GGIC, “Regarding Javanese Labor,” May 30, 1909, GGI 42591, ANOM.

<sup>75</sup> Rossi to the Governor General of Indochina, Feb. 1907, GGI 42591, ANOM.

big children who are the Javanese against the exactions of Vietnamese.”<sup>76</sup> While other plantations may have been able to get away with it, many members of the Colonial Council held disdain for absentee plantation owners who remained in France. Disease was the most pressing threat to workers, as in the first six months of 1910, the mortality rate for Tonkinese laborers was twenty percent, and for Javanese laborers it was twenty-three percent, most dying due to malaria and complications.<sup>77</sup>



*Fig 5.3:* A photo of a Javanese coolie recruited by the Falkenberg Agency in Bandung. He is bound for New Caledonia but coolies sent to Phú Quốc were recruited at the same office and subjected to the same process. The detailed anthropometric details taken here, including fingerprints, photographs, distinguishing features, and biographic data show a carceral logic, as the identifiability of the coolie would help ensure their apprehension in case of evasion. From 7 AFFECON 15.

When Javanese laborers began to flee and commit suicide, Rossi’s lofty promises of docile and obedient laborers seemed hollow, and plantation managers blamed their behavior on “nostalgia,” failing to consider that they were reacting to the miserable conditions of plantation life on the island.<sup>78</sup> For the Javanese laborers especially, the SAPQ plantation was like a prison: it was separated from the outside world by a

long palisade on one side and the coastline on all others, foremen controlled all passage in and out of the plantation, and they were forced to pay for all provisions other than rice at an inflated

<sup>76</sup> Maurice Ajam to Governor General of Indochina, Feb. 1913, GGI 871, ANOM. Note that Maurice Ajam was a prominent lawyer and journalists as well as a member of the General Council of Sarthe, a wealthy department to the west of Paris.

<sup>77</sup> Dr. Harismendy to the Sub-director of Health Services, “Monthly Medical Report,” July 8, 1910, GGI 42591, ANOM.

<sup>78</sup> Roux-Serres, Administrator of Hatien, to LGCC, “Javanese Labor on Phu Quoc,” Aug. 2, 1910, GGI 42591, ANOM.

rate that more-or-less negated their earnings. Even from the very outset, the Falkenberg Agency's office in Bandung treated them as inmates, consigning them to barracks and subjecting them to medical tests. Before being sent abroad, each was assigned a number and a photo was taken with a complex biometric chart that included finger prints, surpassing the data that colonial police and prison services kept on prisoners and suspects.<sup>79</sup> To further disincentivize escape, the agency confiscated all of their NEI currency upon boarding the ship.<sup>80</sup> If the Phú Quốc Penitentiary had been managed by less sadistic individuals, one could imagine that conditions and life there may not have looked too different from SAPQ's plantation.

In addition to Phú Quốc's unforgiving natural environment, the SAPQ's plantation was terribly mismanaged, perhaps another byproduct of metropolitan ownership as investors could not easily visit the site nor could they properly vet and evaluate potential employees. Ultimately, the addition of 300 Javanese laborers only resulted in placing a total of 440 ha under cultivation, so when in 1911 SAPQ requested another 12,500 ha concession on the island, the colonial council refused.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the colonial council found that the SAPQ had encroached upon land cultivated by locals, misreported their capital so that it met the required threshold for receiving a concession, and could not produce a required survey map detailing how each part of the concession would be used (in part due to the fact that the Parisian investors had never set foot on the island). Moreover, the colonial council found the request to be in violation of an 1899 act specifying that no free land concessions greater than 500 ha should be given, a rule which was

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<sup>79</sup> The photograph as well as materials detailing the facilities and operations of the Falkenberg Agency in Bandung can be found in 7 AFFECON 15, ANOM. Note that the laborer featured in the photo was sent to New Caledonia, but the same facility of the same agency processed and sent coolies to Indochina using the same procedures. Other than New Caledonia and Indochina, the agency also sent coolies to the French Congo.

<sup>80</sup> Rossi to GGIC, Feb. 1907, GGI 42591, ANOM.

<sup>81</sup> GCC to GGIC, "Concerning a Concession of 12750 ha Requested on the Island of Phu Quoc," 24 Jan. 1913, GGI 871, ANOM.

apparently frequently ignored as it was with the SAPQ's original concession.<sup>82</sup> The Colonial Council evidently applied this law selectively, and now that they had pegged the SAPQ as a clique of neglectful metropolitan land-grabbers, they would do little to advance their interests.

Meanwhile, in February 1911, as Jourdan, SAPQ's representative in Saigon was lobbying the colonial council for the concession, scandal broke on the plantation when Coupleux, one of the two European foremen, murdered Blot, the other.<sup>83</sup> Unlike the Genevoix Affair, the victim was French, a fact that would ensure the scandal's irruption into Saigonese high society. The plantation manager, Arthur LeGrand, clearly favored Blot over Coupleux and placed him in a senior position. Coupleux, who was many years Blot's senior, felt jealous and dishonored that he should have to answer to a younger man and increasingly showed his contempt outwardly. On the night of February 11, Coupleux murdered Blot with shots from his revolver. LeGrand was not immediately certain as to what had happened, but his suspicions began to crystalize the next day as Coupleux bragged about how his revolver had been of a slightly higher caliber than Blot's.<sup>84</sup>

When this detail was brought up in the Chamber of Saigon's Court of Assises, the innuendo was not lost on the defendant or the audience, as at that moment Coupleux lashed out, creating a chaotic scene that forced the session to end early.<sup>85</sup> The thinly-veiled metaphor was understood by much of the courtroom, Coupleux himself included. His explosive reaction to this attack further revealed his own insecurity over his sense of masculinity which he had been questioning since the moment Blot surpassed him in rank. Indochina called out to young French men who were beginning their careers, yet faced barriers to advancement in the metropole, and the ideal structure of a career in Indochina called for rapid promotion accompanied by the

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<sup>82</sup> "Concerning a Concession of 12750 ha requested on the Island of Phu Quoc."

<sup>83</sup> Procurer General of Indochina to GGIC, "Arrest of a European Employee from the Plantation, Consequential Responsibility of Society and its Director," Apr. 21, 1913, GGI 871, ANOM.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

accumulation of wealth through side ventures (usually a business that grossly exploited local laborers or an administrative position that allowed for bribes) that allowed them to retire comfortably in France and marry a French woman. But Phú Quốc was a colonial backwater, a sinkhole that seemed to always pull in civil servants who scored the lowest on their exams and the plantation managers who could not land a job with the more reputable mainland firms. Blot's quick advancement and youthful energy confirmed Coupleux's anxieties that his career would never advance, that he would not return to France with gilded pockets and marry a respectable Frenchwoman and have white French children who would not have to work their way up the same social ladder. He suddenly snapped and felt he had lost control over his life.

Genevoix, too, had a lackluster career, stagnating as a sub-lieutenant in the Naval Infantry only to be detached to serve as the tax collector of an inconsequential province in Cochinchina when he was no longer considered as fresh and energetic as younger officers. His resignation from the post and subsequent employment on Girard's plantation signified a similar midlife crisis, an attempt to reverse the fortunes of his career by pivoting himself to a lucrative industry. When he arrived at the plantation that would supposedly kickstart his new career only to find withering plants tended by a handful of coolies, he realized that he had miscalculated and he, too, must have felt a lack of control over his life.

The isolated plantations on Phú Quốc also created a skewed sense of social order in which a handful of French men were given total control over hundreds of Asian bodies. While other prisons and plantations in Indochina maintained larger staffs and were subject to direct and frequent oversight, the plantations on Phú Quốc only employed two to three European staff for whom direct communication with the mainland was rare and difficult. The situation mirrored the basic premise of the Stanford Prison Experiment, and the results were shockingly similar. The

limited number of European staff formed a tight and exclusive male social group who had complete control over a number of captive bodies whose lives they considered expendable. Like the Stanford Prison Experiment, the guards quickly cultivated their power in a limitless trajectory, captives obeyed and even acted against one another, and the one omniscient authority who had the power to stop it refused because it threatened their personal ambitions. Both situations were also thwarted only by outside observers who acted conscientiously in deference to their authority.

The men, who all came to the island with underlying insecurities about their masculinity as their career paths had not conformed to the model of a successful French man which they had internalized, and to reassert a sense of control over their life they attempted to assert their physical dominance over others through spectacular displays of bravado/machismo. For Genevoix this meant devising intricate methods of torture for those who he perceived to disobey his will, for Bouchot it meant using raw physical strength to brutalize men and violate women, and for Coupleux it meant killing his competitor. While Genevoix and Bouchot brought out and expanded in one another a mutually enabling and reinforcing sadism and Blot and Coupleux experienced antagonistic competition, all became intoxicated with power employed in a quest to dominate others as a means of quelling and compensating for their own insecurity over their masculinity, enabled by their social isolation and dominance within the closed society of a plantation.

The aftermath of Coupleux's trial revealed not only the bizarre competitions of machismo that prevailed among the white men of Phú Quốc's plantations, but also the silent suffering that characterized the lives of Asian women there. A review of Coupleux's case revealed that on the same night of the murder, a legal complaint that had been filed about a Vietnamese coolie who

raped a Javanese woman on the plantation that went entirely uninvestigated.<sup>86</sup> Women on Phú Quốc's plantations faced particular hardships, yet their voices were seldom heard as the administration seemed to fixate on scandals starring white men. Among all of the court documents relating to the Genevoix affair, female prisoners are only mentioned in the background while every male prisoner subjected to torture as well as those in the band of successful escape were named and their voices seriously considered in the court. Although the female prisoners were spared the public tortures suffered by the men, at least one of them was visited by Bouchot during the night during which time she must have suffered at his hands behind closed doors. The SAPQ rape complaint failed to proceed when plantation authorities refused French authorities entry onto their property to investigate it.<sup>87</sup> While many observers in the administration commented on this failure of justice, it remained overshadowed by the Blot murder, and one must wonder how many more sexual crimes against women went unreported on that plantation.

With the outbreak of war in Europe, the Javanese laborers on Phú Quốc were repatriated to the NEI and, still turning a consistent deficit, the SAPQ took advantage of a wartime loan program intended to compensate industries for losses incurred due to the war, successfully obtaining 125,000 piasters in loans with no interest or payments until the conclusion of hostilities.<sup>88</sup> Tonkinese laborers were hired in place of the Javanese ones, and the company somehow managed to achieve its long-desired concession of 13,208 ha, essentially putting the entire southern half of the island under SAPQ's control.<sup>89</sup> The loans allowed the company to stay afloat through the war, but by 1919 they had only managed to put 440 ha of land under

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> GCC to GGIC, July 23, 1923, GGI 17390, ANOM.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

cultivation and were unable to begin repaying loans, falling again into a pattern of deficit earnings. The postwar economic boom allowed the SAPQ to obtain extensions throughout the 20s, however. Jourdan retired in 1923 and had planned to remit the plantation to the Government of Cochinchina, but the other members of the corporate board decided to continue its operation and managed to ensure its precarious survival.<sup>90</sup>

During the 20s, the French administration began taking greater interest in Phú Quốc, and in 1926 they sent an official to the island to study its potential organized colonization.<sup>91</sup> A first wave of immigrants came to the island independently as followers of the Cao Dai leader Nguyễn Kim Muon who took interest in the island, ensuring a trickle of newcomers throughout the 20s and 30s, settling mainly in the fishing towns of Dương Đông and Hàm Ninh.<sup>92</sup> Then, at the cusp of the new decade, the SAPQ, in cooperation with the Government of Indochina, executed a plan realizing the 1926 study, first bringing 537 contract workers at the company's own expense followed by 450 families comprising 600 adults and 862 children.<sup>93</sup> All 2000 of these newcomers were Catholics from the Tonkin provinces of Ninh Binh and Nam Dinh.<sup>94</sup> The free migrant families would be given 200-1000 ha plots of land with no obligations to the SAPQ, though the government and investors both anticipated that market forces would naturally lead them to work on the plantation on a part-time basis, failing to consider that peasant cultivators who performed backbreaking work year-round just to survive might not be so keen to take on

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Xuân-Tiêu, "L'île edenique."

<sup>92</sup> *Lịch Sử Phú Quốc.*

<sup>93</sup> E. Delamarre, *L'emigration et immigration ouvriere en indochine, [Emigration and Immigration of Laborers in Indochina]*, (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'extreme orient, 1931), 13.

<sup>94</sup> *Comité d'amnistie indochinoise: bulletin d'information, [Committee for Indochinese Amnesty: Information Bulletin]*, May 1, 1933, 3 SLOTFOM 43, ANOM.

even more backbreaking work in their little (if any) spare time.<sup>95</sup> Therefore, coolies continued to performed the bulk of the work.

In fall 1929, the new batch of coolies on Phú Quốc went to work, expecting two years of steady employment as specified in their contracts, beginning the growing season just as the New York stock market began to tumble half way around the world. The markets collapsed in October and the SAPQ, which was a publicly traded company, failed months later. The laborers learned the news when they stopped receiving wages five months into their contract.<sup>96</sup>

By April 1931, the SAPQ's plantation had definitively closed and the coolies were forced to stay in Hà Tiên, boarded on the property of Brother Merdrignac who offered to look after his fellow Catholics in their time of need, until their repatriation in June 1932. Although Merdrignac presented himself as a shepherd, he quickly revealed his true nature as a wolf. Merdrignac tried to squeeze every penny out of the refugees consigned to his property over the course of one year and three months. A petition written by the survivors after their eventual repatriation describes how Merdrignac forced them to sleep outdoors upon their arrival, leading to illness and death especially among the women. Their meager rations of rice were eventually cut off, after which Merdrignac forced them to hew wood on his land and sell it directly to him for well below market rate, paid in ration coupons, simultaneously positioning himself as the sole middleman who sold them provisions for well above market rate.<sup>97</sup> Eleven months in, the administrator of Hà Tiên began to express concern over the plight of the coolies on Merdrignac's property and provided them 0.10 piasters each which Merdrignac pocketed; he did the same when the SAPQ

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<sup>95</sup> Delamarre, *L'emigration et immigration ouvriere en indochine*, 13.

<sup>96</sup> According to TĐNK 31429, the SAPQ stopped all loan payments to the Government of Cochinchina in 1932, signaling that the investors had run out of capital.

*Comité d'amnistie indochinoise: bulletin d'information*. The petition letter is republished from the 19 January 1933 issue of *L'Annam Nouveau [New Annam]* where it was originally published.

<sup>97</sup> *Comité d'amnistie indochinoise: bulletin d'information*.

Merdrignac usually paid 0.55 piasters/m<sup>2</sup> of wood and resold it for 1.30 – 1.40 piasters/m<sup>2</sup>.

sent 1400 piasters, five months of back wages that the company owed the workers for their labor on Phu Quox. Merdrignac only released them, now a homeless and drifting mass clad in threadbare rice sacks, when they refused to sign a ten year contract to work on his land. They walked two days and two nights along the endless canals and paddy fields in the direction of Saigon, fed only by the generosity of passing merchants, until the government could arrange ships for their transportation and repatriation in January 1933.<sup>98</sup> They returned to a different Tonkin, one which had been politically transformed and awakened by major armed rebellions such as the Yen Bay Mutiny and Nghe Tinh Xoviets which raged and perished all over the course of a labor contract.

Although coolies' tragic odyssey was one of many tales of ruthless exploitation in Indochina, it found its way to the metropole, even when incidents as severe as Genevoix and Bouchot's personal Grand Guignol have remained buried in the archives to this day. Their atrocities would never have made it before the courts were it not for the intervention of Dorressamy. In the case of the returning coolies, a literate observer took interest in their plight upon their return to Tonkin and helped them draft a petition to the Governor General.<sup>99</sup> The tract subsequently appeared in the radical journal *L'Annam Nouveau* [New Annam] through which it made its way to metropolitan human rights activists, reprinting the petition in a newsletter, *Comite d'amnistie indochinoise: bulletin d'information* [Committee for Indochinese Amnesty: Information Bulletin]. The petition only found its way into the archives through the surete, who was concerned with the potentially subversive activities of the Committee for Indochinese

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<sup>98</sup> *Comité d'amnistie indochinoise: bulletin d'information*.

<sup>99</sup> Only 235 signed the petition while the Government of Cochinchina arranged for the repatriation of 471 adults and 324 children (in TĐNK 5989), indicating that most but not all were receptive to the outsiders' interest. The writer of the petition was likely a member of the Indochina Communist Party or Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng .

Amnesty, not the abuses suffered by the coolies.<sup>100</sup> Likewise, the only archival fingerprint of the coolies' repatriation concerns the costs, schedules, and passenger counts associated with chartering ships for their repatriation to Tonkin, avoiding entirely any discussion of the conditions that necessitated repatriation.<sup>101</sup>

A side-by-side examination of how Genevoix and Merdrignac's atrocities became visible to the outside reveals the role of a single literate and sympathetic interloper. While administrator after administrator turned a blind eye to what was happening on Girard's and Merdrignac's land, concerned either with reducing their own work or saving the administration's face, only a single outside voice was necessary to pique the interests of outsiders. Literacy was extremely rare among common prisoners and coolies, but its very possession could suddenly afford them access to a burgeoning world of print capital as well as the state's administrative infrastructure. The written accounts of Dorressamy and an anonymous petition writer were small actions that made atrocities visible to the world, transforming mere numbers recorded in the archives of the state into vivid personalities who could experience joy and suffering.

The remainder of the thirties on Phú Quốc saw population growth and the expansion of administrative infrastructure with the establishment of a radio post and maternity clinic in Dương Đông. Part of the former SAPQ concession at Cây Dừa was claimed in 1938 by Grandjean, one of Indochina's most reputable planters. He envisioned a successful plantation using proven agricultural methods and the installation of a private airstrip.<sup>102</sup> His grand reenvisioning of the plantation was cut short, however, by war and occupation.

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<sup>100</sup> *Comité d'amnistie indochinoise: bulletin d'information.*

<sup>101</sup> TĐNK 31429, TTLTQGII.

<sup>102</sup> Freyssenge to GCC, "Japanese Mission on Phu Quoc," Oct. 31, 1941, GGICM 235, ANOM.

## War on Phú Quốc

Georges Peiteven de St. André was transferred to Phú Quốc on September 30, 1940, where he would fulfill the role of customs officer of Dương Đông and, as the only Frenchman on the island, de facto administrator.<sup>103</sup> His assignment came only days after the conclusion of fighting between Japanese and French forces in the north. On Phú Quốc, he likely expected to pass the war peacefully, so he was taken by complete surprise when a company of Japanese soldiers with upwards of 1500 Chinese laborers landed on the island with little warning in October, 1941.

Before the arrival of the Japanese force, St. André did have one brief encounter with the Japanese military on October 8 when three officers disembarked at Dương Đông and expressed in taking a look around the island. They left after traipsing around the town and its hinterlands for a few hours, so St. André thought little of their presence and left for an excursion to the rugged northern part of the island the next day.<sup>104</sup> The day following his departure, a group of twenty Japanese soldiers and fourteen officers disembarked, this time requesting overnight accommodation for which they paid the administrative secretary, Le Van Trao, with twenty piasters, twelve bottles of beer, and four kilos of sugar. All in St. André's absence, the detachment cleared a field to the north of town and, just before leaving, informed Trao that they would return in five to six days with 1,000 men. St. André returned from his excursion on October 14 to find that a whole Japanese company had landed and was already busy trying to occupy the town's administrative buildings.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Administrator of Hatien to GCC, telegram, Sept. 2, 1940, and Sub-dir. of Customs and Duties to GCC, telegram, Sept. 10, 1940, TĐNK 1588, TTLTQGII

<sup>104</sup> St. André to Freyssenge, "Report on the Second and First Japanese Landings at Duong Dong on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of October," Oct. 14, 1941, GGICM 235, ANOM.

<sup>105</sup> St. André to Freyssenge, "Report on the Second and First Japanese Landings at Duong Dong."

The Japanese troops began causing havoc from the moment they disembarked. They stormed the schoolhouse, chasing the children out mid-lesson who they threatened with their fists. Once occupied, Lt. Oetami, the commanding officer, established his headquarters there. The doctor was ejected forcibly onto the street along with his furniture while his office and home were appropriated as sleeping quarters for the officers. Soldiers occupied the salt storehouse and radio hut, both government property, while harassing and even striking local militia members (*gardes civiles*) who were assigned to guard them.<sup>106</sup>

The tensions escalated when about 1500 Chinese laborers, either romusha or prisoners-of-war, disembarked on October 17.<sup>107</sup> Observers could only describe them as “veritable human wretches,” emaciated skeletons clothed in tattered rags who were relegated to the salt storehouse by night with no sanitation facilities and forced to work during the day, employed in the construction of two airfields, one on the north side of Dương Đông and another at Cửa Cạn.<sup>108</sup> Constant Japanese harassment drove St. André and other government workers to their nerves’ edge while their treatment of the Chinese laborers transformed the town into a hellish landscape. “Those incapable of work, almost all, are hit with blows of a baton, of rattan, by both Japanese

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<sup>106</sup> St. André to Freyssenge, “Report on the Second and First Japanese Landings at Duong Dong,” St. André to the Sub-dir. of Customs and Duties, telegram, 19 Oct. 1941, GGICM 235, ANOM.

<sup>107</sup> Lê Văn Trao to the Administrator of Hatien, “Acts of Brutality Committed by the Japanese Army Installed on Phu Quoc,” telegram, Oct. 20, 1941, GGICM 235, ANOM.

Different figures are offered by Trao (1,000), St. André (1,700), and Freyssenge (1,200-1,500), all based on observations at different moments and different perspectives. Trao’s estimate is based on the initial landing, Freyssenge bases his estimate on observations from the town center of Dương Đông, and St. André has access to the most detailed information including the state of affairs outside of Dương Đông, yet the stress he was under and desire to push the administration in Saigon to act could easily lead to exaggeration. Considering the conditions under which each estimate was made, I use the figure 1,500.

The Chinese laborers were likely not from Hainan where a large percentage of forced laborers were historically recruited since the local Chinese population on Phú Quốc (who were Hainanese) could not communicate with them. French sources only use the term “coolie,” leaving open the possibility that they could have been forced laborers or prisoners-of-war.

<sup>108</sup> Freyssenge to GCC, “Japanese Mission on Phu Quoc.”

officers and Chinese corporals,”<sup>109</sup> and deaths mounted as the tarmac expanded. “The Japanese soldiers buried the Chinese superficially, their hands and feet rising from the surface of the earth. Their cadavers have been dug up by the dogs and pigs, and a pungent odor reigns permanently over the airfield.”<sup>110</sup> They were frequently beaten and bayoneted on the airfield if too sick or slow to work and were forced to live on 300 grams of rice a day alongside only salt and a watery soup.<sup>111</sup>

The incident that left the most lasting impression on St. André occurred on October 19 at 9:00 am on Dương Đông’s only bridge, the highest point in town. The event was also witnessed by Freyssenge, the administrator of Hà Tiên who had been called to the island to assess and defuse the situation, and a throng of Sunday market-goers who were busy haggling along the river bank. Everyone’s attention shifted to the bridge when “the Japanese lieutenant [Oetami]... pushed in front of him with blows from rifle butts and batons an unfortunate Chinese coolie. As the Chinese turned around amidst the violent blows, he made a gesture of protest and, before the eyes of the whole town, a sentinel pinned the Chinese to the ground with his bayonet on the lieutenant’s orders, impaling him straight through.”<sup>112</sup> The usual bustle of the market must have must have fallen still before the gruesome spectacle.

It remains unclear whether the Chinese laborers were *romusha* or prisoners-of-war. Some local Vietnamese were recruited to work on the airfield, as well, and reported fair treatment while receiving 0.6 (women and children) to 0.8 piasters (men) a day, a wage well above that

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<sup>109</sup> It is unclear whether the “Chinese corporals” were recruited among the forced laborers or if they were *heiho*, auxiliary military forces recruited mainly from Korea and Taiwan.

<sup>110</sup> Lê Văn Trao to the Administrator of Hatien, Oct. 20, 1941.

<sup>111</sup> St. André to the Sub-dir. of Customs and Duties, Oct. 19, 1941.

This diet falls well below 500 calories a day.

<sup>112</sup> Lê Văn Trao to the Administrator of Hatien, Oct. 20, 1941.

Freyssenge to GCC, Oct. 27, 1941.

offered on any French plantation in Indochina.<sup>113</sup> The comparatively generous treatment of local laborers suggests either a propagandistic gesture, that the Chinese laborers were prisoners, or both.<sup>114</sup> Yet, a prolonged discussion of definitions proves disuseful to understanding the broader carceral reality of these lives. Whether they are called convicts, coolies, *romusha*, or prisoners-of-war matters little when they share the experiences of confinement, forced labor, and torture, all subjected to the absolute and arbitrary power of an individual delegated by a sovereign body with the power over life and death. If all time could collapse into one moment, surely the prisoners of the Phú Quốc Penitentiary and the Chinese laborers brought there under the Japanese yoke could look at one another and immediately recognize one another's condition.

While the Japanese military paid local day laborers well, the local population was not excluded from suffering. Japanese soldiers would extort local shopkeepers for items they wanted, abduct locals for arbitrary infractions and force them to work on the airfield for the day, and catcall passing women as they bathed naked in the river.<sup>115</sup> A few days into the occupation, Japanese soldiers ejected the patients from the infirmary onto the street, “waiting for them to die like dogs without the least of care” over the course of the next three days.<sup>116</sup> The women of Phú Quốc especially suffered, as the soldiers would forcibly enter homes at night under the pretext of searching for escaped Chinese laborers, when in reality they were prowling for women, creating “a reign of terror among the people in the countryside.”<sup>117</sup> St. André received a rape complaint

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<sup>113</sup> Freyssenge to GCC, Oct. 31, 1941.

According to Freyssenge, a notable majority of locally-hired coolies were women.

<sup>114</sup> Freyssenge to GCC, 2 Nov. 1941, GGICM 235, ANOM.

Trao and St. André both note that Japanese soldiers immediately began distributing anti-French propaganda upon their arrival. During his brief stay on the island, Freyssenge took note of this and immediately used personal networks to establish a counter-propaganda and counter-intelligence operation whose operation he delegated to local notables.

<sup>115</sup> Lê Văn Trao to the Administrator of Hatien, Oct. 20, 1941, GGICM 235.

<sup>116</sup> St. André to the Sub-dir. of Customs and Duties, Oct. 19, 1941.

<sup>117</sup> St. André to the Sub-dir. of Customs and Duties, Oct. 19, 1941.

Lê Văn Trao to the Administrator of Hatien, Oct. 20, 1941.

from at least one prominent family, likely one among many more that went unreported.<sup>118</sup> While the administrator of Hà Tiên and the administrative secretary in Dương Đông questioned the rape complaints, St. André believed them.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, as the delegated administrator, he was the one who recorded criminal complaints and therefore had the widest and most immediate knowledge of Japanese atrocities on the island.

Amidst the upheaval, St. André slept no more than three hours each night as he tirelessly responded to every developing incident while staving off constant threats from Japanese soldiers. By October 19, his nerves were reaching their limits as he sent a long, shaky, and rambling telegram to the sub-chief of Customs, ranting circuitously about defending French honor and how the Japanese were intentionally trying to provoke a violent incident to turn the population against him. The telegram also has a distinctly fatalistic tone as St. André suggests that he is poised to respond to the next Japanese aggression with force. He furthermore goes on to list commendations of his personnel, recommending each for various awards as if anticipating his inability to do so in the future.<sup>120</sup> Of course, who could blame him for being on edge after having witnessed, all in one day, the brutal execution on the bridge and the death of two patients ejected from the hospital on the street only meters below his bedroom window? The next day, St. André cracked.

St. André's last straw was when a Japanese sentinel stationed at his veranda wandered into his bedroom. St. André pulled his revolver on the sentinel who immediately turned face and barreled down the stairs, missing the last step and tumbling on the floor. St. André expelled the sentinel and locked his door before the other sentinels could descend upon the customs house,

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Freyssenge to GCC, 27 Oct. 1941, GGICM 235.

<sup>118</sup> St. André to the Sub-dir. of Customs and Duties, Oct. 19, 1941.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

roughing up the office workers and spilling the files all over. Meanwhile, St. André left undetected and made his way across the street to the barracks of the *garde civile* to muster all eight militiamen. He led them down the main street in the direction of the lieutenant's headquarters, advancing in a broad formation, weapons drawn, in what must have looked like a sheriff in western movie leading a posse of deputies. A Japanese sentinel sounded an alarm, summoning a much larger Japanese squad. Facing certain defeat, St. André ordered his men to withdraw, staying behind to stall the Japanese and bear the brunt of the attack. Although St. André laid down his revolver, the sentinels descended upon him furiously as they bayoneted him twice in the right leg and beat him to the point of unconsciousness. When St. André came to, he found himself tied tightly to a post of his veranda in a stress position that cut off circulation to his arms while encircled by Japanese sentinels who took turns beating and taunting him as they awaited the arrival of Lt. Oetami.<sup>121</sup>

When Oetami arrived, half an hour later, he must have been wearing the same twisted smile that crossed Genevoix and Bouchot's lips as they bound prisoners to the pillar of the plantation house fifty-five years earlier. The lieutenant interrogated St. André about the incident, but he refused to talk unless he was removed from the post and moved into his office. Still restrained by the rope but now sitting in his office chair, Oetami attempted to compel St. André to sign a confession indicating that he had acted aggressively without provocation which bore the title "friendship accord."<sup>122</sup> St. André at first refused, but acquiesced when Oetami threatened to tie him back to the veranda until he signed. From then on, the Japanese would carry out their

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<sup>121</sup> St. Andre to the Sub. Dir. of Customs and Duties and Freyssenge, Nov. 2, 1941, GGICM 235, ANOM.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

The customs secretary, who knew some Chinese characters, and a local Minh Huong acted as interpreters, working through brush communication.

occupation of Dương Đông unimpeded and St. André was evacuated to a Saigon hospital a few days later.<sup>123</sup>

After the incident on October 20, the Japanese military continued to build the airfields and no doubt continued to abuse and murder the Chinese laborers while terrorizing the local population. By November 6, the Dương Đông airfield received a two-engine aircraft, attesting to how hard the 1,500 laborers must have been pushed to transform uncleared land into two well-developed airstrips in the course of twenty days.<sup>124</sup> In the following weeks, a squadron of thirty-five Ki-43 fighters was stationed on the island along with more Japanese infantry detachments.<sup>125</sup>

Relations between the occupying forces and French officials calmed until December 6, when they forcibly occupied all administrative buildings, ransacked the local administration's archives, and forcibly bound and gagged Munier, St. André's Successor, until the next morning.<sup>126</sup> Even in early October, the administrator of Hà Tiên suspected that the Japanese activity on Phú Quốc had something to do with imminent Japanese designs on Thailand or Malaya, and the events of December 7 and 8 proved his suspicions correct as the Japanese military used Phú Quốc as a springboard to the Malayan peninsula, one part of a grander operation that would usher in a new phase in the war.<sup>127</sup> All Japanese forces vacated the island on March 11 by which time Japan had occupied almost every corner of Southeast Asia.

## Conclusions

Phú Quốc's unique position as a large, habitable island in the Gulf of Thailand has made it a space resistant to the control of regional states, cementing its status as a frontier island where

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<sup>123</sup> GCC to the Gen. Cmdt. of the Div. of CochinChina-Cambodia, Nov. 3, 1941, GGICM 235, ANOM.

<sup>124</sup> Gougat to the Minister of Colonies, telegram, Nov. 6, 1941, GGICM 235, ANOM.

<sup>125</sup> The squadron was the 3<sup>rd</sup> Chutai/64<sup>th</sup> Sentai of the Japanese Army Air Force and flew missions over the Gulf of Siam, protecting the invasion force on its way to Malaya.

Hiroshi Ichimura, *Ki-43 'Oscar' Aces of World War 2*, (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2009).

<sup>126</sup> Munsch (Sub-dir. of Customs and Duties) to Dir. of Customs and Duties, 27 Dec. 1941, GGICM 235, ANOM.

<sup>127</sup> Freyssenge to Govr. of CochinChina, "Japanese Mission on Phu Quoc," 31 Oct. 1941, GGICM 235.

those marginalized by the mainland states could create relatively autonomous communities, including pirates and bandits who often made life less secure for more peaceful settlers who were frequently refugees or peasants trying to escape over-crowded rural areas where their economic prospects were bleak. The corresponding society that developed on the island was not one defined by dominant states or their associated ethnic groups, but a patchwork of settlers and communities where "all labels should be taken as tentative, fluid, and even temporary," following Li Tana's characterization of ethnic identity on the "water frontier."<sup>128</sup> This fluidity could just as easily give rise to cooperation as it could conflict, however, as it is worth noting that Khmer nationalists frequently cite the presence of Cambodian settlements on the island as justifications for national contestation. When the Khmer Rouge were in power, they even launched armed raids on Phú Quốc to press these claims and the island's sovereignty remains a sore spot in Viet-Khmer relations to this day.

As the water frontier that comprised the Mekong and Chaophraya Deltas along with the intervening coastline became tightly integrated into the expanding Thai and Vietnamese states, Phú Quốc's unique geography caused it to elude their territorial consolidation, retaining its cosmopolitan and stateless character well into the first decades of French rule.

Phú Quốc's enduring isolation must be understood not merely as a product of its geography, but of its forbidding mythos, as well. The island's unsuitability for rice cultivation led to repeated failed settlements, abandoned once the settlers realized they could not sustain themselves off the land, a fact when combined with the island's thriving wild buffalo population that grew with every exodus of settlers became enshrined in the myths and legends of the island, epitomized by the figure of Kiêm Giao. The Vietnamese legend of a Khmer women (whether

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<sup>128</sup> Li Tana and Nola Cooke, eds., *The Water Frontier*, 7.

historical or imagined) with highly probable Cham origins further demonstrates the fluidity of cultural identities so prevalent on the water frontier.

French planters brought with them a technical knowledge of cash crop cultivation which they thought could be applied universally, and they came to Phú Quốc prepared to tame the land that the “lazy” natives had neglected. When the first wave of French planters failed, it did not occur to them that the locals may have had legitimate reasons not to cultivate the land, but instead blamed their failures on lack of labor. Their hubris led to the establishment of the Phú Quốc Penitentiary, a plantation that functioned in part as a prison, using prisoners as a source of labor.

While Poulo Condore was a more perfectly isolated prison island in terms of its physical geography, Phú Quốc was more isolated from mainland society. Therefore, while the enormous *bagne* of Poulo Condore was supported by a robust command structure consisting of Asian and European guards with regular communication and transportation services to Saigon and Cap St Jacques, the penitentiary and successive plantations of Phú Quốc had between two to three European managers and guards at any given time who interacted directly with French authorities on the mainland once or twice a year at most. While Poulo Condore isolated its captives, Phú Quốc isolated its captors, creating a situation prone to abuses of power. Furthermore, while the role of Director of the Poulo Condore Islands and Penitentiary was a prestigious position that has often been a springboard to higher positions, even Governor General, an administrative post or job on a Phú Quốc plantation was usually a dead-end career-wise.

Genevoix and Bouchot were both deeply insecure men looking to reaffirm a lost sense of masculinity and shared a penchant for sadism. More-or-less unchecked by any oversight and given complete power over the lives of prisoners, deciding on a whim what rules they must

follow and how and when they should be punished, Genevoix and Bouchot enabled one another to torture at least fifteen prisoners to death. What's more, a corrupt legal system and self-serving administration allowed them to walk free rather than bring them to justice, an alternative which would have necessitated a deep (and costly) reflection on critical failures in the penal system.

For the various groups of prisoners and unfree laborers who found themselves on Phú Quốc, the only people who were able to successfully reveal their conditions were literate outsiders acting conscientiously, such as Dorressamy who revealed the state of the prisoners of Phú Quốc Penitentiary and the anonymous person author of the petition for the repatriated coolies. While each had side motives, whether personal or political, they did go out far out of their way to use their skills of writing and knowledge of Indochinese governmental institutions in order to achieve redress for these vulnerable populations. St. André, too, as a literate observer with institutional competency was able to bring to others' attention Japan's treatment of the Chinese laborers they brought to the island, though his words did nothing to alleviate their conditions, nor did he make that his goal. Yet, his observations are the sole record of such horrendous acts on Phú Quốc, representing one iteration of an atrocity that no doubt repeated itself thousands more times in silence across Japanese-occupied lands of Asia and the Pacific during the war.

A historical examination of Phú Quốc during the colonial era reveals a troubling ambiguity between prisoners, contract laborers, and *romusha*. All came from an illiterate peasantry, all were subjected to physical abuse and harsh work conditions, and the survivors generally returned home worse off than they had begun. The prisoners of the Phú Quốc Penitentiary had a maximum sentence of three years, signifying minor crimes such as vagrancy, petty theft, or indebtedness. All were swept up in a late nineteenth century expansion of

criminality that outlawed some of the inalienable realities of peasant life, representing some of the same hardships that led peasants to enroll themselves as contract laborers. Although the contract laborers from Java and Tonkin who found themselves on Phú Quốc received wages, measures taken by plantation owners, such as payment in scrip, price gouging, and unexpected and exorbitant fines and fees for facilities, missed work, etc. more-or-less ensured they would end their contract broke or in debt.

All of those brought to Phú Quốc unfreely lived within a daily carceral reality. Strictly consigned to an enclosed space, subject to often arbitrary and physical disciplinary measures, removed far from their homes, and obligated to continue their labor for a fixed (or indefinite in the case of the Chinese laborers) amount of time, all of these groups experienced Phú Quốc as a prison island no matter what the legal title of their condition was.

The short-lived Phú Quốc Penitentiary was the first step in Phú Quốc's gradual transition from frontier island to prison island which was largely a question of establishing the island's legibility vis-à-vis the imperial center. Through the 1940s much of the island's fish sauce and black pepper was exported as far as Hong Kong and Bangkok without ever passing the scrutiny of a customs agent and most of the island's inhabitants continued to make a living by fishing without ever encountering the French state. The plantations of the 1870s, including the one which became the Phú Quốc Penitentiary, were but small coastal enclaves of carceral space, specks in a wild and indifferent frontier. The SAPQ enclosed the entire southern part of the island in the first decade of the twentieth century, expanding the carceral aspect of the island, but that, too, collapsed. The rugged and forested north remained a frontier zone invisible to colonial authorities. The brief but tumultuous Japanese occupation marked the moment that Phú Quốc's status as a prison island began to eclipse/overshadow its status as a frontier island: it suddenly

had a means of constant connection with the mainland via two large airstrips and a regular coastal patrol.<sup>129</sup> The Japanese brief but intensive introduction of upwards of 1500 laborers moreover spread the horrors that were once briefly confined to the small coastal enclave that was the Phú Quốc Penitentiary to the entire island to be witnessed and experienced by the entire populace. The French administration followed Japan's lead and quickly moved to create a network of "special labor formations" on the island, essentially labor concentration camps intended for indefinite administrative detainees established through a Vichy decree, setting the stage for the island's nearly uninterrupted use for various carceral purposes through 1975, a subject that will be discussed at greater length in a later chapter.

Today, the Phú Quốc Penitentiary where Genevoix and Bouchot tortured so many prisoners to death in the 1880s is overgrown with underbrush that pushes up against a rocky, trash-ridden beach, and the Japanese airfield that doubled as the graves of so many Chinese forced laborers served as Phú Quốc's main airport until it was replaced by a new and larger one in 2012. Today, it is a blank spot in the middle of a bustling town, now used to store construction materials and transversed by a steady stream of scooters on a main route. The atrocities of the distant past have been erased from the landscape, and few drivers realize that the roads they travel were first paved by prisoners, or that the blank tarmac conceals the graves of Chinese laborers murdered and worked to death by the Japanese military. The only vestige of the island's carceral past can be found in a museum that recreates one of dozens of prison units from the prisoner-of-war camp dating from 1953-1975, each building filled with gruesome dioramas of torture that represent the legacy of people like Genevoix, Bouchot, and Oetami. In Phú Quốc's

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<sup>129</sup> Counter-Adm. Cmdt. of the Navy in Indochina, "Stationing [of Naval Units] in the Gulf of Siam," Nov. 11, 1951, GCC to HCI, telegram, March 26, 1942, GGICM 235, ANOM.

After the unannounced Japanese occupation of October 1941, the French administration decided to establish a regular naval patrol in the Gulf of Thailand that could quickly respond to any future unauthorized actions by Japan.

long history as a prison island, only the final prisoner-of-war camp has survived the trials of collective memory, largely because among the 20,000 prisoners who occupied it at any given time were literate idealists who fought for a revolutionary regime that ultimately came to power. With literate witnesses and no administration poised to suppress their testimony, the prisoner-of-war camp has come to encapsulate the entire historical memory of Phú Quốc, prison island. The frontier island has mostly faded as the wild herds of water buffalo are gone, the remaining forest has been preserved as a national park, and every village and hamlet is connected to smoothly paved roads. The ethnic cosmopolitanism of the closed frontier can only be glimpsed as traces – a house built on stilts, a kneeling bull at a temple, a soup that at once tastes vaguely Vietnamese and Khmer. Now, Phú Quốc is a paradise island to where tourists flock from around Vietnam and the world primarily to visit its beaches and resorts.

## Chapter 6: Phú Quốc and the Cold War: Chinese Nationalist Internment Camps

There is not only one, but there are two Phú Quốc Islands. This is no metaphorical exercise or feat of metaphysical acrobatics, but a geographic fact. Known in Mandarin as Fùguódǎo (富國島), the wealthy realm, it is a small artificial island in the middle of Chengcing Lake, also artificial, connected to the shore by an oversized pedestrian suspension bridge. The island itself contains a pavilion that juts out into the lake and an increasingly weathered memorial that was built along with the island in 1955 as a memorial to the 30,000 Kuomintang (KMT) troops who were interned on the island's namesake in Vietnam from 1950-53.

The memorial was built in the midst of a military dictatorship when Taiwan was ruled under the iron fist of General Chiang Kai-shek. Like most military dictatorships, a national cult developed around the feats of generals and soldiers, and this monument in particular honored the leadership of General Huang Chieh (黃杰) who came to act as the de facto commander of the interned forces.

While Vietnamese collective memory of Phú Quốc enshrines the experience of Việt Minh and National Liberation Front (NLF)<sup>1</sup> fighters in the 1953-73 prisoner-of-war camp, the island is remembered in Taiwan as the site where 30,000 soldiers of the 26<sup>th</sup> Army experienced a lengthy internment. Yet, the memorial and the memory it represents have become entangled in an intentional amnesia for the KMT's military feats, pivoting instead to focus on the suffering that the military dictatorship caused the Taiwanese people, a topic that had been suppressed until 1991. New memorials have come to take prominence over militaristic ones like Fùguódǎo, one which is the Green Island White Terror Human Rights Park, located on the site of Taiwan's own former prison island where Taiwanese intellectuals and activists accused of subversive thoughts

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<sup>1</sup> Commonly referred to in the US as the "Việt Công."

and actions were sent to be “reeducated” through hard labor. Thus, Green Island and Phú Quốc Island occupy a similar space in the collective historical memories of their respective national societies, albeit Phú Quốc is presented as a triumph of nationalism over external forces and Green Island as a triumph over nationalism within the nation.

As explained earlier, Phú Quốc’s identity as a prison island became cemented at the end of 1941 during a brief but consequential Japanese occupation. French planters had actively tried to establish large-scale plantations on the island from the 1870s, with the government assuming a more active role in the island’s development from the 1930s onwards. The Japanese occupation was a wake-up call for the French as they realized first, that Phú Quốc’s isolation from the mainland and low population made it vulnerable to external threats, and second, that the Japanese had been able to quickly and successfully build critical infrastructure on the island through the use of mass-scale forced labor. The French administration’s evolving policy towards the island’s colonization along with key legal transformations spurred by war and occupation in France solidified Phú Quốc’s status as a prison island as place outside the rule-of-law where castoffs of the colonial state could be relegated to social extinction.

From the opening of the first prison on Phú Quốc until the closure of the last camp in 1975, the island increasingly came to symbolize erasure and disappearance in the form of a hyper-politicized and extra-legal experience. While the island’s carceral regime before WWII had been an extension of the processes of French colonial expansion, after the war it was part of a complex regional Cold War geopolitical terrain as it first held KMT internees and later Vietnamese political prisoners. The KMT internees represented 30,000 among millions of displaced, stateless persons globally who were relegated to life in camps after the world war, though the KMT internees of Phú Quốc did come to occupy a decisive role in the regional

geopolitical gameboard in a way uncommon for displaced persons. The camp was formed on the heels of an era that experienced the largest movement of stateless peoples and refugees, many who were confined for long periods of times in displaced person, or DP camps, a phenomenon that the Chinese Civil War and the Cold War conflicts built upon and extended.<sup>2</sup>

In 1950, the troops there represented the last intact KMT army that had fought through WWII and the Chinese Civil War, and therefore their deployment held the potential to merge the Korean War with the Chinese Civil War and war in Indochina to produce a much broader Asian conflict. All over the course of months, the Republic of China (ROC) government had withdrawn to Taiwan, Chinese “volunteers” pushed United Nations (UN) forces to the last corner of Korea, a secret KMT army in the mountains of Burma threatened both the integrity of the Burmese Union as well as People’s Republic of China (PRC)-controlled Yunnan, and French Indochina suddenly found itself sharing a border with the PRC which fundamentally altered the stakes in the war they had been waging against Việt Minh guerrillas. In this web of entangled events, The ROC, PRC, France, and the US vied to control the fates of the KMT internees on the seemingly remote island of Phú Quốc who depending on whose control they were under could maintain the delicate regional tension, or cause it to snap.

Through a close examination of the development of prison camps on Phú Quốc and the establishment of the KMT internees there, this chapter looks at the role prison islands can play in global geopolitics in the context of the Cold War. While Phú Quốc was a seemingly isolated place, this chapter shows how they internment camps (and some of those confined within them) were important actors regional Cold War geopolitics. The circumstances of those within the

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Mark Wyman, *DPs: Europe’s Displaced Persons, 1945-1951*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

camps had the potential to determine whether the delicate regional status quo held, or the ongoing regional conflicts expanded to a larger, bloodier one.

### Special Labor Formations

On 21 January 1940, the French prime minister, Daladier, signed a decree calling for the indefinite administrative detention of those deemed a threat to national defense and security in “special labor formations.” While the governments of Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina, and Laos readily adopted the new term, the Cambodian administration did not mince words and referred to them simply as “concentration camps.”<sup>3</sup>

While the colonial administrations in Tonkin, Annam, Cambodia, and Laos interpreted the decree most literally, reserving the camps for political prisoners engaged in manual labor for military purposes,<sup>4</sup> the “special labor formations” of Cochinchina represented a much broader interpretation of the decree, creating massive clusters of camps where prisoners were employed in grand infrastructural development schemes. The first was formed in Núi Bà Rá in 1942 at the foot of the central highlands in Tây Ninh, and another followed on Phú Quốc later the same year.<sup>5</sup> While Tonkin applied the 21 January decree mostly as intended for the suppression of

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<sup>3</sup> Information on the implementation of the decree in Tonkin and Annam, see RSTNF 2492, ANOM.

For mention of the concentration camps in Cambodia, see “Prakas 54 of 7 February 1942” in *Bulletin Administratif du Cambodge*, February 1942.

<sup>4</sup> The administration of Tonkin was still willing to stretch their own definitions, as they eventually decided that arrested beggars could be incorporated into the labor formations if they were fit to work. See Superior Resident of Tonkin to Resident Mayor of Haiphong, Dec. 23, 1943, RSTNF 2492, ANOM.

Some of the larger camps were located in Bắc Mê, Chợ Chu, Vụ Bản, and Nghĩa Lộ (first three mentioned in “Memo – Special Camps for Workers for the Internment of Individuals Dangerous to National Defense or Public Security,” June 1940, RSTNF 4292, ANOM; Nghĩa Lộ is mentioned in Vu Van Loi, “Report to the Superior Resident of Tonkin,” April 11, 1945, RSTNF 2492, ANOM).

Cambodia had one camp in Pech Nil (“Prakas 54 of 7 February 1942” in *Bulletin Administratif du Cambodge*, February 1942) and Annam had one in Đăk Glei near Kontum (GGI to Sup. Res. of Tonkin, “Application of the Decree of 21 January 1940,” RSTNF 2492, ANOM).

<sup>5</sup> Additionally, a smaller camp was created for Europeans in Tây Ninh and other smaller camps for Vietnamese were established in Bạc Liêu and Rạch Gia; some of these camps are detailed in Hoeffel to Chiefs of Local Police Services, January 25, 1945, HCI 694, ANOM. A special labor camp was also created on Poulo-Condore in 1943, shown in “Note for Ship Lt. Pelletier on Administrative Internees from the Merchant Marine in Bldg. S of the Maison Centrale of Saigon,” June 4, 1943, RSTNF 2492, ANOM and “Decision of the Governor General of Indochina,” September 30, 1943, HCI 694, ANOM.

political dissent, Cochinchina used the decree more instrumentally as a means of decreasing the populations of larger prisons.

After the administration conducted a detailed agricultural study of Phú Quốc in May 1942, fifty prisoners from the Maison Centrale were sent to the island as soon as July to prepare facilities necessary to receive up to 500 more.<sup>6</sup> A team of five experienced high-ranking prison guards, headed by Lucien Luciani, the chief guard of Poulo-Condore, was tasked with organizing the surveillance and supervising labor for a series of camps located around the island while a detachment of seventy Gardes Civiles would bolster surveillance.<sup>7</sup> Two convoys carrying a total of 485 Vietnamese prisoners arrived in November to populate the camps and begin work on expanding docks, clearing waterways, repaving and expanding the island's road networks, and the construction of public buildings such as schools and hospitals.<sup>8</sup> Yet, the work got off to a slow start due in part to guards' grievances which sparked a protracted labor dispute with the administration who refused to pay them a relocation bonus or allow them to bring family members to the island.<sup>9</sup>

The prisoners came from all parts of Cochinchina and at first comprised only individuals with one-year sentences, but the cap was later raised to two as the need for labor expanded while numbers decreased due to incapacitation resulting from disease and work accidents.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, by the end of the first month fifteen had already fallen too ill to work and sixty were experiencing

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<sup>6</sup> *Lịch sử Phú Quốc qua Tài liệu Lưu trữ*, (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia – Sự thật, 2012), 16-18.

<sup>7</sup> "Telegram from Commandant of the Garde Civile in Hatien," February 1943, TĐNK 49979, TTLQGII.

<sup>8</sup> *Lịch sử Phú Quốc*, 164.

<sup>9</sup> In March 1944, Luciani was replaced for "fatigue and lacking the inclination for a prolonged stay on the island." The same month, the other four guards that had come with him were transferred to the Maison centrale upon their own request, according to Administrator of Hatien to Director of the Maison Centrale, letter, March 4, 1944, TĐNK 49979, TTLQGII.

Over the course of the year, Luciani made 1,060 piasters while the other guards made 851. The commander of the *gardes civiles* on the island made 1,541, according to 2<sup>nd</sup> Bureau to the Administrator of Hatien, letter, May 6, 1944, TĐNK 49979, TTLQGII.

<sup>10</sup> *Lịch sử Phú Quốc*, 166-168.

less severe symptoms of tropical diseases prevalent on the island.<sup>11</sup> Escapes were numerous at both Núi Bà Rá and Phú Quốc, attributed to a shortage of bright blue uniforms meant to set the prisoners apart from the general population but no doubt augmented by the indifference of the underpaid prison guards and Gardes Civiles.<sup>12</sup>

By January 1945, the projects on Phú Quốc had more-or-less progressed to their greatest extent. The prisoners had built a market, school, guesthouse, power plant, kiln, and fish sauce laboratory in Dương Đông while renovating various public buildings. Around the island, they also succeeding in repaving and improving the two main routes while making considerable progress on a series of levies on the Dương Đông River. Yet, the construction fell far short of the administration's goals, leaving the entire northern section of the island untouched.<sup>13</sup> As prisoners on Poulo-Condore began to perish at an increasing rate due to starvation and malnutrition caused by wartime shortages, the administration recommended dispersing the island's special labor camp which exclusively held administrative internees, employing brigands in mainland special labor formations and all others (mostly political detainees) on Phú Quốc.<sup>14</sup>

Just over a month later, on 9 March 1945, Japanese forces seized complete power in Indochina, arresting and interning all French nationals, worried that the recent Allied liberation of France and advances in Burma would kindle concealed sympathies towards Free France. The action almost certainly meant the end of the special labor formations on Phú Quốc, and it is uncertain whether or not any of the political prisoners from Poulo-Condore had made it to the

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<sup>11</sup> *Lịch sử Phú Quốc*, 166.

<sup>12</sup> *Lịch sử Phú Quốc*, 164.

GCC to Gen. Cmt. of the Cochinchina-Cambodia Division, letter, June 15, 1943, GGI-CM 946, ANOM.

<sup>13</sup> *Lịch sử Phú Quốc*, 175-176.

<sup>14</sup> Hoeffel to Local Chief of Police Services, Jan. 25, 1945, HCI 694, ANOM.

island before the coup de force. While the camps on Phú Quốc simply dissolved back into the island's oscillating frontier, the ones at Núi Bà Rá were burnt to ashes.<sup>15</sup>

### **Rebellion on a Frontier Island**

An Indochina Communist Party Committee was formed on Phú Quốc in September 1945, immediately after Japan's surrender.<sup>16</sup> Since the Communist Party had never had a reported presence on the island before the war, it is likely that some of the political prisoners from the special labor camp on Poulo-Condore had been transferred to the island before the coup de force and established themselves on the island once the camps dissolved. In anticipation of landings intended to reestablish French control on the island, the fresh Việt Minh cell destroyed newly constructed roads, culverts, and bridges. French forces landed in April 1946 as the Việt Minh evaporated into the northern jungle and nearby rocky islets. The French forces left the island in May and entrusted its defense to a detachment of Gardes Civiles and local Cao Đài militias. These paramilitary forces were largely ineffective due to their entrenched position in towns and serious infighting that developed between the Cao Đài and Gardes Civiles, leaving them completely unprepared for a Việt Minh amphibious raid on Cây Dừa in October that razed the Grandjean plantation. In response to the phantom-like presence of Việt Minh guerrillas, French paratroopers landed in May 1947 and again in January 1948 only to encounter no hostile forces.<sup>17</sup> While Việt Minh forces harassed and raided Phú Quốc's coast, the main Việt Minh cell in the north of the island established a liberated zone under their control and developed ties with long-established smuggler networks to transform it into the main transshipment point for the flow of the arms traffic from the Gulf of Thailand into Cambodia and Cochinchina which led

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<sup>15</sup> "Note for the Chief of Staff," July 8, 1947, HCI 236, ANOM.

<sup>16</sup> *Lịch sử Phú Quốc*, 178.

<sup>17</sup> *Lịch sử Phú Quốc*, 180-185.

Jacques Mordal, *Marine Indochine [Indochina Navy]*, (Paris: Amiot-Dumont, 1953), 201.

Gen. Delatour to declare the waters around Phú Quốc as a no-go zone where all civilian water traffic was subject to search and confiscation.<sup>18</sup>

The northern part of Phú Quốc had always been an enduring frontier ever illegible to the French state. Just as Nguyễn Trung Trực had based himself there to wage his rebellion against the French in 1868, the Việt Minh did the same in 1946. While Trực's forces became isolated and worn down in the frontier region, the Việt Minh integrated themselves into the existing local communities who had long made a living off of fishing, forest products, and smuggling while maintaining contact with a robust and widespread network of underground Party cells throughout Indochina. The French command in Indochina noted the ineffectiveness of intermittent landings in pacifying the island while also trying to find an alternative to the practice of “executing [captives] in the field, by units who estimate they cannot be encumbered by captives” which had become commonplace, and the idea of a large prison camp on Phú Quốc was considered, even though the proposal was ultimately rejected.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the French administration again began turning to the mass movement of unfree bodies as the solution for establishing control over Phú Quốc.

### **The KMT Soldiers' Flight over the Indochinese Border**

Meanwhile, upon the conclusion of WWII in the North of Indochina, the Allied command ordered KMT forces under the command of Gen. Lu Han (also the Governor of Yunnan) to occupy Tonkin and Laos and secure the surrender of Japanese forces there. Lu had long enriched himself on Yunnan's lucrative opium trade over the course of the warlord era, so

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<sup>18</sup> *Lịch sử Phú Quốc*, 181.

<sup>19</sup> Note for the Councilor of the Republic, High Commissioner of France in Indochina, “Proposal to create a Center for Assembling Combatants and Suspects who fall into our Hands in the Course of Military Operations,” June 5, 1947, HCI 236, ANOM.

his presence in Hanoi no doubt afforded him the opportunity to expand his trade networks during his two-year stay in Hanoi.<sup>20</sup>

In order to curb Lu's power, Chiang Kai-shek ordered sent his armies from Indochina directly to Manchurian battlefronts where they were quickly decimated by the advancing People's Liberation Army (PLA).<sup>21</sup> Lu returned to Kunming in 1948 as a governor without an army only to find two crack units, the 8<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> Armies,<sup>22</sup> commanded by the Chiang loyalists Li Mi (李彌) and Yu Chengwan (余程萬) garrisoned outside his city.<sup>23</sup>

By the end of summer 1949, PLA forces had made major advances to threaten Guangzhou and Chungking, the capital, prompting Chiang and his advisers to plan their last stand: the capital would be moved to Kunming and the mountainous landscape of Yunnan would be their final redoubt. One of Chiang's top commanders, Pai Chongxi, worried the plan would fail. He and Li Zongren, the acting president of the ROC, both believed (in theory, if not in practice) they were fighting for a liberal democratic China that would never actualize under Chiang's megalomaniacal authoritarianism. They quickly recruited some of Pai's top generals as co-conspirators in a plot to abandon Chiang in Taiwan, form an independent state out of remaining KMT territory on the mainland, and begin negotiating a peace treaty with the PRC.

Although Lu Han had outwardly convinced Chiang of his loyalty, he personally had no faith in the generallisimo and began making a series of plans to save his own skin when the PLA overran Yunnan. Lu's wealth had been built on opium, and in the summer of 1949 famine raged in the uplands as he had set opium poppy quotas so abnormally high that villagers could not

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<sup>20</sup> McCoy, Alfred W., *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade*, rev. exp. ed. (New York, NY: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, 163.

<sup>22</sup> Note that KMT armies are similar in size and organization to a large U.S. division.

<sup>23</sup> Richard M. Gibson and Chen Wenhua, *The Secret Army: Chiang Kai-shek and the Drug Warlords of the Golden Triangle*, (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

produce enough food. Lu aimed for no less than a bumper crop of opium whose profits could buy him an affluent life in exile, the CPC's forgiveness, or even his own independent state.

By October, Pai's defensives lines faltered rapidly, leading most of his troops to be pushed deep into the south. Realizing that he could not hold onto any major cities and that a retreat into Yunnan would be disastrous, he began thinking creatively. During WWII, militant elements of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, VNQDD) had fled to China to join nationalist forces fighting Japan there who continued to operate there after the war, sheltered by the KMT. In mid-October, Pai called Pham Tai from Hong Kong and Vũ Hồng Khánh, who had been living with his band of 200 guerrillas in the Guangxi frontier, to his headquarters for a meeting.<sup>24</sup>

Pai tasked Tai with securing permission from Emperor Bao Dai and/or High Commissioner Leon Pignon for 50,000 KMT troops to cross the Indochina border where they would engage Việt Minh forces. Khanh would relay the plan to other VNQDD bands in Yunnan and his guerrillas would serve as guides, assuring that they slipped past French forces undetected. Pai's forces who had not become trapped on Hainan would cross into Tonkin while the 26<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Armies in Yunnan would cross into Laos.<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, Lu Han had grown suspicious of all factions and began hedging his bets by appealing to the US to support a bid to establish an independent Yunnanese state, and to the CPC to defect if all else failed.<sup>26</sup> It is likely that Chiang was aware of the conspiracy against him and Lu's role in it at this point, as on November 16 he suddenly abandoned all plans to move the

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<sup>24</sup> "Activities of Leaders of the Viet Nam Quoc Dang [sic]," report, June 20, 1950, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

<sup>25</sup> "Activities of Leaders of the Viet Nam Quoc Dang [sic]."

<sup>26</sup> Document 675, the Vice-Consul at Kunming to the Sec. of State, Nov. 15, 1949, telegram," in Office of the Historian, U.S. Dept. of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, v. VIII*.

capital to Kunming.<sup>27</sup> Around the same time, Li Zongren personally visited Lu in Kunming to reaffirm his support for the approaching coup, though French sources noted that Lu did not immediately accept, suggesting that he was serious about his ambitions for independence – though it is also possible he was simply using it as a bargaining chip with Li. Lu finally confirmed his support by the 26<sup>th</sup>.<sup>28</sup> Li was evidently not reassured, however, as only days later he resigned as vice president and travelled to New York for “emergency medical treatment” which marked the beginning of a life in self-imposed exile.<sup>29</sup> The dismantling of the anti-Chiang KMT faction as well as the US’ rejection of an independent Yunnan together helped Lu decide that defection to the PRC was his best option.<sup>30</sup>

Lu Han had become an influential figure in the Golden Triangle opium trade during his occupation of northern Indochina, and the passage of the substance between Indochina, Burma, and Yunnan depended on his complicity.<sup>31</sup> On December 6, this point, Lu shipped and sold off approximately \$2,400,000 worth of opium to Hainan and 40,000 oz. of gold to Haiphong via CAT, selling off both. While it is unclear what became of both stocks, on December 15, Pai suddenly bought 2,000,000 piasters through the Bank of Indochina and deposited them. It is more than likely that, unable to solicit US support for Yunnanese independence, Lu sold his

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<sup>27</sup> Document 680, the Chargé in China to the Sec. of State, Nov. 16, 1949, telegram,” in Office of the Historian, U.S. Dept. of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, v. VIII*.

<sup>28</sup> Document 684, the Vice Consul in Kunming to the Sec. of State, Nov. 19, 1949, telegram,” in Office of the Historian, U.S. Dept. of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, v. VIII*.  
Document 693, The Chargé in China (Strong) to the Secretary of State, Nov. 25, 1949, telegram, in Office of the Historian, U.S. Dept. of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, v. VIII*.

Diplomatic cables only note that Li’s visit to Kunming came a few days before Nov. 19, therefore it is not possible to determine if Li persuaded Lu to contact the French, or if Li had visited Kunming after the 14<sup>th</sup> to rein Lu in after learning that he had contacted the French independently.

<sup>29</sup> Document 685, the Consul General at Hong Kong to the Sec. of State, Nov. 21, 1949, telegram,” in Office of the Historian, U.S. Dept. of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, v. VIII*.

<sup>30</sup> Document 712, the Vice Consul in Kunming to the Sec. of State, Dec. 4, 1949, telegram, in Office of the Historian, U.S. Dept. of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, v. VIII*.

<sup>31</sup> McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, 162-163.

opium on Hainan through KMT intermediaries who became entitled to a percentage of the profit and deposited them in the Bank of Indochina.<sup>32</sup>

Opium was evidently the last card Lu could play with the US, as over the course of the next few days PLA forces began advancing towards Yunnan and Lu called Li Mi, commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, and Yu Cheng-wan, commander of the 26<sup>th</sup>, to his palace where they expected to receive orders for the defense of Yunnan. Instead, Lu had both generals arrested and informed them of his intention to defect to the PRC, urging them to join. Yu acquiesced but Li affirmed his loyalty to the KMT. Yu's defection, however, meant little since his second-in-command, P'ang Tcho Hi (Peng Zuoxi, 彭佐熙), refused the order and assumed command of the 26<sup>th</sup> Army.<sup>33</sup>

While Lu was unable to turn either KMT army against the other, his temporary interruption of their leadership was enough to prevent their organization of a proper defense.<sup>34</sup> The 26<sup>th</sup> decided to abandon its position on the southern perimeter of Kunming and withdraw southward to await Chiang's approval for an airlift to Taiwan or Hainan that would come on January 2, 1950. By then, it was too late, however, as the PLA was within a day's march of the airfield. Only a few planes were able to take off, carrying mostly the families of high-ranking officers, and CAT pilots along with a motley collection of freelancers, seemed to prioritize Lu's gold.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "Lu Han and Lung Yun," report, May 8, 1950, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

<sup>33</sup> Gibson and Chen, *The Secret Army*.

<sup>34</sup> It is also possible that in these closed-door negotiations, Lu Han attempted to recruit the generals as a military force for an independent Yunnan loyal to Li Zongren.

<sup>35</sup> The airlift was carried out by Civil Air Transport (CAT), an American-owned airline that started out doing charter flights in Nationalist China but as the Civil War escalated shifted their missions to military logistics support for the KMT. Before the evacuation, CAT ran a regular lucrative route between Mongtze and Haiphong transporting tin concentrate and the airline chose to evacuate 472 tons of this precious cargo to Hainan before airlifting refugees to Hong Kong. CAT pushed the evacuation of Mongtze to the last possible second, leading to the capture of one its pilots, Lawrence R. Buell, when PLA forces took the airfield. See W.M. Leary, *Perilous Missions: Civil Air Transport and CIA Covert Operations in Asia*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2006), 91; 101. It is important to note that 1.25 tons of this "tin" was actually gold, a substance which surely motivated the pilots more than tin. See "Lu Han and Lung Yun."

Back in Lu's palace in Kunming, he had his prisoners, Yu and Li, flown to Hong Kong while retaining Li Mi's wife and some of his high-ranking officers as hostages in his palace.<sup>36</sup> Lacking strong leadership and unconfident that Chiang would come to their aid, many officers of the 26<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> armies began discussing alternatives much earlier. Officers of the 26<sup>th</sup> Army were especially open to the strategy of crossing the Indochinese border, perhaps inspired by Lu's earlier negotiations as well as plans Pai had drawn up earlier as a last resort for the defense of Guangxi. Pai's 14<sup>th</sup> Army had been the pride of the KMT, but it had since been dismembered, its remnants scattered haphazardly to Hainan and the uplands of Guangxi, a fact which meant that the 8<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> Armies in Yunnan were the KMT's best remaining fighting force, ordered to Kunming because they could be trusted with defending the likely future capital.

Gen. Lin Wei (林蔚) crossed the border into Indochina in early December with a small force to sign an agreement with Gen. Alessandri known as the Chi Ma Accord. It allowed for the passage of the 26<sup>th</sup> Army into Indochina, provided that the soldiers disarm and submit themselves to French internment with the possibility of eventual repatriation to KMT-controlled territory.<sup>37</sup> The French had been aware of the possibility since at least earlier in the month and legal experts, who had convened in Saigon, had agreed to adhere strictly to standards of military neutrality towards the PRC and ROC per international law, and that Zhou Enlai's ultimatum allowed for the disarmament and internment of KMT forces under the supervision of the High

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<sup>36</sup> Gibson and Chen, *The Secret Army*. Later, a colonel, Liu Ming, was able to escape with Li Yu who bribed her guards with gold thread that had been sewn into her clothing.

The CIA document, "Lu Han and Lung Yun," adds further context to the situation by suggesting that KMT generals had helped him transport 24,600,000 Hong Kong Dollars (worth more than \$160 million in 2022 USD) from Yunnan to Hainan in exchange for a major cut of the value. Given the timing and the direction that the opium flowed, Li Mi and Yu Chengwan were the only two people who could have trafficked Lu's opium. In this context, it makes much more sense as to why Lu let his prisoners go and kept their family members as hostages.

<sup>37</sup> Pignon, "Sheet concerning Chinese Internees," report, Jan. 30, 1952, 3 HCI 108, ANOM.

Commissioner.<sup>38</sup> Soldiers would be classified as internees while civilians would be classified as refugees, allowing the latter greater freedom of movement including the right to leave Indochina if they desired. On December 12, 22,000 soldiers and 8000 civilians, mostly family members, crossed the border with thirteen high-ranking officers, arriving at camps in Lai Mou and Mông Dương on the 16<sup>th</sup>.<sup>39</sup>

The crossing was by no means orderly as PLA units began engaging the fleeing 26<sup>th</sup> Army as their officers negotiated with General Alessandri. Lucien Bodard was the only reporter on the scene and described how for hours both parties struggled in the shared medium of “bad English” until one KMT general revealed his French. Over the course of the entire day negotiations continued as the sound of firefights drew nearer. Still, the KMT officers refused to concede to disarmament until well past nightfall when the French spokesman revealed that three shock battalions supported by light armor were positioned on the ridge behind them. The next morning starting at 9:00 a.m., every fifteen minutes groups of 500 soldiers at a time would cross

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<sup>38</sup> “Document 718, Memorandum by the Director of the Office of Chinese Affairs to the Asst. Sec. of State for Far Eastern Affairs, Dec. 7, 1949, telegram,” in Office of the Historian, U.S. Dept. of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, v. VIII*.

“Document 723, Consul Gen. of Saigon to the Sec. of State, Dec. 13, 1949,” mentions that French forces stationed on the border were already prepared to receive Chinese forces across the border.

Bodard, *Quicksand War*, 146, notes the commission explicitly ruled out the military as the interning authority.

<sup>39</sup> While Gibson and Chen, *The Secret Army*, estimate the 26<sup>th</sup> Army’s full strength to be somewhere around 14,000 before their retreat (contending that half of the reported strength of 28,000 were “ghost soldiers”, p. x), French records indicate that the actual strength of the 26<sup>th</sup> Army was much closer to the reported figure of 28,000 (see Gen. Poirier to Director of Chinese Internees, “Projected Budget for 1951 for the Special Account for Interned Foreign Combatants,” Nov. 13, 1950, 3 HCI 97, ANOM). These armies were organized just like square divisions, and Gibson and Chen note that one division of the 26<sup>th</sup> (~7000 troops) was annihilated, meaning that a figure of 22,000 soldiers crossing the border and an original strength of 28,000 must both be considered quite accurate when accounting for the loss of a division of 7,000 as well as minor losses during the retreat plus the addition of a few thousand stragglers from the 8<sup>th</sup>. Later, discrepancies between numbers reported to France and the ROC from the camps differ often by a few thousand (the numbers given to the ROC are likely close to correct since the maintenance costs passed to France and the US after their disarmament), the numbers given to France was a few thousand higher which could have accounted for the presence of a few thousand civilian refugees, but more likely was an effort by generals to increase rations as well as pocket direct payments in piasters that the French made to each troop intended for purchasing vegetables. For official numbers, see Henri Tranit to Chief of Security Service for the HCI, “Account of my Mission to Phu-Quốc,” July 25, 1950, 3 HCI 97, ANOM.

the border and disarm. After an hour, however, the main PLA force reached the border of the village, prompting the entire KMT force to stream over the border at once.<sup>40</sup>

Bodard also observed how the march from Chi Ma took on a “concentration camp atmosphere” as the legionaries marched the internees at gunpoint. They referred to and thought of them not as internees, but as prisoners. Having long fought Viet Minh guerrillas who disappeared like phantoms as soon as they struck, many of the legionaries reveled in the moment as if it were their triumph. And like a Roman triumph, they also made sure to take all their captives’ remaining valuable possessions as personal loot to be divvied up among themselves.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike the 26<sup>th</sup> Army, many senior officers of the 8<sup>th</sup> had been taken prisoner by Lu, so the responsibility of command fell on Dr. Ting Tsou-shao, a man of vast knowledge in history and culture but no military command experience. Educated in France, Ting was hopeful of the possibilities of cooperating with French authorities but preferred to await the results of the 26<sup>th</sup> Army’s negotiations. When his scouts confirmed that the 26<sup>th</sup> had been disarmed and interned he decided to cross the Burma border where a weak and fragmented fledgling state would be less likely to assert control over a KMT force that had already fought Japanese forces in the Burmese uplands and therefore knew the terrain better than the bulk of Burman soldiers that comprised the Burmese army.<sup>42</sup>

Only 700 to 1,600 of the fragmented 8<sup>th</sup> Army followed Ting to Burma while some elements remained at Mong Tze to stall the PLA advance and others made a break to the Indochina border, most to be intercepted by Communist guerrillas or the PLA.<sup>43</sup> The 26<sup>th</sup> Army acted quickly and decisively to cross the Indochina border, ensuring their survival at the cost of

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<sup>40</sup> Bodard, *Quicksand War*, 153-154.

<sup>41</sup> Bodard, *Quicksand War*, 158.

<sup>42</sup> Lamour, *Enquête sur une armée secret*.

<sup>43</sup> Gibson and Chen, *The Secret Army*, use the figure 700 (adjusting for alleged “ghost soldiers”) while Lamour, *Enquête sur une armée secret*, cites 1,600.

freedom of action, while the 8<sup>th</sup> hesitated, leading to the destruction of most of its forces, but those who arrived in Burma would effectively carve out their own state.

On December 22<sup>nd</sup>, one more large group of 7,000 to 8000 KMT remnants of Pai's 1<sup>st</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Armies crossed the Indochina border between Dong Dang and Dong Khe. This group was led by Vũ Hồng Khánh, and like the 8<sup>th</sup> Army in Burma, they were poised to set up their operate as an independent state. While 1,000 surrendered to a small French force who intercepted them near the border, Khanh outwardly refused and melted into the mountainous jungle with the remaining 6,000. The French replied with force, peppering the seemingly empty green expanse with howitzer fire.

Some time during the beginning of 1950, the ROC councilor in Hanoi, Tchang Liang Tsai (Zhang Liang Cai, 張良才), worked with interned generals to secretly set up fifteen sophisticated radio transmitters in the camps. Pai had also equipped all units involved in the border crossing operation with field radios that could not have reached KMT territory, which was now confined to Hainan. Therefore, the transmitters in the camps likely intended to connect KMT units who had successfully infiltrated Indochina with their commander. The transmitters remained in place until they investigated in March. Before the French investigated, Tchang ordered the the transmitters thrown into the Muong Duong River While Tchang was at first a key contact between the interned generals and Taipei, his aggressive and reckless indiscretion quickly led the French to isolate him.

Khanh's guerrillas guided the well-armed KMT troops through the craggy highland jungles, swiftly making their way towards the delta, a trajectory further supports the hypothesis that they were trying to establish radio contact with superiors. While a handful of direct engagements with French forces killed about 200, the Việt Minh who operated in the area stalked

the army relentlessly, picking off KMT soldiers one-by-one, often unseen. Some soldiers even noted how Việt Minh guerrillas intentionally ignored French troops even when they passed within feet of their concealment. Still, Khanh's force moved swiftly, covering roughly 200 miles in rough terrain over the course of five days when they reached Luc Nam. There, at the edge of the delta on January 6, 4,000 surrendered after 2,000 had been killed by Việt Minh attacks.<sup>44</sup>

Bodard comments how the brief war between France and Khanh's Chinese guerrilla army was "one of the best-guarded secrets of the Indochina War."<sup>45</sup> After the debacle, the ROC's foreign minister, George Yeh, called the VNQDD agents, including Khanh, to Taipei.<sup>46</sup> French documents relating to the camps avoid mentioning the affair entirely, but the correspondence and reports on them are steeped in a sense of suspicion and accusation that only could have arisen from something as serious as Khanh's incursion. Because of Khanh's brief secret war with the French which was waged under Pai's command and directly supported by Tchang and the interned generals, the French treated the internees with the suspicion of POWs or political detainees. The KMT generals constantly urged the French to treat them as allies, knowing all too well that their captors could not cite the unspeakable event that had roused their suspicions.

The 5,000 survivors of Khanh's expedition joined the internment camps, along with another KMT unit of 1,000 who were led by their VNQDD guides to cross the border at the wrong point and surrendered to a French force. Besides these two large groups, a splintered shards of regiments made their way over the border and added to the ranks of the internees. Yet, for all these bands of remnants who faced internment, there were many who slipped through the lattice of French border defenses and past the invisible wall of Viet Minh. While their number cannot be ascertained, on CIA informant (likely Pham Tai) exaggeratively estimated that 15,000

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<sup>44</sup> Bodard, *Quicksand War*, 150-161.

<sup>45</sup> Bodard, *Quicksand War*, 160

<sup>46</sup> "Activities of Leaders of Viet Nam Quoc Dang [sic]"

had made it through and operated in the jungled highlands of Tonkin.<sup>47</sup> Even if the true number were only a few thousand, it would have been alarming. They could have dissolved into the highlands of Tonkin, crossed back into the PRC as guerrillas, or more likely, made their way to the Shan States of Burma to join Li Mi's secret army.

The leaders of the two surviving armies-in-exile had a shared goal: to strategically place themselves in such a position that they were sheltered from the PLA advance while maintaining constant readiness to strike back over the border when the inevitable (so they thought) time came for the reconquest of the mainland. The camps in Tonkin that the French had set up were less than a day's march from the Chinese border, so the KMT forces interned there could break out of their enclosure upon Chiang's orders, with or without the approval of French authorities. This intricate, if reckless, strategy was foiled when French authorities decided to transfer the interned forces south to Phú Quốc and Cam Ranh, dashing their hopes for a counteroffensive or a speedy repatriation to Hainan or Taiwan.

### **The Transfer to the South**

The KMT troops confined in Tonkin began their movement south in February 1950, about the same time that the remnants of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army arrived in Burma. The French had many reasons to move the internees south. First, the cost of transporting food and supplies to camps in the mountains was expensive, and French leadership worried they would not be able to assure proper nutrition. As early as January, French authorities began looking for outside sources of funding to support the costly endeavor which they estimated at seven million piasters, discussing the possibility of approaching Taiwan or even the US.<sup>48</sup> While the French ended up bearing the brunt of the financial burden, they did manage to secure regular funds and material from Taiwan

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<sup>47</sup> "Pai Chung-hsi's Troops in Indochina," report, Dec. 21, 1949, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

<sup>48</sup> HCI to Diplomatic Councilor of Overseas France, telegram, July 4, 1950, 3 HCI 97, ANOM.

which was eventually indirectly paid in full by the US in the form of military aid to Taiwan that was passed on to the French for the upkeep of camps.<sup>49</sup> Before the US stepped in, the ROC paid from a special Bank of China account in Saigon, and it is quite possible that among these funds were those deposited from Hainan immediately after the sale of Lu Han's opium crop there.<sup>50</sup>

Second, the French suspected (correctly) that the interned KMT leaders had hidden motives to direct guerrilla warfare in China from camps near the border, secretly sending over guerrillas and weapons, or even breaking out of the camps to launch a cross-broader offensive. The KMT command in Taipei needed a way to coordinate the thousands of KMT remnants roving the Tonkinese wilderness in small joint VNQĐĐ/KMT guerrilla bands and the secret radio transmitter incident in Cẩm Phả showed that they intended to use the internees to this end. If Taipei could direct coordinated attacks and infiltrations over the Tonkinese border, the French risked provoking military action by the People's Republic of China (PRC) or giving them greater reason to aid the Việt Minh. Unable to track down the guerrillas, it was in France's interests to move the internees far outside the range of their field radios.

Third, the KMT generals were gaining power in the regions hosting the camps to the extent that French felt their authority was being undermined or circumvented. So close to the border, generals easily built intelligence networks with locals whose livelihoods depended on regular border crossings. Furthermore, top officers and local operatives established connections to a secret society called Xi Hua Shan (西華山, West Hua Mountain) that they used to secretly try and execute interned soldiers they expected of subversion or Communist sympathies, effectively bringing Chiang Kai-shek's White Terror to the camps.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> R. Ricklin to Diplomatic Councilor of Overseas France, July 16, 1950, 3 HCI 97, ANOM.

<sup>50</sup> Minister of Foreign Affairs to Director of Asia and Oceania, Jan. 28, 1950, 3 HCI 97, ANOM.

<sup>51</sup> Brissot, "Report prepared by Battalion Chief Brissot on 'Si Wa San,' Chinese Secret Society and their activities in the Chinese internment camps of Cam Pha," July-August 1950, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

Few things struck fear into the hearts of colonial administrators like Chinese secret societies, as the organizations proved almost entirely impenetrable to their intelligence networks and frequently sustained themselves through lucrative but clandestine activities.<sup>52</sup> The Xi Hua Shan dated back to the early 1600s, secretly recruiting influential personalities who were opposed to Qing rule and committed to “renewing the Han race.”<sup>53</sup> After the overthrow of the Qing dynasty and establishment of Sun Yat-sen’s republic in 1911, the remnants of the Xi Hua Shan turned to banditry. When the civil war broke out in 1927, the bandits pledged loyalty to KMT officials and generals and vowed to use their covert skills and underworld connections to fight communism as guerrillas and spies.<sup>54</sup>

The generals of the 26<sup>th</sup> Army came from a rich tradition of warlordism, and rather than adhere to the terms of internment, they were poised to establish themselves as local warlords to the greatest extent possible. In the Shan states of Burma where the remnants of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army set up base, the officers quickly established themselves as rulers of the local populace, engaging in various economic activities to sustain themselves, from taxation to opium trafficking.<sup>55</sup> Li Mi was himself of Yi ethnicity, a people who inhabit upland regions of Yunnan and mainland Southeast Asia, which simultaneously lent him affinities with his Yunnanese soldiers and the various uplands peoples of the Shan states and an intrinsic understanding of uplands politics.

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<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of the fear that Chinese secret societies caused European colonial officials, see Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1885-1915*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 132-133. On p. 131, De Groot, in “Klassen der Bevolking” (cited in Nedenberg cited in Tagliacozzo) summarizes European colonial governments’ fear: “Their train of thought, their internal lives, their religion, morals, and customs, the ancestral practices which are the chief driving force of all they do – all of this is still a closed book for us.” Taking a similar perspective, the French officials who prepared a report on the Xi Hua Shan in the camps open with a quote expressing the same sentiment and implied fear from a European missionary to China: “First missionary: (After five years staying in China): I have not come to understand the Chinese / Second missionary: (After twenty-one years staying in China) : Me neither.” Brissot, “Si Wa Sa,” 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>53</sup> Brissot, “Si Wa San.”

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

Southeast Asia has historically been a region of refuge for those escaping successive Chinese states with ethnic minorities fleeing in times of territorial expansion, and Han loyalists of the ancien regime fleeing in times of dynastic change. One notable Ming loyalist from Guangdong had ruled over Phú Quốc from his own feudal warlord state based in Hà Tiên that he had carved out 300 years earlier.<sup>56</sup> The KMT generals who fled Yunnan in 1949, similarly fleeing an expanding new political regime, ultimately aspired to return to China in force to oust the Communist government, though the creation of warlord-states was not beyond the scope of their ambitions, a tendency illustrated by Khanh's ill-fated expedition. Although in Indochina the generals only exercised partial sovereignty within the enclosure of their own camps, in the Shan States of Burma Li Mi's maverick leadership and Ting's nationalist mode of thought led to an attempt to create a state based on common cultural connections through an imagined Chinese past to cement their opposition to the Burmese state under Chinese leadership.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Mạc Cửu's original Chinese name was Mo Jingjiu (莫敬玖). He later adopted a Vietnamized name as he came to rule over many Vietnamese subjects and swore fealty to the Nguyễn state. He fled Leizhou, Guangdong, when the Qing dynasty came to power in the late seventeenth century. He left in a junk full of 400 likeminded refugees, eventually finding shelter in Cambodia. He gained the favor of the King who granted him rights to administer and collect taxes in a province following the Gulf of Thailand coast from Cà Mau to Kampot. Mạc Cửu established his citadel at the prosperous port of Hà Tiên and oversaw the settlement and development of various other territories in his jurisdiction, including Phú Quốc. During this time, an influx of Hainanese immigrants came to Phú Quốc and established themselves as merchants and pepper planters. Mạc Cửu's establishment in Hà Tiên on the one hand put an end to the endemic piracy that had plagued Phú Quốc, but on the other hand created new conflicts between Hainanese settlers and Vietnamese locals who frequently duffed one another on the high seas over the control over the sea cucumber trade which finally settled into an ethnic division of labor whereby the Vietnamese continued to exercise control over the extraction of all sea resources and fish sauce production while the Chinese acted as merchants who traded with Siam, Cambodia, and Southern China. The Chinese newcomers to Phú Quốc further integrated themselves into the region by often marrying Khmer or Cham women, descendants whom formed a significant Minh Hương community on the island. During The time of Mạc Cửu, his citadel at Hà Tiên enjoyed the status as the most prosperous port in the Nguyen domain, surpassing even Đà Nẵng and Hội An which no doubt bolstered Phú Quốc's economy.

For more on Mạc Cửu's state/fiefdom based in Hà Tiên, see Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*.

It even appears that Saigon did not eclipse Hà Tiên until some time after French conquest since even as late as 1880 the province had registered more high-tonnage oceangoing ships than Saigon with 483 oceangoing craft greater than or equal to 450 piculs in tonnage. This accounted for 51% of all vessels of this category in Cochinchina, as shown in *Etat de la Cochinchine Francaise*, 1880.

<sup>57</sup> Lamour, *Enquête sur une armée secret*, 104.

Each group's relationship with the ROC government in Taiwan also determined the bounds of their actions. Since Li Mi's forces occupied the territory of a sovereign Burmese nation and actively fomented and fought in an armed rebellion against its regular military forces, the ROC government had to sever official ties and could only offer direction through clandestine channels. The forces interned in Indochina, however, had laid down their arms and agreed to internment as regular ROC forces, which meant that Chiang Kai-shek and generals in Taipei were still officially at the top of their chain of command. The interned forces had a direct and secure line of communication via the ROC consulates in Saigon and Hanoi and France was obligated to provide necessities to their forces. While both armies-in-exile found themselves in entirely different circumstances, they both found ways to attempt to coordinate their actions.

In Burma, Li Mi's forces faced a hostile Burmese state driven to dislodge them while the 26<sup>th</sup> Army negotiated French forces set on keeping them in place. In spite of the challenges each army faced to their mobility, they could rely at first on three networks of communication, with a fourth one added later. ROC consular communication was the most obvious means through which the various generals were connected to the government in Taipei.

Ing Fong Tsao, the ROC councilor in Saigon, served as the main point of contact with the interned soldiers once the French had quickly isolated Tchang and coordinated ROC covert operations throughout Indochina. Ing always brought with him a hand-carved wooden cane that looked like a toothpick beneath his towering and heavy frame. Always wearing an indifferent half-



*Fig. 6.1.* Ing Fong Tsao with French officials on a visit to the internment camps on Phú Quốc. From HCI, ANOM.

scowl partially concealed beneath the shadow of a fedora, any onlooker in the streets of Saigon could have easily mistaken him for a Cholon gangster. Ing was well-respected by French authorities, an asset which allowed him to coordinate and execute covert operations across the Chinese border and within the internment camps. He worked especially closely with Huang Chieh.

The generals in Burma and Indochina also frequently communicated with KMT guerrillas and spies who continued to operate in Yunnan after the generals' withdrawal. These networks furnished generals with (often exaggerated) reports on guerrilla activities in mainland China and sometimes transmitted correspondence that could not go through consular channels. Information would often change hands a number of times before reaching the generals; for instance, much information from the mainland would be relayed to the Xi Hua Shan secret society who operated across the Tonkin-PRC border who would then pass it on to generals such as Lao Dao Yuan and Huang Chieh.<sup>58</sup> Similar relay networks conveyed information to Li Mi. Since the generals had come from a tradition of warlordism rooted in personal territorial loyalties and ethno-linguistic identities, each general kept tabs on resistance activities in their own province of origin.

During the first few months of internment, the Xi Hua Shan played a central role in maintaining communications across the Chinese border, and possibly acted as a liaison with KMT/VNQDD groups in Indochina. Tchang was a prominent member of the organization but quickly lost his political capital with the French once his involvement in the radio scheme drew their suspicion and a subsequent investigation uncovered his role as a Xi Hua Shan leader. Once Tchang was isolated and the internees moved south, they came under the jurisdiction of Ing whose prudence and tact allowed him to delicately and subtly direct intelligence operations.

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<sup>58</sup> Brissot, "Si Wa San."

The generals would also meet periodically in Hong Kong, making their way there through clandestine routes. Li Mi used his control of part of the Thai-Burmese border as well as the complicity of Thai police Gen. Phao Sriyanod who was allied with the CIA, to slip in and out of the Shan states.<sup>59</sup> Huang Chieh used his connections with high-ranking sympathetic French officials and Ing Fong Tsao's backing to meet with Li Mi in Hong Kong, a journey which he must have made more frequently than the archives admit. In addition, Pai travelled frequently to Hong Kong and his presence at meetings with Li and Huang must be considered. As Pai continued maintain his alliance with Li Zongren who continued to live in exile in the US, Chiang watched Pai's movements closely in Taiwan. Both Li Mi and Huang had showed clear support for Li Zongren, and Pai remained his co-conspirator.

Another key element of the communication networks that played a coordinating role between all governmental and individual actors was the CIA. While the agency arrived on the scene only after the aforementioned communication channels had been established, taking interest in the KMT armies in Burma and Indochina after the outbreak of hostilities in Korea in June 1950, hints of US involvement were visible from early stages. French intelligence, for instance, reported that Tchang was attached to a "foreign intelligence agency" and that George Marshall himself knew him and looked upon him very favorably,<sup>60</sup> leaving little doubt that Tchang was working with the CIA. In turn, the CIA provided reliable communication channels between Pai in Taiwan and Li Zongren in the US while eluding Chiang's suspicions as long as the US continued to send consistent and generous military aid to Taiwan.

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<sup>59</sup> Both Catherine Lamour, *Une armée secret*, and Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, detail Gen. Phao's complicity in enabling Li Mi's forces and allies' crossings of the Thai/Burmese border.

<sup>60</sup> George Marshall had served in a number of successive positions that would have put him in close contact with prominent Chinese nationalists as well as US intelligence.

The idealistic KMT generals as well as the ROC government still believed they could retake the mainland, a conviction that the CIA would take advantage of to divert PRC military resources from Korea to Yunnan. Chiang felt he could use the remnant forces to reconquer the mainland himself, while Li Zongren and Pai, confident that Huang and Li Mi were on their side, saw an opportunity to establish Chiang-less ROC on the mainland. The CIA offered the KMT generals the latest American arms and specialized training for their reconquest while lobbying members of the military administration in French Indochina to allow for the remobilization and rearmament of interned KMT troops.

### **Leadership and Espionage**

While Li Mi was the uncontested natural choice to lead the KMT forces in Burma, Huang Chieh was a less obvious candidate. P'ang Tso Hi, after all, was the commander of the 26<sup>th</sup> Army which constituted the bulk of the forces interned in Indochina. While P'ang showed his commitment to the KMT in defying Yu's order to surrender despite the imminent arrival of more numerous PLA forces, like most aspiring warlords the horizons of his optimism hinged upon the promise of personal material gain.

One day in March 1950, P'ang decided to take a trip to Hanoi with a train of suitcases in tow, evidently overpacked, some heavy as bricks and others light as paper. He first went to the ROC embassy to send some telegrams to the government in Taipei, narrating a long story of how during his flight down the Red River Valley into Tonkin, bandits periodically attacked, each time overwhelming his forces and extorting him for precious metals and important documents, whittling down the 26<sup>th</sup> Army's treasury (and all records of it) bit-by-bit until nothing was left. His telegrams then accounted for the losses and requested 300,000 piasters as well as supplies for his interned troops. Later that day, he exchanged and deposited 270,000 piasters worth of gold

and silver ingots, along with some banknotes, at the Indochina Bank and attempted to wire it to family members in Hong Kong. But the transfer was blocked as French military intelligence had intercepted his correspondence ahead of time, and P'ang's actions violated the terms of the Chima Accord which forbade internees from exchanging specie for currency. P'ang's flimsy attempt to embezzle his army's entire treasury lost the trust of authorities in both Indochina and Taipei as the former banned him from living in the camps alongside his troops, and the latter "promoted" him to the position of Commander of Guerrilla forces in Yunnan and appointed Huang Chieh as the commander of the 26<sup>th</sup> Army in his place.

After P'ang's clumsy attempt to enrich himself at his troops' expense, Lao Dao Yuan and Huang gained the attention of French authorities. The two generals could not be more different. Lao was a member of the old guard and was a reserved and private man, preferring careful solitary scheming to public agitation. Huang was of an outspoken and energetic generation of generals who came of age during the civil war whose words could quickly whip his troops into a frenzy, preferring strong and decisive action to careful and measured planning. Though Lao may have been the better strategist, Huang's boisterous personality made him the natural successor for the disgraced P'ang. The French began turning to him when they wanted anything with camps, Ing made him a close confidant and operative for Taipei, and eventually Huang even became to attract the attention of the CIA.<sup>61</sup>

Huang also was a member of the Xi Hua Shan secret society whose coercive and violent force he leveraged to crush rival officers in the camps of Tonkin. Huang's Hunanese origins gave him privileged access to the society as well as the support of councilor Tchang (also Hunanese). Huang simply had to suggest that a soldier or officer harbored communist sympathies and a team of masked pistol-wielding assassins would descend upon him, shooting him outright if they were

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<sup>61</sup> "Note on Nationalist Propaganda on the Subject of Internees," Jan 5, 1952, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

feeling merciful, but most of their victims were tied up and tortured before being thrown in the Mông Dương River.<sup>62</sup>

While non-internee Xi Hua Shan lived outside of the camps as bandits on-call, Tchang and Huang together set up a “surveillance section” in the camps - more-or-less a Xi Hua Shan front organization that acted as Huang’s personal secret police force and allowed internees to openly work for the secret society within the camps. Around 200 internees were put to task pressing others into the service of the Xi Hua Shan to conduct espionage and guerrilla warfare across the border.<sup>63</sup> Those who refused were branded communists and eliminated by Xi Hua Shan bandits living in hideouts outside of the camp.

Huang not only used the organization to forcibly recruit guerrillas, but as a political tool, removing col. Yang Yu Tsuan from an important command in the 26<sup>th</sup> Army to replace him with his own brother, Huang Tchín. Yang initially refused to leave his command, so Huang contacted French intelligence to falsely denounce Yang as a communist operative. They interrogated Yang for three weeks and released him upon concluding that Huang’s accusations were false, placing him under special protection<sup>64</sup>. Nevertheless, the damage had been done and Yang left the camps as a “volunteer” to work in the coal mines of Tonkin.<sup>65</sup> Huang Chieh’s ruthlessness towards rivals facilitated his rapid rise to power. He was a warlord at heart, and had the French not moved him and his interned forces south to Phú Quốc, he very possibly would have turned the camps of Tonkin into his own realm just as Li Mi had in the Shan states.

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<sup>62</sup> Brissot, “Notes collected by battalion commander Brissot on the ‘Si Wa San,’” August 1950, HCI 98, ANOM. Brissot, “Situation of Chinese Camps: Second Half of July 1950,” August 1, 1950, HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>63</sup> Brissot, “Si Wa San.”

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

It is likely that Yang’s interrogation furnished the French many of their investigative leads on the Xi Hua Shan.

<sup>65</sup> Brissot, “Si Wa San.”

Li Mi and Huang Chieh both combined a maverick political personality with a stringent ideological loyalty to nationalism, two qualities that the CIA frequently sought in collaborators. Their nationalist idealism meant that the CIA could win them over through ideological appeals, confirming their disillusionment with more pragmatic politicians above them while egging on their renegade tendencies to get them to take actions that their leaders or superiors would never support. Someone like P'ang might simply throw his support behind the highest bidder, while someone like Lao might be held back from more drastic actions due to deeply held notions of military tradition and honor. Li and Huang were determined to retake mainland China by any means necessary, even if it meant provoking a third world war.

Coordination between Li Mi and KMT generals in Indochina was evident as early as April 1950 when Liu Dao Yuen and Li Mi both lobbied Chiang Kai-shek's support for a broad counter-offensive from over the Indochina and Burma borders.<sup>66</sup> It is also quite likely that the secret radio transmitters Tchang ordered built in the camps in Tonkin made radio contact with the 8<sup>th</sup> Army remnants in Burma.<sup>67</sup> The following month, however, the KMT lost Hainan after which the US believed a PRC invasion of Taiwan was imminent. The ROC administration was shaken and at this point Ing Fong Tsao made his first visit to the camps and worked with Liu and Huang to produce a concrete plan for a cross-border counter-offensive that would drive all the way into Hunan.<sup>68</sup> It is also at this point that Huang began pressuring the French to release 3,000 internees for use in a guerrilla force that would likely be sent to the Shan states.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Likely, Li Mi and Huang had already met with Pai in Hong Kong about the offensive before going to Chiang.

<sup>67</sup> In Lamour, *Enquête sur une armée secrète*, Ting mentions that it was about in March after they had obtained a radio transmitter that they made their first contact with Li Mi in Hong Kong.

<sup>68</sup> "Intelligence Bulletin: Activities in Indochina of O Tche Tao, delegated by the Min of Int of Nationalist Chinese Government," June 19, 1950, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>69</sup> "Intelligence Bulletin," Aug. 23, 1951, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

At the beginning of June, the PRC pressured Burma to mount a major counter-offensive against Li Mi's rag-tag army.<sup>70</sup> Although Li handily defeated the Burmese forces, ROC leadership grew worried and directed Huang to escalate his agitations of French authorities only to be rebuffed.<sup>71</sup> The Burmese attack on Li's forces were a prelude to the North Korean (DPRK) invasion of South Korea (ROK) on June 25. The PRC was well-aware of the DPRK's plans and did not want to risk Li Mi opening a separate front should PRC forces intervene in Korea.

It was at this point that the US immediately became interested in Huang's interned forces in Indochina and Li Mi's proxy army in the Shan States. Only four days after the beginning of the conflict in Korea in June 1950, in Tonkin Ing Fong Sao was already meeting with Vũ Hồng Khánh who had just returned from Taiwan, promising to equip and train them in the latest US arms if they were willing to fight alongside an army formed from the interned KMT forces. After their secret war with Khanh that resulted in fighting between legionaries and Chinese nationalists, the French replied with a strong message warning Ing that Khánh was "a persona non grata and anyone found to be working with him would be viewed the same way."<sup>72</sup> Yet, they could not prevent Huang and Ing from conspiring together to create a secret army in Indochina. With the start of the Korean War, Huang became a sort of triple agent, playing the French, Chiang Kai-shek's faction, and Li Zongren's "third force" which had come to receive US backing against one another.

### **Life on Phú Quốc**

When the internees arrived on Phú Quốc between February and April, they had only been receiving 550 grams of rice per day and many suffered from hunger and beri-beri, wearing the tattered remains of parasite-infested uniforms, the same ones in which they had crossed the

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<sup>70</sup> Lamour, *Enquête sur une armée secrète*, 40.

<sup>71</sup> "Note for the Director of the Civilian Cabinet," October 22, 1951, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>72</sup> "Note for the Minister," June 1950, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

Indochina border.<sup>73</sup> Upon moving to Phú Quốc, their rations were improved to 800 grams of rice per day, the minimum allowance for plantation workers in Indochina.<sup>74</sup>

By April 1950, 15,000 internees had already arrived on Phú Quốc and French officials were worried that the island could not support more. In an April 25 meeting, they reviewed the 1942 study prepared in anticipation of the creation of “special labor formations,” but it had only anticipated that seven to ten thousand prisoners would come to the island, so they explored the possibility of opening another large camp in Kampong Cham in Cambodia, sending internees as laborers to rubber plantations in the Central Plateau, and even sending large numbers of them to New Caledonia.<sup>75</sup> New Caledonia was out of the question and the Cambodian administration responded to the request to open a camp in Kampong Cham with unexpected hostility, but thousands of volunteers were sent to work on the rubber plantations modeled on a program in Tonkin that had allowed internees to work in the coal mines.<sup>76</sup>

Phú Quốc, it seemed, was the only suitable location for more than 20,000 internees and presented a direct continuation of earlier efforts to establish a massive network of prison camps on the island. Over the next few months, the French would establish a camp of internees for 5-6,000 at Cam Ranh, another for a few hundred officers and their family members at Kep, and finally two main camps on Phú Quốc housing more than 20,000 internees.<sup>77</sup> The camp at Cam

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<sup>73</sup> Consulate General of the Republic of China in Hanoi, memorandum, April 27, 1950, 3 HCI 98, ANOM. Bodard, *Quicksand War*.

<sup>74</sup> Consulate General of the Republic of China in Hanoi, memorandum.

<sup>75</sup> Financial Counselor to President of the Interservice Committee on Chinese Entities, September 30, 1950, 3 HCI 97, ANOM.

HCI to Commander of FTEO, “Chinese Internees,” June 19, 1950, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

Gen. Carpentier to HCI, “Chinese Internees from Phu-Quoc,” July 7, 1950, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>76</sup> His Royal Highness Prince Sisowath Moniphong to Commissioner of the French Republic for Cambodia, letter, June 3, 1950, 3 HCI 97, ANOM.

“Transcript of the July 29, 1950 [Meeting of the] Commission on the Problem of Chinese Internees,” September 6, 1950, 3 HCI 97, ANOM.

Minister of Associated States to the Association of States, telegram, December 22, 1950, 14 HCI 40, ANOM.

<sup>77</sup> Financial Counselor to President of the Interservice Committee on Chinese Entities.

Pha was dismantled, but the one at Mong Dzuong continued only to isolate a few generals distrusted by the French.<sup>78</sup>

Although the 26<sup>th</sup> Army was interned under the authority of the High Commissioner, the military who drafted the agreement and inducted internees into the camps had only the model of POW camps to fall back on, especially considering that the Fourth Geneva Convention which established protocols for the treatment of civilian refugees had been freshly adopted in August 1949. By 1950, however, few governments or other institutions had had any experience applying the conventions. Although the French military authorities designated the disarmed soldiers as civilian internees and their civilian family members that crossed the border with them as refugees, the model by which the camps were run mirrored that of a POW camp, but one in which the French administration had less authority and oversight, giving the KMT generals considerable authority in setting up and organizing the camps. While French perceptions of the internees lay somewhere between POW and refugee, the internees thought of themselves as allied combatants who were guests on French soil, entitled to all of the courtesies commonly extended to visiting allies.

By May 1950, the major camps in the south were more-or-less completely set up and the social dynamics of camp life had settled into a regular pattern. While the inner workings of the camps were largely opaque to many of the French officers who knew barely a word of Vietnamese – let alone Chinese – a few officers assigned to overseeing the camps with extensive knowledge of Vietnamese language and society were able to gain insights through Vietnamese internees. Col. DeLorge, the appointed commandant of the Cam Ranh camp, noticed that a small number of the interned soldiers were actually Vietnamese members of the VNQDD, likely guides who had led KMT forces across the border. He used these contacts to gather information

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<sup>78</sup> “Note on the Subject of Gen. Lou Tao Yuen,” July 13, 1950, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

on the inner workings of the camps and establish an intelligence network on which he produced a detailed report in June 1950.<sup>79</sup>

Within the camps, a social hierarchy quickly solidified based on the level of organization of their military unit at the regimental level when it crossed the border. The regiments that crossed first suffered few losses and quickly reestablished their command structure within the camps, giving their officers greater power within the camps. Units that arrived in a state of disarray and were slower to reconstitute were subordinated to the fully formed regiments. These first two categories almost entirely comprised regiments of the 26<sup>th</sup> Army. At the bottom of the military social hierarchy were those who arrived in Indochina as part of the fragmented units that had crossed the border later, splintered apart by skirmishes with PLA forces and guerrillas, including those who surrendered with Vũ Hồng Khánh. A number of members of the so-called “independent units” had also been part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army which was concurrently waging a war with Burmese forces in the Shan states. The officers of the independent units were given no role in the command structure of the camp and many idled away their days through gambling, opium, and womanizing.<sup>80</sup> While Delorge comments specifically on their heavy opium use in Cam Ranh, the situation was no doubt duplicated on Phú Quốc where both camps’ pharmacies’ morphine stocks were depleted in mere weeks.<sup>81</sup>

The camps were also divided by spoken language and province of origin, a reflection of the fact that KMT generals tended to personally recruit soldiers from their own province. On Phú Quốc, the camps near Dương Đông were populated mainly by Hunanese Mandarin speakers

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<sup>79</sup> Col. DeLorge to Cmdt. of the Southern Zone, “General Situation of Cam Ranh,” June 1, 1950, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Tranit, “Account of my Mission to Phu-Quốc.”

under Huang Chieh's command while Cantonese speakers from Guangxi under Lao Dao Yuen's command lived in the southern camp at Cây Dừa.<sup>82</sup>

The 6,000-8,000 civilians who crossed the Indochinese border were predominantly women and children, the family members of 26<sup>th</sup> Army officers. The officers' wives played a key but unacknowledged role in camp life, keeping their husbands' domestic spaces and social engagements in order while also birthing and caring for children and informally lobbying for their husbands' social status and political power within the chain of command. Women also seemed to take the initiative in reconnecting soldiers and officers interned in Indochina to family members who had fled to Taiwan, navigating the complex military bureaucracy that was itself in a state of disarray in the wake of its unexpected and sudden transfer to Taiwan.<sup>83</sup> Besides

civilians, Bodard mentions seeing a column of KMT women's auxiliary units marching away from Chi Ma.<sup>84</sup>

The women were organized politically through a Women's Association that organized performances and took part in celebrations such as Sun Yat-sen's birthday, and



Fig. 6.2. Much of women's lives in the camps revolved around child-rearing and domestic labor. HCI, ANOM.

<sup>82</sup> Brissot, "Si Wa San."

<sup>83</sup> "Translation of five letters expedited by the intermediary of the Consulate General of China in Hanoi," March 21, 1950, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

The senders of the five translated letters are mostly women who take an active role in reestablishing communications with family members who had evacuated the mainland to Taiwan.

<sup>84</sup> Bodard, *Quicksand War*.

even Armistice Day which the internees and French troops celebrated jointly.<sup>85</sup> The camp's cultural life seemed largely to be organized through identity-based organizations such as women's and youth associations.



*Fig. 6.3.* Schooling in the camps revolved largely around political education. From HCI, ANOM.

The interned forces quickly set up schools that provided the children in the camps with elementary education that also emphasized arts, physical fitness, and political indoctrination. Photographs

seem to indicate a gendered division in arts and physical education in which girls were encouraged to learn crafts and music while boys were encouraged to engage in rigorous physical training in anticipation of military service. The leaders of the camps clearly favored and prioritized the boys, not only because of their potential as future soldiers but also China's deeply-rooted patrilineal kinship system, reinforced by an institutionalized Confucian social system, that placed disproportionate value on male offspring. Women and girls were more-or-less invisible to the commanders of the camp while the ROC government in Taiwan even saw them as inconvenient and undesirable, a position which became evident during repatriation negotiations in 1952. During the negotiations, France insisted upon repatriating women and children first while Taiwan would only accept a deal that first repatriated men of fighting age.

<sup>85</sup> M. Clement, "Bi-monthly Report by the Chief of Territorial Surveillance on Phu-Quoc," November 16, 1950, 14 HCI 40, ANOM.

The paths of boys and girls who came of age in the camps especially diverged in adolescence. While boys followed a straightforward and compulsory path into military service, girls experienced a coming of age crisis due to lack of normal educational or social opportunities available to them in China or Taiwan. While the daughters of urban elites frequently pursued further education before marrying in their early twenties, the daughters of peasant families frequently sought marriage from high school age onwards. In the camps, the daughters of high-ranking officers could not pursue advanced education while the daughters of peasant families encountered a dearth of eligible spouses, especially considering that boys their age were engaged in intensive military training and the prevailing rumors of an imminent third world war further made prospects of marriage look more like a fast-track to widowhood. While the camps' adolescent girls could help their mothers carry out household labor to some extent, those whose origins were both rich and poor, urban and rural, found themselves in a similar predicament of quotidian idle and stasis on the path of life.

The independent officers and adolescent girls were the two social groups whose lives at the camp were dominated by idle time. DeLorge notes that even more than gambling and opium, the independent officers devoted their time and effort to the camps' single women who with few exceptions were the girls who had come of age within the camps.<sup>86</sup> These adolescent girls and young women must have been put in an uncomfortable position as the officers, unpredictable as they were strung out on opium or morphine, made advances. Yet, they grew up within a cultural milieu that stressed deference and obedience to elders and men, compounded by a deeply nationalistic wartime political culture that sanctified military officers which surely created an uncomfortable and possibly dangerous situation for them.

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<sup>86</sup> Col. DeLorge to Cmdt. of the Southern Zone, "General Situation of Cam Ranh."

The camps were created to hold internees and refugees who had no proper legal status within French Indochina, and so those who inhabited them were excluded from French Indochinese society. The society created within the camps was a microcosm of nationalist China, reduplicating its ethnic, gender, and class categories as well as the the informal political, cultural, and social formations that had mediated relations between these groups back in China. Yet, the small scale of the camps, already societies of the excluded, were more-or-less small-scale closed social systems that could not reproduce certain larger social institutions, circumstances which created categories of excluded peoples within an excluded society. The inability for the camps to produce secondary or post-secondary educational institutions for girls or to form new military units to reincorporate the independent officers meant that these two groups suffered from a double social exclusion. The unwritten social and cultural expectations that established hierarchies according to gender and age meant that the girls who came of age in camp society lived at the bottom rung of the social ladder, suffering the greatest degree of exclusion.

### **The Camps and the Korean War**

The interned soldiers who comprised an overwhelming majority of the camps' populace worked busily. Over the course of the first year of life in the camps, much of their efforts went into building camp facilities. Otherwise, they were subjected to various corvée details on a daily basis to help provide supplies and resources necessary to camp life. Within the camp, they conducted regular maintenance, unarmed sentry details and perimeter patrols, and moved and distributed supplies obtained from outside.<sup>87</sup> Gathering wood was the main activity soldiers performed outside of camp on Phú Quốc, though officers would also assign them to many other tasks without the approval of French authorities.

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<sup>87</sup> Arthur Dupont and Roger De Brouwer, "Transcript of Intelligence on the Kidnappings of Thirty Chinese Internees from the Duong Dong Internment Camps by Rebels," March 29, 1951, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

The highest ranking officer in each camp received information and took orders directly from Huang Chieh who divided his time between the Dương Đông camps and his newly established office in Saigon. By June 1950, the French had realized that the ROC was using covert means to pressure them to rearm internees by lobbying government officials and agitating internees with promises of rearmament.<sup>88</sup>

Huang's knack for analyzing military strategy set him apart from the other interned generals who tended to take gossip as truth and relied on a blind faith in nationalism's superiority to communism to calculate their troops' odds of victory. Huang's more measured analysis, combined with his access to detailed information on Li Mi's forces in Burma, the interned forces in Indochina, and guerrilla activity in Yunnan, made his opinions especially valuable to the CIA, especially since the outbreak of war in Korea. Huang believed that the conflict in Korea would inevitably metamorphose into the Third World War through a PRC invasion of Indochina.

Huang's analyses no doubt had considerable influence on Taipei's and the CIA's blueprints for Indochina. Before the outbreak of war in Korea, French officials were already aware of the ROC's covert attempts to provoke border clashes between French and PLA forces on the northern border (often using pro-KMT guerrillas to lure PLA units over the border) and the Paracels, trying to coax France, who had pursued a policy of strict neutrality with the PRC, into an aggressive brinkmanship. To Taipei's dismay, the French refused to retaliate or even rebuke the PRC every time PLA forces crossed the border, even when they raided French posts.

While the KMT internment camps in Indochina have often been written off as a footnote in history, the CIA's willingness to expand the war in Korea into a broader regional conflict whose success leveraged on the mobilization of the interned KMT troops shows how important their rearmament was to the US' over-arching Cold War strategy in Asia. While the US Dept. of

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<sup>88</sup> "Note for the Minister," June 1950, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

State seemed mostly unaware of the CIA's designs for the internees (just as they were unaware with the CIA's involvement with Li Mi), there is little doubt that some of the US' most senior Army officers and a handful of Republican senators were aware and even active interlocutors.<sup>89</sup>

The US' first direct contact with the camps came through US consular official and China observer Oscar Vance Armstrong's visit to Phú Quốc on July 13, no doubt an information-gathering mission for use by Gen. Douglas MacArthur during his July 31 special mission to Taiwan to discuss US military aid, much of which happened behind closed doors.<sup>90</sup> Two weeks later, Gen. Alonzo Fox, who was the deputy chief of staff of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in Japan, was sent to Taiwan to conduct an in-depth study on how military aid to Taiwan should be allotted, some of which would be passed on to French Indochina to maintain the camps.<sup>91</sup>

American involvement and interest in the camps came just as the morale of officers and internees ebbed due to the combined effect of P'ang's "promotion" earned for his attempted embezzlement which went into effect on July 25, the French arrest of a number of key figures in the Xi Hua Shan secret society, and the beginning of Việt Minh propaganda operations within the camps.<sup>92</sup> Việt Minh operatives who infiltrated the camps distributed propaganda, usually pamphlets highlighting the poor material conditions of camp life that urged soldiers to desert and even join the Việt Minh, to children and pregnant women. On Phú Quốc, the Việt Minh

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<sup>89</sup> In light of MacArthur's major role in the US Military Mission in Taiwan and Republican senators' knowledge of plans for the US to play a role in rearming and deploying the interned KMT soldiers, and the State Department's apparent lack of knowledge, it seems possible that an additional reason for Truman dismissing MacArthur from his command in Korea could have had something to do with his circumventing presidential authority to meddle in Burmese and Indochinese politics via the exiled KMT armies. This is a hypothesis requiring more research.

<sup>90</sup> Document 244, "The Chargé in China ( Strong ) to the Secretary of State," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, East Asia and the Pacific, Volume VI*, 418-419.

<sup>91</sup> Document 5, "Memorandum by the Director of the Office of Chinese Affairs (Clubb) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Rusk)," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951, Korea and China, Volume VII, Part 2*, 1509-1510.

<sup>92</sup> DeLory, "Morale of Chinese Internees," Feb. 4, 1952, 3 HCI 98, ANOM. Brissot, "Situation of Chinese Camps."

ambushed French convoys and patrols with increasing aggression that even led to some Chinese fatalities. French military intelligence services attributed the mass desertion which included three high-ranking officers to their desire to join Li Mi in Burma where they hoped to engage in armed struggle against the PRC.<sup>93</sup>

It is important not to exclude the possibility that these desertions were ordered by Chiang, or even more likely Pai, especially considering a series of strange KMT movements that took place along the Lao/Thai/Burmese border beginning on August 13 when Ing Fong Tsao notified the French administration that around 4000 KMT forces in Thailand and Burma would cross the Lao border for internment. Yet, Taipei insisted that the troops had been ordered not to the Indochinese border, but to the Yunnan border. Amidst the confusion, France proceeded cautiously and reshuffled forces to the area of the Lao/Thai/Burmese border zone only to observe the KMT forces circumvent French Indochina on their way to Yunnan.

The KMT/VNQĐĐ bands who had slipped through the border undetected in January did so by taking care to circumvent French troops nearby, so it is possible that in order to get the remaining KMT forces out of Indochina and over the Thai border, the ROC misled the French, using a planned movement of troops near the Indochinese border as a ruse to draw them further to the north and west. By this time, the hundreds of deserters from Phú Quốc could have joined with the guerrilla units from Tonkin to cross into Thailand somewhere farther south where French forces had been thinned out. Phao's border police would have then safely conducted the KMT force of a few thousand towards the Burmese border where a battle raged between Li Mi's army and Burmese forces. While this explanation is only a hypothesis, it is clear that the French had been outmaneuvered.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> "Intelligence Bulletin," Aug. 23, 1951, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>94</sup> French Ambassador to Laos to HCI in Saigon, telegram, Aug. 16 1950, 3 HCI 97, ANOM.

The same week that Ing pulled his border ploy, French intelligence confirmed that the ROC's national intelligence service had tasked a team of operatives to establish communication with Huang Chieh regarding "eventual military activities in the provinces of Guangxi and Yunnan." Members of the same team concurrently established a connection with the Bank of China branch in Bangkok, suggesting that Taipei planned to channel funding for Li Mi and other generals via Thailand. Huang Chieh himself received \$18,000 in funds from the ROC Bureau of Investigation and Statistics for the express purpose of facilitating the movement of KMT agents from Yunnan.<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile, Taipei also assigned various generals in the camps to the command of guerrilla operations in various provinces of southwestern China.<sup>96</sup>

Although French authorities were only aware of fragments of information on the whole plan, it was enough to heighten their anxiety over the camps, so on August 18 they formed a special Directorate for Chinese internees in Saigon where they gave Huang Chieh his own office. They calculated correctly that Huang's ego would preclude him from rejecting an office alongside French bureaucrats where his communications and movements could be more easily monitored.<sup>97</sup> While the southward relocation of the internees seemed to do little to stop their

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HCI in Saigon to Comrep Laos, telegram, Aug. 13, 1950, 3 HCI 97, ANOM.

HCI in Saigon to Comrep Laos, telegram, Aug. 16, 1950, 3 HCI 97, ANOM.

HCI in Saigon to French Ambassador to Laos, Aug. 16, 1950, 3 HCI 97, ANOM.

While internal French reports show that they had readied themselves completely to receive new KMT troops, US reports indicate that George Yeh (ROC Foreign Minister) told them the French refused to let them cross the border. He also mentions that the ROC had contacted the Thai government for ammunition for the KMT troops entering Indochina so they would be ready to fight when entering Yunnan. See "Document 119, The Chargé to the Sec. of State, 11 Aug. 1951, telegram," in Office of the Historian, U.S. Dept. of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, v. VI*.

Ultimately, it appears that if the ROC had any intention of KMT forces passing into Laos, they would only do so if it meant they could pass through to Yunnan without French internment.

<sup>95</sup> "Intelligence Bulletin," Sept. 20, 1950, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

The Bureau of Investigation and Statistics was the ROC's military intelligence service which both coordinated espionage and covert actions abroad and acted as a domestic secret police force. The French intelligence report seems to have instead translated the agency as "The Bureau of Statistics and Research," a slight but critical error that demonstrates how unequipped the French intelligence was to watch the internees' activities.

<sup>96</sup> "Intelligence Bulletin," July 21, 1950, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>97</sup> Plenipotentiary Minister of the HCI to Director of the Cabinet, Aug. 22, 1950, 3 HCI 97.

efforts to support armed struggles against the PRC (threatening France's China policy of strict neutrality in the process), in August they shifted to a surveillance-based strategy that relied on the establishment of security posts and strict monitoring of all movement in and out of the camps.

### **Việt Minh – KMT Conflict on Phú Quốc**

While the camp at Cam Ranh had always been relatively secure due to its position on a thin peninsula, bordered by a naval base to the north, Phú Quốc's position as an isolated frontier allowed for considerable undetected movement into and out of the camps, some which were only 500 meters from the edge of a dense jungle that was home to one of the Việt Minh's liberated zones. On July 11, 1950 the Việt Minh leaped from propaganda operations within the camps to armed attacks when a grenade was lobbed at a barracks, wounding three French soldiers.<sup>98</sup>

French intelligence services have tended to oversimplify Việt Minh attacks on the camps as acts of unprovoked aggression. The KMT internees far outnumbered the Việt Minh on the island while French forces equaled or surpassed their numbers and had access to superior firepower. Because the northern part of Phú Quốc where the liberated zones were located was a major regional arms trans-shipment point, the Việt Minh did have access to much greater firepower than most guerrilla units in the Mekong Delta, but the strategic position of the island in maritime arms smuggling networks was too important to risk losing to the French, so every Việt Minh raid, attack, and ambush on the island had to be well-calculated, assuring that the potential loss of personnel and arms would lead to even greater material gains or strategic advantages. Ambushes along the main routes were the most common as guerrillas could conceal themselves

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<sup>98</sup> Ing Fong Tsao to Diplomatic Counselor in Saigon, July 24, 1951, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

Gen. Phan Phou to Arbey, July 18, 1951, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

Arbey to General Commander of FTSV, July 14, 1951, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

Note that the CIA's reports on the situation contended that charges of propaganda and infiltration were largely false and/or exaggerated, which disagreed with French military intelligence. See "Chinese Communist Infiltration of Troops, Phu Quoc Island," report, Apr. 12, 1951, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

in the jungle only meters from the road and quickly loot supplies before disappearing back into the trees. Kidnappings of internees outside the camp perimeter was also a rather low-stakes and common tactic as the mere display of arms usually coaxed internees to surrender, providing useful intelligence before their release and, on rare occasions, defection. The Việt Minh reserved armed attacks on the camps only as a last resort.

The KMT officers on Phú Quốc were just as eager to fight the PLA as their troops, so the best substitute they could find on the island was through participating on patrols around the camp perimeter where they could see the edge of the jungle that contained the Việt Minh's realm, sometimes venturing farther. Clement, the chief of the French security post in Dương Đông, sometimes even armed internees and allowed them to participate in French patrols, unaware that it was a major violation of international law that the PRC could have easily used as a pretext for invading Tonkin.<sup>99</sup>

Most of the time, lacking firearms, the internees performed sentry and patrol duties with sharpened bamboo poles and generally remained safe as long as they stayed within vision of the camp perimeter. Clement was clearly unaware of the reach of the patrols, however, as KMT officers would frequently order their troops to guard positions along the routes to the camps. On one particular occasion, internees were assigned to a series of guard posts that the French had abandoned due to aggressive Việt Minh attacks only to be kidnapped themselves.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Delegated Administrator of Duong Dong to Chief Administrator of Rach Gia Province, "Report on Activities of Duong Dong Security Post," 14 HCI 40, ANOM.

M. Clement, "Bi-monthly report by the Chief of Territorial Surveillance on Phu Quoc," Nov. 16, 1950, 14 HCI 40, ANOM.

Clement was eventually transferred from his command for arming internees (an act so scandalous that it created a flood of gossip in international diplomatic and intelligence circles, though France performed successful damage control), but also for his mismanagement of the security post. His security officers did little to monitor Viet Minh movement near the camp, instead passing their time on opium, gambling, and extorting locals. They were eventually tried and convicted for the extortion.

<sup>100</sup> "Note for Diplomatic Counselor: Viet Minh Incursions into the Internment Camps on Phu Quoc," June 14, 1951, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

French intelligence attempted to watch closely for Việt Minh infiltration of the camps without considering the scope of contact that the internees had with Việt Minh outside of the camps. Other than the occasional wood corvée which Việt Minh could safely observe from a distance, large mobs of internees were occasionally sent into the liberated zone in search of deserters. One such search that occurred in November 1952 was completely unknown to French authorities until they captured a Việt Minh operative carrying a detailed report on it. 300 internees traipsed for days through the liberated zone armed mostly with bamboo spears, but also some pistols and sub-machine guns, surrounding and searching homes by force. The documents revealed that KMT officers had earlier communicated with Việt Minh leaders and had come to a clandestine modus vivendi upon what the internees could do within the liberated zone, yet frequently abused their privileges.<sup>101</sup>

Small bands of internees who took leave from the camps often terrorized the locals of Phú Quốc. In one of the worst abuses, a band of four internees looking for work entered the home of an ethnically Chinese family. When their demands were unmet, they intimidated the head of the family who then fled his home. The internees chased and murdered him in front of his wife and children. They then proceeded to rough up his wife who was left badly wounded, they cut off a large part of her thirteen-year-old son's hand, and they struck her infant with a baton before running off with seventy piasters and all the loot they could carry. When the woman reported the incident to French authorities, they responded by dismissing her report, questioning

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Lt. Col. DeLory to HCI, "Kidnappings of Chinese Internees on Phu Quoc by Viet Minh," April 13, 1951, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>101</sup> Translated by A.M. Savani, "Report by the Viet Minh Security Forces of the Phu Quoc Delegation on the Activities of Chinese Nationalist Soldiers Interned on the Island intended for Viet Minh Security Forces of Long Chau Ha," intercepted and translated correspondence, Feb. 12, 1952, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

Bodard, in *Quicksand War*, notes that he was aware of this modus vivendi on the island, showing that it was not completely unknown to French officials as the reporter had never even visited Phú Quốc himself.

if the assailants were really Chinese internees.<sup>102</sup> These kinds of incidents were not isolated and showed how on Phú Quốc the French authorities' inability to keep track of or discipline the internees or respond to the complaints of the local population led directly to an expansion of Việt Minh authority on the island.

While the French observed sporadic patterns of Việt Minh aggression against the camps, if they had known of the internees' activities within the liberated zone, they would have realized that every attack was an order of last resort, a retaliation for numerous incursions into the liberated zone that had violated the KMT officers' *modus vivendi* with Việt Minh leadership. The Việt Minh's stance towards the French and Chinese Nationalists on Phú Quốc was ultimately a defensive one, and so any attack on the camps or French positions were not random, but carefully planned and considered.

At 3:30 am on July 12, 1951, the Việt Minh launched their largest attack in which they razed the hospital in the Dương Đông camp. The fifteen-man Việt Minh squad fired fifteen rifle-mounted grenades at the hospital and one caused a fire that incinerated the hospital in thirty minutes. Then, French mortar fire seriously wounded some of the guerrillas and forced them to hastily retreat, abandoning two light machine guns. The fire killed one internee and wounded six.<sup>103</sup> Oddly, the death only seems to have been reported in the initial action report written by the commander of the French garrison of Dương Đông. Ing Fong Tsao mentioned nothing of any deaths, making it plausible that French officials covered it up in order to avert heightening tensions between themselves and the PRC in order to maintain their already strained policy of strict neutrality.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Savani, tr., "Report by the Viet Minh Security Forces."

<sup>103</sup> Lt. Col. DeLory to HCI, "Fire at the Hospital in the Chinese Camp of Duong Dong," Aug. 1, 1951, Arbey to General Commander of FTSV.

<sup>104</sup> Ing Fong Tsao to Diplomatic Counselor in Saigon.

The Việt Minh abductions of internees and attack on the camp hospital in mid-July 1951 occurred only days after Li Mi withdrew from Yunnan in one of many cross-border offensives, a development on which internees were no doubt well-informed and the cumulative effect which was a crushing blow to their morale. Many of the soldiers must have felt that if they were not consigned to a remote internment camp, constantly in the crosshairs of Việt Minh guerrillas, they could have been fighting alongside Li Mi to liberate China from the CPC. Their leaders' repeatedly unfulfilled promises of repatriation and rearmament, anticipating that the latest developments in Korea or along the Tonkin frontier would quickly induce a change of heart in their French captors, only sank the internees' spirits even lower.

The generals' confidence and enthusiasm had been stoked on May 21, 1951 when Ing Fong Tsao conveyed a telegram to Huang Chieh confirming that the US military mission in Taiwan directly supported the rearmament of internees in Indochina for their immediate deployment to Yunnan as guerrillas serving under the command of Li Mi. Furthermore, a group of Republican senators knew of the plan and enthusiastically supported it.<sup>105</sup> Huang and Ing believed that France, who had recently been liberated in part by US troops and was now economically dependent upon Marshall Plan aid, could not defy the will of the US military and Republican senators, so Huang immediately spread the gossip and began peppering up his troops. Contrary to expectation, France defied US wishes, falsely arguing that the internees were in ill health and unprepared for combat.<sup>106</sup> Without a doubt, the ROC and the US had realized that an offensive Li Mi launched into Yunnan on 22 April (the same day as an offensive launched by the

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This report mentions that seven internees were wounded, but takes note of no deaths.

Arbey to General Commander of FTSV notes one fatality in addition to six deaths. The omission of the death in Ing's report suggests that he may have received information that had been altered by the French.

<sup>105</sup> "Intelligence Bulletin," Aug. 23, 1951.

<sup>106</sup> "Intelligence Bulletin," Aug. 23, 1951.

People's Volunteer Army in Korea) had begun to lose steam and realized that reinforcements were necessary to maintain its momentum and tie up more PLA units.

Furthermore, by July the fighting in Korea had come to a stalemate, and the US likely saw opening a second front in Southwest China, which would have effectively transformed the Korean War into a much larger regional conflict, as the best way of redirecting Chinese "volunteers" elsewhere. The battered DPRK forces could not hold the front without the support of the battle-hardened Chinese "volunteers," and so their withdrawal from Korea would have meant the collapse of the DPRK's lines, decisively turning the tide in favor of ROK and UN forces. While the consequences of opening a sustained second front in Yunnan were unclear, the US likely envisioned a diversion while the ROC saw an opportunity to begin its long-awaited reconquest of the mainland.

As long as the stalemate persisted, the US was poised to repeat its efforts to open a second front in China. Li Mi launched another offensive in September, and without fail, one month later their advance halted without having diverted any "volunteers" from the Korean front. On October 22, Huang lobbied French authorities to allow him to train a force of 200 paratroopers and arm them with American weapons, no doubt an effort to quickly reinforce Li Mi in Yunnan.<sup>107</sup> The US likely started exploring the idea of creating paratrooper units using the internees a year earlier as in October 1950.<sup>108</sup>

By then, however, French attitudes towards Huang had shifted from annoyance to frustration after he had falsely (and intentionally) accused Pai's former envoy Fr. Maillot of

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<sup>107</sup> "Note for the Director of the Civilian Cabinet on Chinese Internees," Oct. 22, 1951, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>108</sup> "Report on the Visit of the Chinese Delegation on Oct. 17," Oct. 23, 1950, 14 HCI 40, ANOM.

At that time, Col. Yu Tong Fong, the director of the Formosa Aviation School visited the camps. Considering that Civil Air Transport was chartered in Taiwan and employed many Taiwanese crewmembers, Yu likely had CIA connections as well as the ability to judge the potential of the interned troops as paratroopers. Only months later, in February 1951, the CIA utilized Civil Air Transport in Operation Paper in which arms were airlifted from Taiwan to Burma via Thailand. The October 1951 request to train internees as paratroopers was likely part of this larger scheme.

being a Communist agent simply because he refused to mistranslate the Chinese text of the Chima Accord in a way that he could use it to push for repatriation as evidence the French had reneged part of the internment agreement.<sup>109</sup> The French flatly shot down Huang's paratrooper proposal and by the following month Li Mi's forces once again withdrew to Burma, unable to affect the situation in Korea. Immediately, Li traveled to Taipei.

### **The Christmas Hunger Strike**

On December 25, 1951, hunger strikes broke out simultaneously in the camps in Phú Quốc and Cam Ranh. Lasting twenty-four hours in Phú Quốc and forty-eight in Cam Ranh, the hunger strikes were more a symbolic demonstration of discontent than a sustained effort, but they did manage to worry the French by attracting the attention of the international press.<sup>110</sup>

The hunger strikes took French officials by surprise, especially since the soldiers at all camps were perfectly coordinated, commencing at the same time and delivering the same set of demands. The demands generally called for improved material conditions in the camps and repatriation to Taiwan. Yet, the grievances listed on paper were cumulatively aimed towards a higher goal which was to create a public image of the camps which was unflattering to France that would force them to repatriate the interned troops to Taiwan. This shift in strategy also came after a stalemate had been established in Korea for almost six months, a situation that signaled to the ROC and US a lowered likelihood of the PRC invasion of Tonkin. While repatriation would take longer than covert deployment, Taipei felt that the stalemate in Korea and the presence of a

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<sup>109</sup> Commissioner of the French Republic in North Vietnam to General of the Army, HCI, Oct. 20, 1951, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

Fr. Maillot to Col. DeLory, Oct. 13, 1951, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>110</sup> "Sheet on Chinese Internees," Jan. 30, 1952, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

"Chinese in Hunger Strike: Nationalist Soldiers Interned in Indo-China Show Discontent," *New York Times*, Jan. 1, 1952.

US Fleet in the Taiwan Strait had bought it extra time that could be used to retrain the internees in Taiwan and then airlift them to Burma or use them for the defense of Taiwan.

All the French could ascertain for certain was that someone at a high level of command had coordinated the hunger strikes. While some members of the administration blamed Huang Chieh's own ambitions and desire to regain loyalty among restless troops as the motive, other signs suggested that the plans came from somewhere *much* higher up.

The hunger strikes commenced immediately following a radio address by Li Zongren who continued to live in self-imposed exile in New York City. His exile came at an opportune time as the U.S. had grown disgruntled with Chiang's inflexibility on foreign policy and his increasingly iron-fisted approach to governance.<sup>111</sup> While the US was keen to support Li as a political challenger to Chiang, once it became clear that Chiang would not tolerate any political opponents, the CIA began grooming Li as a potential "third force."

While on the surface it appeared that as a "third force" Li was willing to overthrow and replace Chiang, Chiang's grip on ROC politics within Taiwan would never allow it. More plausibly, the CIA attempted to portray Li Zongren as the leader of a viable "Third Force" first in order to pressure Chiang to cooperate more closely with the US, and second to undermine loyalty to Chiang among the KMT forces in Indochina and Burma and have the generals answer to a leader more responsive to US geopolitical interests. Chiang had proven himself to be a hard-headed generalissimo, but what the US wanted in Taiwan was an obedient subordinate elite.

As Li's stay in New York grew longer and longer, Chiang knew that he was no longer in the US for medical treatment and his paranoia only grew as the US became increasingly outwardly critical of his authoritarianism. By November 1951, Chiang had blocked Pai from

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<sup>111</sup> DeLory, "Morale of the Chinese Internees."

leaving Taiwan, preventing him from frequent trips he had regularly been making to Hong Kong where he ostensibly met with Li Mi and Huang away from Chiang's watchful eyes.

Li Mi had already expressed his support for Li Zongren, and Li Mi's trip to Taiwan in November was no coincidence. Huang Chieh, too, travelled to Taiwan in November 1951. Normally, the generals' itineraries overlapped in Hong Kong, always one month before Li Mi launched a major offensive and Huang increased his pressure on the French. Traveling to Taiwan was no easy feat for Huang, however, as the French worried that it would violate their neutrality.

In order to facilitate Huang's journey, a few top French officials came to an agreement with Ing Fong Tsao: Lin Wei, the ROC's Minister of Defense and Huang's former colleague in who had fled Yunnan with him, would come to Indochina to visit the camps. Then, Lin would assume Huang's identity, and Huang would assume Lin's. Ing would furnish a false ROC passport and one of the unnamed French officials would expedite an exit visa.<sup>112</sup> The immigration bureau had been kept out of the loop, and an especially diligent official noticed irregularities with the passport, leading to a delay in the approval of the exit visa. Huang's delayed departure for Hong Kong was delayed by a few days by which time the press had already reported on "Huang Chieh's" recent activities in Indochina. Huang's passport may have fooled officials at the airport, but when he met with some associates during the layover, Hong Kong journalists immediately recognized his face and began reporting on the simultaneous existence of two "Huang Chiehs," a blunder that caused considerable embarrassment for France and the ROC.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Note that Lin Wei was the general who oversaw the signing of the Chi Ma accord. He later made his way back to Taipei after which he was appointed to a position in the military's chief of staff.

On a speculative note, from the beginning of 1951, CAT had one C-47 based in Saigon, therefore it is plausible that the company played a role in transporting KMT notables into and out of Indochina. Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 159.

<sup>113</sup> "Note for Director of the Cabinet," Jan. 1951, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

In discussion of the Huang Chieh/Lin Wei blunder, French officials imply that Huang Chieh had successfully used the same trick numerous times before.

Huang's official reason for his visit to Taipei was an audience with the generalissimo, but beforehand, he made sure to pay an informal visit to Pai.<sup>114</sup> Considering that Li Mi was also in Taipei at the same time, it is almost certain that the trio met to discuss their plans as they normally did in Hong Kong. Then, a month later after Huang and Lin had reassumed their regular identities, the Christmas Hunger Strikes broke out.

The French administrators cluelessly mistook the forest for the trees when they attributed the internees' newfound support for Li Zongren to their shared Cantonese identities (believing that this threatened their loyalty to Huang since he was from Hunan). They were even further from the truth when suggesting that Chiang Kai-shek had given the order. In fact, the hunger strikes worried Chiang even more than it did the French as he immediately began lobbying Bao Dai for permission to personally visit the camps. Contrary to the assumption that ethnic affinities and rivalries drove camp politics or that they originated from the generalissimo himself, a more in-depth inquiry about the origins of the hunger strikes headed by Col. Delory identified that beyond the demands for repatriation and the improvement of material conditions, most of the soldiers' discontent stemmed from their inability to leave for Burma to fight under Li Mi for Li Zongren after Huang's sustained encouragement.<sup>115</sup>

It was Pai who ordered the hunger strikes, likely with US approval. The signal to commence the hunger strikes was a radio address given by Li Zongren from the US, soldiers all cited their desire to fight for Li Mi, and Huang Chieh had encouraged them. Furthermore, following a well-established pattern, one month after Huang, Li Mi, and Pai had found themselves in the same city at the same time, renewed agitations occurred in the internment camps of Indochina while a new operation was launched in Burma, this time a CIA airlift of

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<sup>114</sup> "Placing of Restrictions on Pai Ch'ung-hsi," report, Mar. 2, 1950, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

<sup>115</sup> Col. DeLory, "Report on the Revindications presented by the Internees on the Occasion of the Christmas Manifestations," Jan. 7, 1952, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

ROC troops and arms from Taiwan via CAT as part of Operation Paper.<sup>116</sup> Pai was the one figure upon whom all the various factors surrounding the hunger strike converged.

Furthermore, the hunger strikes came only weeks before tri-lateral repatriation talks led by Rankin, the US ambassador to the ROC. All previous negotiations had broken down due to both France and the ROC's unwillingness to compromise preventing the US from arming and training the internees for deployment to Burma, a factor that outlines a direct motive for the US to support or even instigate the hunger strikes. It is also notable that during the tri-lateral negotiations that followed, Rankin surprised French negotiators by citing detailed information on camp conditions that could have only originated from Huang.<sup>117</sup>

While the French position was generally to oppose repatriation as an observance of strict neutrality in diplomatic relations with the ROC and PRC, some members of the administration had more utilitarian motives in mind. Gen. de Lattre, for instance, opposed repatriation because he envisioned using the internees as a labor force to construct the de Lattre Line, a 235 mi/378 km-long system of bunkers and fortifications built along the Red River.<sup>118</sup>

The Christmas Hunger Strikes shifted the terrain of power in the repatriation talks. First, it represents the first time that the international press paid any attention to the KMT internees in French Indochina which turned heads among diplomatic officials around the world. This press attention also put pressure on France to conclude repatriation negotiations since it put them further in the crosshairs of PRC propaganda that could lead to a deterioration of French-PRC relations, and while the conflict in Korea had settled down, the threat of the PRC opening a second front by invading Tonkin was still palpable.

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<sup>116</sup> McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, 169.

<sup>117</sup> "Note on Nationalist Propaganda on the Subject of Internees," Jan. 5, 1952, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>118</sup> DeLory, "Morale of the Chinese Internees."

Second, the hunger strikes sapped the last dredges of political capital that Huang had with French officials. His retaliatory referral of Fr. Maillot to the sûreté for “communist activities” deeply offended the administration, and the hunger strike was their last straw. Soon after the strike, the High Commissioner wrote a strongly-worded letter to Huang to inform him that he “was not a general but internee matriculation no. 1 and that he was named the chief of internees not because he was the ex-governor of Hunan and ex-general of an army corps,” and furthermore that “there are no nationalist Chinese forces interned in Vietnam but Chinese internees. Their internment is in no part a function of their being a political part of their government.”<sup>119</sup>



*Fig. 4.* Internees at a rally led by Huang Chieh during a visit to Phú Quốc. From 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

Third, the hunger strikes led the French to close the camp at Cam Ranh and move all internees to Phú Quốc in order to make it easier for the French to keep tabs on the generals.<sup>120</sup> The hunger strikes evidently concerned Chiang Kai-shek as much as they did the French, as in February 1952 he began profusely lobbying Emperor Bảo Đại for personal

access to the camps.<sup>121</sup> The same month, as part of a new phase in Operation Paper,

whose goal was to rearm and resupply KMT remnants fighting in Burma largely through opium production and sales, CAT began airlifting Taiwanese “volunteers” directly into Burma.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>119</sup> “Note for the Director of the Military Cabinet,” Jan. 10, 1952, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>120</sup> “Decision by Gen. Salan,” Feb. 19, 1952, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>121</sup> Catherine Lamour, *The Second Opium War*, (London: Lane, 1974), 123.

<sup>122</sup> McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, 169.

While Chiang himself did not succeed in gaining access to the camps, he did secure permission to again send Lin Wei to Phú Quốc. Lin's visit to the island was unusual in its length, lasting from April fourth to the twelfth, and that he did not invite French officers into the camp with him. At the Dương Đông camp, Lin rallied and reviewed 10,000 men and notified them, perhaps prematurely, that their repatriation to Taiwan was imminent. On April 11, Lin gathered every officer in the camp with the rank of colonel and higher to go over detailed plans to introduce new intensive training regimens and quickly reorganize the internees into complete triangular divisions, an indication that the ROC wanted the troops ready for combat upon their arrival in Taiwan.<sup>123</sup> As the threat of a PRC invasion of Taiwan had subsided, it is likely that the ROC planned to immediately redeploy internees upon their repatriation as "volunteers" to fight under Li Mi in Burma. Lin's extended visit to the camps can also be understood as an effort by Chiang to use a trusted minister to reestablish the internees' loyalty who he felt had become redirected towards his rival, Li Zongren.

By the end of May 1952, all of the internees had been concentrated on Phú Quốc. The three remaining camps on the island mirrored the reorganization. Huang was the de facto commander and ran a school to train officers (presumably in a curriculum emphasizing tactics that would be useful in Burma and political indoctrination). Each camp was run by one general, and each was organized into exactly three regiments.<sup>124</sup> The outcaste "independent regiments" of earlier days had been dissolved and absorbed into the new formations, and the idle officers who belonged to it were now subjected to a strict training and disciplinary regimen.

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<sup>123</sup> Lt. Col. DeLory, "Report on the subject of the Recomforting Mission carried out the general of the Nationalist Army Lin Wei, Under-Secretary of State of War of the Government of Formosa," Apr. 30, 1952, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>124</sup> "Extracts of Correspondence coming from the Chinese Internees on Phu Quoc," intercepted and translated correspondence, May 24, 1952, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

Gen. Thang Yon Pin commanded the first camp in Dương Đông. Gen. P'ang Tcho Hi (who had apparently been forgiven for his attempted embezzlement) commanded the second camp in Dương Đông. Gen. Ho Tchou Pan (the former commander of all camps on Phú Quốc) commanded the Cây Dừa camp. Gen. Wong Ten Ming was responsible for all of the camps on Phú Quốc and Gen. Phan Phou was his second-in-command.

By mid-June, Huang Chieh had ordered internees to construct a series of large docks and to conserve food, both measures anticipating an impending voyage to Taiwan. At the same time, the US embassy and “an intelligence service” (the CIA, with little doubt) pressed French officials for access to the camps which had been denied over the course of the previous year due to a purported plague outbreak which was little more than an excuse to deny Americans access. At the same time, Huang Chieh was sending funds to KMT internees in a much smaller camp in Hong Kong via a Xi Hua Shan front organization attempting to smuggle them out of Hong Kong and incorporate them into guerrilla units.<sup>125</sup>

Following a recognizable pattern, Huang’s activities intensified in the camps and Hong Kong as his increased efforts to pep up his troops immediately preceded activity on the Burma-Yunnan border. In July 1952, Li Mi built up his troops on the Burma-Yunnan border and invaded in August. Huang and Lin misread French indications that they were ready to start discussing repatriation as a sign that the internees would be ready to leave the camps in weeks or months to fight alongside Li Mi’s army. But again, France’s commitment to a policy of strict neutrality towards the PRC meant that the KMT internees in Indochina were still on Phú Quốc when Li launched his next offensive in August 1952. Both the secret war in Burma and the repatriation negotiations in Indochina were about to enter their most intense phase.

## **Repatriation**

The opening of formal negotiations to repatriate the internees meant that the camps were now on the radar of the international diplomatic community who had only been alerted to their

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<sup>125</sup> J.A. DeBord, “Note for Minister of Associated States on Activity of Chinese Nationalist Clans from Hunan,” June 28, 1952, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

It is likely that these were drawn from the earlier mentioned funds from the ROC Bureau of Investigation and Statistics. The movement and political activities of internees outside of the camps were much more strictly controlled in Hong Kong than in French Indochina. Hong Kong internees were much smaller in number, less organized, and deeply factionalized between supporters of Chiang Kai-shek and Li Zongren.

existence after the Christmas Hunger Strikes appeared in the international press. The scale of internment shocked much of the international community, as the British consul in Taiwan observed, “we have been thinking in terms of 10,000 internees on Phu Quoc Island, of which 4,000 were weaklings. 25/30,000 including an approximate division of men in fighting age is a whole different kettle of fish.”<sup>126</sup> From October 1952, Britain agreed to indirectly support France in the negotiations through small-scale psychological warfare operations in the Taiwanese press in which they planted articles harshly critical and exaggerative of France’s treatment of the internees, a strategy that intended to establish humanitarian concerns as the primary motive for repatriation in order to soften criticism from the PRC.<sup>127</sup>

Even if there was something inherently inhumane in confining tens of thousands of people indefinitely in crowded camps, the material conditions had greatly improved by fall 1952. The internees received regular and sufficient nourishment and adequate medical care. The only major row at this time was over clothing as the internees’ had deteriorated by then, and respectable uniforms were seen as a key element in instilling proper military discipline and preparing the soldiers for rapid redeployment. When the French provided enough surplus military uniforms for all the internees in February 1953, Gen. Wong could only complain about how degrading it was that his soldiers had to wear mismatched fatigues full of factory defects over buttonless t-shirts.<sup>128</sup> The internees’ material conditions at the beginning of 1953 was a far cry from early 1951 when they were struggling to stave off beriberi.

Huang had also tried to step up measures to maintain the ideological conformity of his troops as he lobbied the French to allow him to establish a “disciplinary camp” on one of the

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<sup>126</sup> H.A. Graves to J.A. Tahourdin, “Chinese Nationalist Troops Interned on the Island of Phu Quoc,” minutes, Nov. 8, 1952, Foreign Office (FO) 371/101065, The National Archives at Kew (UKNA).

<sup>127</sup> E.H. Jacobs-Larkcom to C.H. Johnston, Esq., letter, Oct. 9, 1952, FO 371/101065, UKNA.

<sup>128</sup> Lt. Col. Tertiaux to Col. DeLory, Nov. 15, 1952, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

islets south of Phú Quốc for internees found to have committed disciplinary infractions as well as those suspected of communist sympathies. While France refused on legal grounds, Huang's request is indicative of his efforts to attain a state total mental and physical discipline among his troops.<sup>129</sup> Just as Huang had brought the White Terror with him to Cam Pha, he brought it to Phú Quốc, as well where the inner workings of the camps were even more opaque to the French than they were in the north.

The camps of Phú Quốc are rife with stories of unresolved disappearances of internees who had committed disciplinary infractions or raised suspicions regarding their political sympathies. For instance, on August 26, 1951, days after Col. Tso Kuen started a drunken brawl over a woman that wounded a dozen other officers, he disappeared entirely.<sup>130</sup> In April 1952, the generals imprisoned two suspected Việt Minh infiltrators who eventually disappeared.<sup>131</sup> In July 1952, Huang Chieh became especially adamant about the need to "cleanse the camps... of certain undesirable elements" as he urged French officers to allow him to send about 100 officers suspected of communist thoughts and sympathies to one of the rocky islets to the south of Phu Quoc. They denied his request, however, and insisted he send them to the existing officers' camp at Kep.<sup>132</sup> It is also worth asking if some part of the high reported number of desertions on Phu Quoc may have been internees who were in fact disappeared by Huang.

Meanwhile in Burma, Li Mi's August 1952 offensive into Yunnan was once again repulsed, following the same pattern as all the previous ones. It seemed that each time the ROC high command gambled on the possibility of quickly obtaining battle-hardened reinforcements from the camps in Indochina, but each time France blocked their efforts. Yet, Li Mi's offensives

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<sup>129</sup> Lt. Col. DeLory to Minister of Associated States, "Purification of the Chinese Camps on Phu Quoc," July 19, 1952, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>130</sup> Salan to HCI, "Incidents in Chinese Internment Camps of Phu Quoc," 17 Dec. 1951, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>131</sup> Lt. Col. Delory, "Report on the subject of the Recomfort Mission by Gen. Lin Wei."

<sup>132</sup> Lt. Col. Delory to Minister of Associated States, "Purification of the Chinese Camps on Phu Quoc."

continued, almost every one of them correlating with developments in Korea. The confirmation of a sustained stalemate in Korea as well as the ROC's acceptance that repatriation negotiations with France would be a drawn out process likely motivated this change of strategy.

In November, Li Mi's army, whose strength had reached 97,000, marched south, occupying a corridor along the Salween River that put them within striking distance of the port city of Moulemein and within 100 km of the capital of Rangoon.<sup>133</sup> If Li could capture a port, his army could receive much heavier munitions and reinforcements en masse – perhaps even from Phú Quốc. Such a strategy would certainly explain why the ROC adamantly insisted that only soldiers should be repatriated in the first wave.

France and the ROC finally came to an agreement over repatriation in December 1952. According to the provisions, a preliminary repatriation trip of one vessel would be used to test the PRC's reactions. In the absence of a negative response, a larger-scale repatriation effort would follow. 4,000 internees working on plantations and coal mines in Indochina would be given the option to stay through the end of their contracts. The negotiations furthermore agreed that the repatriation would occur within the next six months.<sup>134</sup>

French intelligence documents also shed light on some of the terms of repatriation that were negotiated behind closed doors. The repatriated internees would receive six months of intensive training in arms furnished by the US, meaning that the troops would be ready to deploy to Burma in about one year. The fact that the US had indirectly financed *nearly all* of the ROC's payments to French Indochina for maintaining the camps by informally earmarking part of the

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<sup>133</sup> Lamour, *Enquête sur une armée secret*.

<sup>134</sup> Minister of Associated States to Associated States, telegram, Dec. 22, 1952, 3 HCI 98.

ROC's military aid meant that the camps and the soldiers interned within them were a rather hefty US investment.<sup>135</sup>

Even as the internees awaited imminent repatriation, Huang continued to rile them up with (largely unfulfillable) promises of military action. At the beginning of February 1953, for instance, he addressed internees working at a coal mine in Tonkin, assuring them that they would soon take part in a Hainan counter-offensive. Huang no doubt understood that such an attack would have amounted to a slaughter, so his announcement may have been a way of concealing the planned invasion of Burma while feeding potential disinformation to any communist spies, or simply incentivizing some of his troops to give up their work and opt for repatriation.<sup>136</sup>

On February 24, the Burmese army launched a major offensive against Li Mi's troops positioned along the Salween Valley. By March, their positions had collapsed and those who could retreated back to the Shan States. With the upper hand, Burma used the opportunity to file a complaint with the UN who formed a quadripartite commission that required the repatriation of 2000 "KMT soldiers" to Taiwan in April. The soldiers who were sent to Taiwan, however, were all local recruits from the Shan States carrying mostly obsolete weaponry, producing a spectacle of withdrawal for the press and diplomatic observers while doing little to reduce the KMT forces in Burma.<sup>137</sup> Here, the ROC's largest setback was diplomatic as the unwelcome international attention meant that they could no longer give Li Mi and his army the same level of support as they had before. This also meant that the transfer of an entire division to Burma was now entirely out of the question.

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<sup>135</sup> I only say "nearly all" because the US did not provide the ROC with regular military aid until MacArthur's mission to Taiwan in July 1950. After the establishment of regular military aid, however, congressionally approved US military aid paid for every penny of the ROC's responsibility for maintaining the camps.

<sup>136</sup> "Note on Chinese Nationalist Internees," Feb. 11, 1953, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>137</sup> All of the soldiers "repatriated" were local recruits while most of the original KMT force, who were invaluable within Li Mi's army, stayed behind. This spectacle of withdrawal is detailed in Lamour, *Enquête sur une armée secrète*, and McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*.

One month later, starting on May 24, the first convoy of four cargo ships departed Phú Quốc. Five more convoys followed and the last one arrived in Kaohsiung, Taiwan on June 22. 1000 internees decided to stay behind to work at the mines and plantations. While it is uncertain whether or not the soldiers began the planned intensive training in US arms after arriving in Taiwan, an armistice agreement ending hostilities in Korea was signed on July 27, rendering the repatriated troops suddenly irrelevant to US interests.<sup>138</sup>

The soldiers were never deployed to the mountains of Burma or the beaches of Hainan, but most served the rest of their careers in Taiwan, their new homeland.<sup>139</sup> Yet, there is still the possibility that some found their way to Burma as the Burmese government alleged that the ROC clandestinely sent more troops to the Shan states in 1954. Huang Chieh never made it to Burma, either, but instead pursued a successful career in government in which he occupied prestigious positions such as the Governor of Taiwan and Minister of Defense, and to memorialize his and his troops' suspended time on Phú Quốc, he built a small artificial island bearing the same name in an artificial lake in Kaohsiung with a pavillion and a memorial.

The internees were more quickly forgotten on Phú Quốc as by the end of July France had already begun sending Việt Minh prisoners of war to Phú Quốc to inhabit the same space along the Cây Dừa beach that the KMT internees had just vacated. By the end of the year, the number of prisoners on the island had reached 10,000. Although the prison camps on the island were closed temporarily in 1957, after being reopened in 1967 the complex of camps grew to cover

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<sup>138</sup> "The Arrival of Repatriated Chinese from Phu Quoc Island," translated press excerpt, July 3, 1953, 3 HCI 98, ANOM.

<sup>139</sup> The possibility exists that another wave of KMT soldiers that included soldiers who had been interned on Phú Quốc made their way to Burma, as after the repatriations the Burmese government accused the ROC government of illegally sending reinforcements.

the entire southern part of the island (roughly the same area that belonged to the Société Anonyme de Phu Quoc's concession) and held 40,000 prisoners at its peak.<sup>140</sup>

### **Phú Quốc as a Prison Island**

Under the rule of France and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), Phú Quốc was transformed from a frontier into a prison island. As a frontier, Phú Quốc had been a place where people could escape from the societies of the mainland, but as French interests increasingly turned to the transplantation of unfree people to integrate the island into the administrative and economic infrastructure of the French Empire, it ceased to be a place where people could take refuge from society and instead became a place for people who had been rejected from a society.

The nearly uninterrupted chain of prison farms, plantations, labor camps, internment camps, and POW camps were each closed social systems inside which a small number of individuals living in isolation of the social networks of mainland society exercised inordinate power over a large number of people, a situation which lent itself to brutal abuses of power. Genevoix and Bouchot tortured countless prisoners to death, Lt. Oetami and his troops beat and murdered Chinese forced laborers at the slightest provocation, and Huang Chieh used agents of a secret society to murder suspected communists in his camp.<sup>141</sup> The torture that POWs on Phú Quốc suffered during the RVN era were systematic and especially horrendous.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> *Lịch Sử Phú Quốc*.

Nguyễn Thị Thanh Hương, ed., *Trại Giam Tù binh Phú Quốc: Thời kỳ Chống thực dân Pháp và Đế quốc Mỹ Xâm Lược [Phú Quốc Prison Camp: During the Era of Resistance to French Colonialism to American Imperialism]*, (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Tổng hợp Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2012).

<sup>141</sup> While the French archives only show evidence of these extrajudicial killings in the northern camp of Mông Dương, it would be surprising if he did not employ the method to some degree in Phú Quốc as his paranoia of communist infiltrators only seemed to grow with time. French sources do not confirm any such extra-judicial killings on Phú Quốc, but they do allude to some mysterious disappearances of internees that Huang identified as potential communists.

<sup>142</sup> Numerous Vietnamese monographs record this, such as *Lịch Sử Phú Quốc* and *Trại Giam Tù binh Phú Quốc*. The Phú Quốc Prison Camp Museum also centers its narrative on the torture experienced by prisoners as each recreated barracks is filled with grisly torture dioramas.

It was the French and RVN prison camps on the island that cemented the island's reputation as a fearful place in Vietnamese society. It was known as a place where people would be sent and never heard from again.<sup>143</sup> The French began using Phú Quốc as a POW camp in search of an alternative to the common practice of “liquidating” Việt Minh prisoners on the battlefield, a practice which Generals Salan and Le Bris seemed to oppose not on humanitarian grounds, but because of the bad press it caused.<sup>144</sup> Their comments reveal the sense of power they felt over prisoners' lives, the low value which they assigned to them, and moreover, that to be sent to Phú Quốc was to be merely a step away from physical death. Instead, it equaled social extinction.

The RVN assimilated many elements of the French colonial legal and penal code whose sentences often relied on the existence of a vast empire speckled with remote penal colonies to which convicts could be sentenced to “transportation” or “deportation.” As discussed in chapter x, for the RVN, to be sentenced to “deportation” meant imprisonment on either Phú Quốc or Côn Đảo. While the prison on Côn Đảo operated right up to April 1975, the prison camps of Phú Quốc were shut down and abandoned in 1973 just after the withdrawal of US forces.

Once the US withdrew from Vietnam, the RVN's defensive capabilities quickly shriveled with the lack of US aid and support while the DRVN bolstered its offensive capabilities. In December 1974, what the DRVN had intended as a “test” of RVN defenses caused their lines to quickly collapse, producing mass desertions and an outpouring of refugees from the interior to coastal population centers until the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. As refugees flooded the

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<sup>143</sup> The elusive existence of prisoners on Phú Quốc is demonstrated by an exchange between a woman searching for information on her husband on Phú Quốc and the High Commissariat of Indochina as officials deflect and stonewall her every inquiry. See Nguyễn Thị Tuyết to HCI, letter, March 22, 1954, HCI 586, ANOM

<sup>144</sup> See “Proceedings of Meeting of July 2 concerning the eventual Creation of Camps for Viet Minh Prisoners,” July 4, 1947, HCI 236, ANOM.

roadways and swelled in port cities, the RVN government found itself forced to hastily prepare an evacuation plan.

In April 1975, the disused prison camps on Phú Quốc became the centerpiece of the RVN's plan to manage and evacuate refugees as it was transformed into a "combination internment and relief camp" for "all refugees from Central and South Vietnam."<sup>145</sup> On three occasions on three separate ships holding 8000 refugees each, ARVN soldiers and officers aboard US-chartered rescue ships mutinied and forced the captains to divert their course to Vũng Tàu when they learned they were being taken to Phú Quốc. The RVN government, in cooperation with the US and Australia, decided to concentrate all relief workers and facilities on Phú Quốc, yet so many refugees preferred to face starvation and the advancing PAVN to being sent to Phú Quốc, an island which had by then gained such a mythology of extinction that even the most desperate refused to go there.

To add to the aura of grotesque mystery that emanated from Phú Quốc, the RVN had refused all press access to the island and had planned to force refugees to work in exchange for provisions and shelter. 40,000 refugees had made it to Phú Quốc, a much smaller figure than the number that opted to stay in Vũng Tàu.<sup>146</sup> Even ARVN officers dreaded Phú Quốc as they had better knowledge than others what happened on that island, and they assumed (correctly, it seems) that they would become de facto prisoners the moment they stepped foot on it.

### **Phú Quốc, the Internment Camps, and the Broader Cold War**

Phú Quốc had long been a frontier and imperial backwater, and its isolation is precisely one of the reasons that the French found it an ideal location for interning 30,000 Chinese nationalists. The internees were confined to a small, closed camp society on a far-off island as

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<sup>145</sup> Malcolm W. Browne, "A Refugee Barge Yields 50 Dead at Vietnam Pier," April 7, 1975, NYT.

<sup>146</sup> Browne, "Refugee Barge."

they watched the CPC extend its control over every inch of mainland China, a conflict in Korea from start to finish, and their compatriots wage a guerrilla war in the mountains of Burma and Yunnan. On Phú Quốc, the internees were removed from society at large and forgotten, so it would seem.

In their consignment to Phú Quốc, it would seem at first glance that the internees lacked significance as they were forced to sit on the sidelines as the Cold War unfolded. Yet, the ROC, France, and the US fiercely contested their internment because they knew that the internees on Phú Quốc were the one factor that spelled the difference between a Korean conflict and a wider regional Asian war. The 26<sup>th</sup> Army which had crossed into Indochina nearly intact was a crack fighting force that had seen decades of continuous combat, and after the shattering of Pai's armies on the battlefields of southern China and the disintegration of Li Mi's 8<sup>th</sup> Army during its retreat to Burma, it was the ROC's best combat unit. No more than 1600 members of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army survived the flight to Burma, yet reinforced by local recruits they were able to fight the entire Burmese army to a standstill. While Li Mi's incursions into Yunnan caused a major nuisance for the PRC, 30,000 more battle-hardened KMT soldiers in Burma would have posed a true threat that could have forced the withdrawal of a critical mass of PVA forces from Korea, allowing the swift establishment of ROK control over the peninsula while opening up a new conflict along the PRC-Burma border, very possibly dragging Indochina in, as well.

For the US, the internees were a pawn on a larger regional chessboard for the Korean War as well as a broader Asia strategy, for the ROC they represented the last viable hope for reconquering the mainland, while for the French they were a liability. In a complex game of chess with many players, the interned army was like a powerful piece locked in the corner of the game board, but the individual soldiers were only pawns whose lives were assigned little value

by the players. The US was willing to sacrifice them to the armies of the PRC if it meant total victory in Korea, and the ROC was willing to do the same even if it offered only the remotest chance of regaining territory on the mainland. While the stubbornness of French diplomats must be credited with preventing the Korean war from metamorphosing into an Asia-wide conflict, they still did so at the expense of some 25,000 soldiers and their families who were consigned to a carceral space and denied a social existence outside of it for three years.

The KMT internment camps of Phú Quốc risk disappearing into an abyss of historical amnesia as the narrative in Vietnam has (understandably) come to emphasize the suffering of Vietnamese POWs on the island and Taiwanese society has been reexamining everything that the KMT had memorialized since their loss of power in 1991. Memorials to KMT generals and soldiers especially have been rejected as they were some of the primary beneficiaries and enforcers of martial law which led to countless killings, disappearances, and imprisonments. Huang Chieh's own culpability in the white terror is evident in some of his actions within the camps, but this also means that among the internees were victims, too. The soldiers and civilians in the camps were all at once subjected to a French carceral regime, Việt Minh attacks, and Chiang Kai-shek's White Terror.

## Conclusion

When I began writing this dissertation, it appeared as if prison islands were fading into the past. The Obama administration had been actively working towards the closure of detention facilities on Guantánamo Bay, in 2017 Australia shut down its immigrant detention facilities on Manus Island, and New York City announced plans to close all prisons on Rikers Island in 2019. None of these intentions to close these notorious prison islands have fully materialized. The vision to close the prison complex on Rikers Island by 2027 is constantly met with setbacks. While Australia has shut down its prison camps for asylum seekers on Manus, the one on Nauru continues to operate. And despite the Obama administration's efforts and intentions to close the camps on Guantánamo, legal hurdles drew out the process and left it to the Trump administration which actively and vehemently opposed closing the prisons on Guantánamo. Today, twenty years after they were incarcerated, dozens of prisoners still remain in Guantánamo's prisons.

What is striking about today's prison islands is that they seem to defy all ideology as they are created and maintained – and defended – by the world's liberal democracies and authoritarian states alike. What should become clear through observing these longstanding historical patterns is that prison islands are pure expressions of state power rather than outgrowths of ideology. As such, the prison island is a characteristic of modern statecraft rather than an exception to it

Geographically, prison islands tend to appear where a state's power is weak so that they may use that power to cement their borders while externalizing domestic dissent. Côn Đảo, Phú Quốc, Nusakambangan, Buru, and Digul had all been spaces either contested or beyond the reach of premodern Southeast Asian states. European colonial powers may have placed these islands solidly within their boundaries on imperial maps, but they inherited spaces which in reality were difficult to assert control. This principle stands for numerous other prison islands outside of the

scope of this study, as well, such as the Andamans in British India, Robben Island in South Africa, Fernando de Noronha in Brazil, and the collection of prison islands off the French penal colony of Guiana, from the Îles du Salut to Devil's Island, just to name a few. Guantánamo and Nauru, too, are located on the precarious edge of imperial formations as the former is a contested US military enclave surrounded by Cuban territory, while the latter has only gained its independence from Australia in the last few decades.<sup>1</sup>

Besides the stubborn persistence of the above mentioned prison islands, the last decade has seen a global swing towards authoritarianism, and with the rise of every new dictator and strongman, new cohorts of political prisoners appear in their wake. In particular, Russia and China have been creating vast new carceral archipelagos in the Eurasian tundra, steppe, and desert as Vladimir Putin resurrects the gulag system and Xi Jinping has created a system of camps to incarcerate hundreds of thousands of Uighurs. Much as Digul was an inland island on account of its isolation, many Russian penal colonies and Chinese “vocational training centers” are similarly inland prison islands.

Among the prisoners of these contemporary islands of confinement, martyrs and impassioned voices have also spoken out. And all have in ways followed in the footsteps of those voices who cried out from the prison islands of Indonesia and Vietnam to effect major changes in their societies.

On May 15, 2010, the NYPD arrested Kalief Browder, a Black teenager from the Bronx, on charges of petty theft. Starting at sixteen years old, Browder spent three years incarcerated on Rikers Island awaiting trial, one year and five months of which he spent in solitary confinement

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<sup>1</sup> Rikers Island, located amidst New York City's dense urban sprawl, is notably an exception to this trend. Other notable exceptions exist, as well, such as Alcatraz and Angel Islands located in the middle of San Francisco Bay and the Île d'If located right near the entrance of Marseille's harbor.

– a practice which the UN has designated as a form of torture since 2011.<sup>2</sup> The date for his trial finally arrived in February 2013 only for the City of New York to drop all charges, citing insufficient evidence and effectively proving Browder’s claims to innocence which he had maintained since his arrest.

The lengthy and brutal pre-trial detention Browder faced on Rikers is an experience that many African American males have faced in the US, as is the intense pressure to confess to a crime which he did not commit. In such circumstances, so many innocent prisoners choose to confess rather than wage the long war of attrition fought between their soul and a judicial system that stacks the odds against them. This war of attrition is no easy undertaking as it exacts a heavy psychological toll and often results in false guilty verdicts in the end.<sup>3</sup>

Kalief Browder’s story only hit the news in 2014, a year after the conclusion of his incarceration, and afterwards it became a major topic in the press, activist circles, and among the general public<sup>4</sup>. He became a figure of political significance not because of his beliefs, but rather because his story alone created a social consensus that Rikers Island must be closed, a political position few politicians would have dared adopted only years earlier. The suffering inflicted upon Browder, which culminated in his taking his own life in 2016, reflects the injustices faced by so many others on Rikers who have suffered from neglect, physical and psychological abuse, and suicide.

Browder’s story is, upon first glance, distant from the experiences of those who were incarcerated on prison islands of colonial Southeast Asia. Yet, his testimony is strikingly similar

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, *Torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment*, note by the Secretary General, A/66/130 (August 5, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> To get an idea of the scope of false confessions in the US, among 375 DNA-based exonerations that occurred between January 2020 and 2022, twenty-five percent of those exonerated had confessed to a crime they did not commit, eleven percent pled guilty. See The Innocence Project, “Resources,” <https://innocenceproject.org/research-resources/>.

<sup>4</sup> The first media coverage of Kalief Browder was: Jennifer Gonnerman, “Before the Law,” *The New Yorker*, (October 2014).

to that collected by Durand Forgues during his investigation of the causes of an 1890 rebellion on Poulo-Condore.<sup>5</sup> of at least eight Vietnamese teenagers arrested between the ages of fourteen and seventeen who had been handed down sentences of ten years of forced labor, to be served on Poulo-Condore, for having allegedly being accomplices to piracy.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the incarcerated teenage boys knew not what infraction he had committed. Many prisoners interviewed attributed their incarceration to their inability to pay bribes, noting that others had successfully secured their release this way.<sup>7</sup>

Like Browder, the Vietnamese teenagers featured in Sorgues' investigation found themselves locked away in their country's most infamous prison island having committed no crime, and they remained there because they could not produce money requested by the authorities. And like Browder, they remained locked away by a power that ascribed their lives little value because of the intersection of race and class.

Kalief Browder's story has resonated in American society in part because his story is not especially exceptional, but is representative of a fate suffered by far too many African Americans who are consumed by the nation's jails and prisons despite their innocence and/or inability to post bail. Rikers has a reputation as a lawless labyrinth run by prison gangs and corrupt guards. Of course, such was the reputation of Côn Đảo when hundreds of Tonkinese peasants were incarcerated there for little more than the inability to pay a bribe, or being in the wrong place at

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<sup>5</sup> The investigation is detailed in Durand Forgues, "Report addressed to Mr. the Procurer General on criminal or misdemeanor acts committed at the Poulo-Condore Penitentiary on June 19 last year," July 26, 1890, GGI 22791, ANOM.

For further information on the investigation as well as additional analysis, see Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 139-142

<sup>6</sup> For examples, see "Extracts of Judgement from the Tribunal Mixte of Hai Duong," Nov. 9, 1889, RSTNF 2468, ANOM.

Some of their names include Nguyen Van Tan, fifteen, from Gia Lâm, Ngo Van Trang, thirteen, from Bắc Ninh, Nguyen Van Dam, fifteen, from Bắc Ninh, Pham Van Bao, fourteen, from Hai Đường, Nguyen Van Tam, sixteen, Pham Van Dam, fifteen, from Hai Đường, Duong Van Thinh, sixteen, from Hai Đường, and Nguyen Van Ty, fifteen, from Bắc Ninh.

<sup>7</sup> Forgues, Report addressed to the Procurer General."

the wrong time. Like Kalief Browder, they did not go to the prison island for a political cause, but they have been elevated to the status of martyr in retrospect due to the injustices they suffered.

Moazzam Begg is only one among many former prisoners of Guantánamo to actively tell his story and participate in human rights advocacy after his release. Like Nguyễn An Ninh (discussed in chapter 1), he was able to cultivate networks with other prisoners to take part in international human rights advocacy as well as publish works about their experiences. His memoir of imprisonment in Guantánamo, *Enemy Combatant*, was among the first to be published while he quickly became involved with an organization called CAGE that advocates for victims of the “War on Terror.”<sup>8</sup>

Begg’s activism, again paralleling Nguyễn An Ninh’s, has done much to bring the voices of former Guantánamo detainees to public discussions while also demystifying the inner workings of a prison island formerly shrouded in enigma. Since the publication of Begg’s memoir, numerous other former Guantánamo detainees have put their own experiences to writing.<sup>9</sup> He and other former Guantánamo detainees have engaged in sustained human rights activism and recently published “An Open Letter to President Biden About Guantánamo” urging him to close the prison.<sup>10</sup> The letter’s demands are strikingly similar to countless counterparts

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<sup>8</sup> Moazzam Begg, *Enemy Combatant: A British Muslim’s Journey to Guantanamo and Back*, (London: Free Press, 2006).

CAGE was founded in 2003, two years before Begg’s release from Guantánamo. “About US,” CAGE, <https://www.cage.ngo/cage-about-us>.

<sup>9</sup> For a selection of memoirs and film productions by and about former Guantánamo detainees, see: Mohamedou Ould Slahi, *Guantánamo Diary*, ed. Larry Siems, (New York, NY: Little, Brown, 2015), David Hicks, *Guantánamo: My Journey*, (North Sydney, NSW: William Heinemann Australia, 2010), Ahmed Errachidi, *The General: The Ordinary Man who Challenged Guantanamo*, (London: Random House UK, 2013),

Mansoor Adayfi, *Don’t Forget Us Here: Lost and Found at Guantánamo*, (New York, NY: Hachette Books, 2021), *The Mauritanian*, Dir. Kevin McDonald, film, (Burbank, CA: STX Films, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Mansoor Adayfi, Moazzam Begg, Lakhdar Boumediene, Sami Al Hajj, Ahmad Errachidi, Mohammad Ould Slahi, and Moussa Zemmouri, “An Open Letter to President Biden About Guantánamo,” *The New York Review*, (January 29, 2021).

published by Nguyễn An Ninh over the course of the 1930s in his Saigon newspaper, *La Lutte*, which frequently published calls for general amnesty for prisoners of Poulo-Condore and measures to ameliorate their conditions on the island. Among the former Guantánamo detainees' demands are measures aimed at guaranteeing due process, providing for humane repatriation, and support for released prisoners.<sup>11</sup>

While the former Guantánamo detainees who wrote “An Open Letter to President Biden about Guantánamo” were released into societies in which stigma and legal barriers towards them have slowly relaxed, Nguyễn An Ninh and other former Poulo-Condore prisoners writing for *La Lutte* lived in a world in flux in which their relative levels of freedom were constantly at stake. In March 1938, Ninh was tried and convicted for “subversive” articles published in *La Lutte* as well as associations “subversive” groups.<sup>12</sup> He would tragically perish while serving his sentence on Poulo-Condore during the war when prisoners on the island suffered from severe shortages of food and medicine.

The parallels in the struggle borne by former prisoners of Poulo-Condore and Guantánamo who took to the presses go beyond mere comparison, for the two prison islands are more closely connected than immediately apparent. The US took France's place as Poulo-Condore's warder in 1954 and, while the island was nominally under the jurisdiction of the RVN, US military advisors and the CIA played key roles in operating the prison, adopting methods established by the French on the island while experimenting with new methods of confinement and psychological torture. What the US military and CIA learned on Poulo-Condore came to be applied in Guantánamo. Of course, Guantánamo is by no means a carbon copy of Poulo-Condore, but in the caged cells of the Guantánamo's early days, the psychological torture methods, and

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<sup>11</sup> Adayfi et al., “An Open Letter to President Biden.”

<sup>12</sup> “Conviction of Nguyen an Ninh,” *La Lutte*, v. 6, no. 189, (March 13, 1938): 1.

indefinite detention centered around producing confessions, Poulo-Condore's DNA is readily recognizable.

Finally, Behrouz Boochani's literary voice rose from the clutches of the detention camps of Manus island to humanize the asylum seekers who have suffered under Australia's offshore detention policy. Manus Island, part of Papua New Guinea, hosted an Australian "Regional Offshore Processing Centre" from 2001 to 2021 (but its counterpart camp on Nauru continues to operate). These camps, far from the Australian mainland, existed outside the eyes of the Australian public until whistleblowers began expressing concern and high-profile events such as protests and hunger strikes occurred that could not evade the press.

Boochani, a Kurdish journalist from Iran, was imprisoned on Manus as a result of his attempt to enter Australia via boat to seek political asylum. Manus is only about 200 miles from the coast of Papua, the island where the Digulists were imprisoned from 1926 to 1942. Like some of the Digulists, Boochani managed to publish his experiences from captivity.<sup>13</sup> While the Digulists made use of the emerging networks of Indonesian-language print capital make their voices heard, Boochani communicated the entire manuscript of his book via WhatsApp messages composed on his cell phone. Boochani not only wrote a 398-page book over text messages, but he continued to follow his journalistic instinct, writing articles and editorials for *The Guardian*, *The Saturday Paper*, and *The Financial Times*, among others.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Behrouz Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*, tr. Omar Tofighian, (Sydney, NSW: Pan Macmillan Australia, Ltd., 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Behrouz Boochani, "Life on Manus Island: Island of the Damned," *The Saturday Paper*, Melbourne, (Mar. 4, 2016),  
Behrouz Boochani, "The Day my Friend Hamid Kehazei Died," *The Guardian*, London, (Nov. 27, 2017),  
Behrouz Boochani, "The 'Offshore Processing Center' I live in is an Island Prison," *The Financial Times*, London, (Feb. 13, 2019).

Boochani's reporting recognizes Manus for what it is: "This is a prison, a prison with a history of affliction and violence."<sup>15</sup> He also refers to himself and other asylum seekers as "exiles" and "prisoners."<sup>16</sup> He goes on to describe how he and his fellow imprisoned asylum seekers are being "used as a political football," "crushed by a political machine, kept in perpetual purgatory."<sup>17</sup> His colorful prose communicates vividly that he considers the asylum seekers on Manus and Nauru as political prisoners, all but stopping short of using the precise term.

While Boochani was exiled to his island prison on a voyage from Indonesia to Australia, the Digulists were similarly detained on an island off the coast of Papua during their return voyage to Indonesia from camps in Australia. Their island, however, was Tuesday Island, located off the stretch of coastline most distant from Manus. The Digulists' stay on the island was also a brief one as they were cleared for repatriation to Java in a matter of days. Both Boochani and the Digulists, then, had been at the mercy of Australia's border regime.

For all of those writers on prison islands who have propelled themselves and other prisoners from the clutches of social extinction, it is important to remember that they exist among many other prisoners who were consumed by their imprisonment. Therefore, it is important to remember that writers like Nguyễn An Ninh and Mas Marco Kartodikromo perished on Poulo-Condore and Digul, respectively. Pramoedya Ananta Toer included a list of 325 tapol who died on Buru at the end of his memoir,<sup>18</sup> while Huang Chieh, the only KMT internee to ever write a book about his experiences on Phú Quốc, was, in fact, responsible for the demise of many prisoners on the island.

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<sup>15</sup> Boochani, "The 'Offshore Processing Center' I live in is an Island Prison."

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Pramoedya, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, 347-364.

Turning back to the contemporary examples introduced in this conclusion, it is also worth reiterating that while Kalief Browder survived his incarceration on Rikers, he took his own life shortly after, even while receiving support from family members, friends, his community, and NGOs.<sup>19</sup> His tragedy is recreated multiple times daily across America and repeats multiple times each year among Rikers Island inmates. Begg, Slahi, and other former Guantánamo detainees who had the opportunity to write about their experiences as public figures are also exceptional as others have taken their lives or suffered complete psychological breakdown from sustained torture and the hopelessness of indefinite detention. Boochani is also exceptional as so many other prisoners of Manus suffered violence and mistreatment from guards, sexual abuse, and untimely deaths due to insufficient medical facilities and suicide.

This brief examination of extant prison islands and critical voices that have emerged from their depths demonstrates that many of the dynamics and processes that created and shaped the prison islands of colonial and Cold War Indonesia and Vietnam are not confined to the time period or geographic scope covered by this dissertation, but work to explain an ongoing global phenomenon whose lifespan is coterminous with modernity itself. The future legacy of today's prison islands is as contested as that of Côn Đảo in the early 1900s or Buru in the 1970s, but if historical trends hold, prisons and/or camps on Rikers, Guantánamo, and Nauru will one day be widely considered just as brutal and obsolete. Yet, the prison island has no foreseeable end. They are part of a vast archipelago of extinction whose amorphous form has shifted over time, appearing and reappearing in different places. Some prison islands are rooted to particular places, such as Nusakambangan and Robben Island, while others are centered on ideas to be constituted, dissolved, and reconstituted in different locales. Examples of the latter include Digul and Buru as

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<sup>19</sup> Kalief Browder's life after prison is recorded in the documentary miniseries, *Time: The Kalief Browder Story*, dir. Jenner Furst, 6 episodes, (New York, NY: Viacom Entertainment Group, 2017).

well as Côn Sơn and Guantánamo. Prison islands have long been considered anomalies in the realm of politics and governance, and powerful symbols in the literary and cultural realm, but a deep historical examination of prison islands shows that they are part of a phenomenon that has been continuous throughout modern history, revealing much about the past, as well as the future, of prison islands of the present.

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Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine (GGI, General Government of Indochina)

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Guernut

H Colonies (H COL)

Haute Commissaire pour la France à l'Indochine (HCI, High Commissioner for France in Indochina)

Haute Commissaire pour la France à l'Indochine, Service de protection des corps expéditionnaire (HCI SPCE, High Commissioner for France in Indochina, Service for the Protection of Expeditionary Forces)

Résident Supérieure de Tonkin, Nouvelle Fonds (RSTNF, Resident Superior of Tonkin, New Fonds)

Service de liaison des originaires des territoires français d'Outre-Mer (SLOTFOM, Liaison Service for those Originating in French Overseas Territories)

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