

The Origins of the Vietnamese Civil War and the State of Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation attempts to tell a more autonomous history by reframing the First Indochina War as a Vietnamese civil war that was simultaneously a colonial and Cold War conflict. To accomplish this, the chapters here focus on the efforts of lesser-studied non-communist parties, personalities, and state projects, and their relation to both domestic Vietnamese opponents and French colonial policy. Because this subject is usually depicted simply as a French war waged against the Vietnamese revolution, histories have largely omitted these figures and the states that they supported: the Empire of Vietnam, the Republic of Cochinchina, the Provisional Central Government, and the State of Vietnam. By incorporating these rival state projects into the history of the First Indochina War, this study shows that the conflict was a process that emerged from within late-colonial society and continued into the post-colonial. The central tension was between rival political projects seeking primacy over movements to reform or revolutionize Vietnamese society and state, and the different political models that they utilized. That framework allows us to understand why a great many Vietnamese chose to oppose the revolutionary Democratic Republic of Vietnam and how they came to support various, alternative state projects in collaboration with France. Finally, this dissertation shows how the refusal of France to trust or empower these moderate Vietnamese groups led to the collapse of French influence in Vietnam and the failure of the State of Vietnam.

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ABBREVIATIONS

* * *

The following abbreviations appear in the footnotes:

| | |
|-------|---|
| ANF | Archives nationales de France (Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, France) |
| ANOM | Archives nationales d'outre mer (Aix-en-Provence, France) |
| AH | Academia Historica (Taipei, Taiwan) |
| BDR | Archives départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône (Marseille, France) |
| DAM | Archives départementales des Alpes-Maritimes (Nice, France) |
| MAE | Ministère des affaires étrangères (La Courneuve, France) |
| NARA | National Archives and Records Administration (College Park, Maryland) |
| PDP | Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Paris (Paris, France) |
| SHD | Service historique de la Défense (Vincennes, France) |
| TTLT1 | Trung tâm Lưu trữ Quốc gia 1 [National Archives Center 1] (Hanoi, Vietnam) |
| TTLT2 | Trung tâm Lưu trữ Quốc gia 2 [National Archives Center 2] (Hồ Chí Minh City, Vietnam) |
| TTLT3 | Trung tâm Lưu trữ Quốc gia 3 [National Archives Center 3] (Hanoi, Vietnam) |
| TTLT4 | Trung tâm Lưu trữ Quốc gia 4 [National Archives Center 4] (Dalat, Vietnam) |

INTRODUCTION
AUTONOMOUS VIETNAM

* * *

The fifth death anniversary of the revolutionary Phan Bội Châu took place in October 1945. This was the height of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's (DRV) August Revolution, a moment that conventional histories trace back to Phan Bội Châu's promotion of an assertive nationalism in the 1910s-1920s that aimed to overthrow French colonial rule. We are told moreover that Phan Bội Châu was not only the inspiration for those who led this revolutionary state – Hồ Chí Minh, Võ Nguyên Giáp, Trường Chinh, and others – but that Phan Bội Châu saw in them his natural successors. At that moment in 1945, the familiar narratives of national unity that have long defined the Vietnamese revolution should all come together. Yet it's precisely here that they fall apart.

That moment in 1945 was bitter. Present for the anniversary were two of Phan Bội Châu's closest colleagues, Huỳnh Thúc Kháng and Võ Bá Hạp. Both men were leading scholars in the central French protectorate Annam. Huỳnh Thúc would soon join the DRV National Assembly, serving until his death two years later. At the sparsely attended death anniversary, Võ Bá Hạp stared at the ancestral altar, blurting out: "It's a good thing this old man has already passed away. If not, now he also would find himself arrested for being a 'reactionary' [*phản động*] or a 'race traitor' [*Việt gian*]." Huỳnh Thúc Kháng replied, "They'd only have to bring out a copy of '*Pháp-Việt đê-huê*' [Franco-Vietnamese Collaboration] and the inquisition would have all the evidence it needed." Hue's two most important scholars agreed, had Vietnam's preeminent revolutionary not died five years earlier, had he lived to see the 1945 revolution, he may not have lived to see the end of it.¹

¹ "Ngày giỗ cụ Phan ở Huế 1945," *Cải Tạo* n. 26, 6 November 1948. This memoir was written by a witness to the death anniversary. The article appeared in a special issue of *Cải Tạo* that included

This moment at the end of Phan Bội Châu's life and the beginning of the First Indochina War (1945-1954) does not fit conventional accounts of either. This scene is difficult to understand because historians, be they party apparatchiks or western academics, have tended to externalize the sources of conflict in Vietnamese history. Wars are attributed largely to the actions of the Chinese, the French, or the Americans, and the Vietnamese masses unite to expel each. Historical figures like Phan Bội Châu are selectively interpreted moreover. His advocacy of moderate politics and Franco-Vietnamese cooperation in later life is absent from historical accounts of colonialism. Instead, historical periodizations are synchronized with the actions of external states. This pattern is pronounced in a recent surge of studies on the First Indochina War, authored by western diplomatic historians.² With fieldwork and interests that lie in Washington, Paris, and London, for many of these scholars Indochina remains less the subject of their study than the setting for great power politics or the moral failings of French and American diplomacy. The First Indochina War thus begins with French actions in late 1946 and the Cold War arrives with the actions of America and China circa 1950.

Both the Orthodox and Revisionist schools of history on the Indochina Wars largely ascribe to this external perspective. First writing in the 1970s, Orthodox scholars believed that they could

memoirs of others who encountered Phan Bội Châu in some way. For example, one story told by a former guard at Hanoi's *Maison Centrale* contains specific details of Phan Bội Châu 1926 confinement that are corroborated by colonial reports, for example, "Tôi vào tận trong Hoà-Lò Hanoi do xem Trần-Văn-Đức là ai???" *Cải Tạo* n. 26, 6 November 1948 and the reports in box 900, folder 2649, Agence de la France d'outre-mer [hereafter AGEFOM], ANOM.

² For example, Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*. (New York: Random House, 2012); Kathryn Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007); Mark Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California, 2007); Stein Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* (Berkeley: University of California, 2009); James Waite, *The End of the First Indochina War: A Global History* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

mobilize history to oppose a war in Vietnam that they argued was as not only immoral, but that history proved was misguided and unnecessary. Washington was fighting not an insurgency in Vietnam, but the march of history: an innate Vietnamese resistance to foreign occupation rooted in Confucian values and peasant culture, and embodied by Hồ Chí Minh. In opposing him and the DRV, France and America were thus supporting illegitimate states and failed to recognize that communism was but vehicle to reach independence. Frances Fitzgerald's Pulitzer-winning *Fire in the Lake* embodied this Orthodox school. Thereafter most academic and journalistic studies agreed with FitzGerald's conclusion that the defeat of South Vietnam was "inevitable," and that for Vietnamese "peace implies revolution."³ For others, this interpretation lent itself to ideas of an a "bright shining lie," an "unwinnable war," or an "invented" South Vietnam.⁴

In time, a Revisionist rebuttal emerged that sought to rehabilitate American foreign policy through an equally troublesome reading of Vietnamese history. From the perspective of these scholars, the U.S. war effort was a noble pursuit and one sure of victory. It was a "triumph forsaken" through the meddling of Saigon's Western press corps, Edward Lansdale's "road not taken," the capitulation of American politicians, or William Westmoreland, "the general who lost Vietnam."⁵

Yet both schools share an interpretative framework that emphasizes and focuses on external actors: France, the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. From this perspective, the

³ Chapter 17, Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: the Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972).

⁴ Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988); John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of An Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2009); James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁵ Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Lewis Sorely, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011); Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York: Liveright, 2018).

disagreement between the Orthodox and Revisionists appears to be less substantive. They diverge only on whether they offer approbation or condemnation, and to which external state they award it. Even histories that seek to privilege a Vietnamese perspective fall into this trap. By adopting the Vietnamese Communist Party's language of "The French War" and "The American War," they only reinforce a narrative that externalizes the conflict and bounds it with the actions of foreign states.⁶

The inclusion of external actors is certainly understandable and necessary. To different degrees, Chinese, French, American, Soviet, and others' actions – not to mention the wider international environment – played central roles in events in Indochina. Yet the controlling variable throughout Indochina's ordinal wars was the internecine conflict between rival Vietnamese political projects. The fighting between Vietnamese began before the arrival of French or American troops and ended long after they left. Indeed, far more Vietnamese died fighting the DRV than did Frenchmen. Yet these periodizations reflect a narrative where the Indochina War remains imposed upon Vietnam and external to it.

Moving beyond that framework requires a more autonomous perspective. Writing in the early 1960s, John R. Smail proposed that historians of Southeast Asia needed to seek out the possibility of an autonomous history. Smail argued that the recent experience of colonialism meant that history continued to be written in Eurocentric and Asiatic frameworks. The former continued to tell history as seen from the deck of British gunboats off the coast of Malaya or the few Dutch administrative offices in Batavia, while the latter sought to tell nationalist histories emphasizing local or regional autonomy and marginalizing outside actors. Using the Aceh War

⁶ For example see chapter "2. The French War" and chapter "3. The Coming of the American War," in Mark Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

of the late nineteenth century as a case study, Smail lamented that in both colonial and post-colonial nationalist histories the war was simply another chapter in the expansion of Dutch control. But in an autonomous Achenese framework, Smail located a power struggle between the secular and religious elites that existed prior to, during, and after Dutch colonization. The Aceh War ended when the secular elite allied with the Dutch forces and attacked the religious elite. After Indonesian independence, this secular-religious dynamic continued to define conflict in Aceh. In an autonomous history, the Dutch played an important role, but it was a role within an Achenese story.⁷

This dissertation attempts to tell a more autonomous history by reframing the First Indochina War as a Vietnamese civil war that was simultaneously a colonial and Cold War conflict. To accomplish this, the chapters here focus on the efforts of lesser-studied non-communist parties, personalities, and state projects, and their relation to both domestic Vietnamese opponents and French colonial policy. In this lens, the First Indochina War was a process that emerged from within late-colonial society and continued into the post-colonial. The dominant tension was between rival political projects seeking primacy over movements to reform or revolutionize Vietnamese society and state. Only this framework can make the events at Phan Bội Châu's death anniversary legible. More broadly, only this framework allows us to understand why a great many Vietnamese chose to oppose the revolutionary DRV and how they came to support various, alternative state projects in collaboration with France.

Chapter Two locates the origins of this civil war in late-colonial society circa 1925. Vietnamese adopted different, often oppositional, strategies and ideologies to address their colonial

⁷ John R. Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, n. 2 (July 1961): 92-93.

condition. The conflict was at once between those supporting "Franco-Vietnamese collaboration" – which professed it wisest to reform colonialism from within, in league with France, to achieve social and political progress – and those pushing for an immediate overthrow of the colonial regime. There was, moreover, an ideological conflict within this latter radical bloc that pitted communist and nationalist activists against one another as they vied for leadership of revolutionary movement. Members of the Vietnam Nationalist Party and the Indochinese Communist Party fought one another in rhetoric and action, and sought assistance from their respective Chinese and French ideological allies. In this sense, the Cold War had already arrived in Vietnam by the 1930s and Vietnamese on both sides were active, often enthusiastic participants in the internationalization of their conflict.

Chapter Three examines the failed Republic of Cochinchina (1946-1947) state project. In reaction to the upheaval of the August Revolution, a segment of Vietnamese elites sought to revive Franco-Vietnamese collaboration as the key to restoring security and effecting gradual political reform. Its animators also saw it as a tool to mitigate the return of French colonialism. This counterrevolutionary state was closely linked to General Charles de Gaulle's plans for an ostensibly more egalitarian post-war empire, the French Union. It was also a vehicle through which France intended to effect its colonial re-occupation of the colony of Cochinchina in southern Vietnam following the 1945 August Revolution. Its President Nguyễn Văn Thinh and his colleagues chose to 'collaborate', accommodating the return of French power in ways that were not always clear to supporters of the Republic and its opponents.

Chapter Four examines the tensions within the Vietnamese revolutionary forces, showing how the DRV state and its grand Việt Minh front organization showed strains in 1945 that eventually broke open in 1946. Detailed here are an array of political forces that emerged on the

national stage from 1940 onward – from the Japanese sponsored Empire of Vietnam, the Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo Buddhist politico-religious sects, and urban revolutionary parties – to seek power in 1945. Their subsequent suppression or adhesion to the DRV, sometimes both, feature prominently here. By the end of 1946, however, the same political forces re-emerged as competitors to the Indochinese Communist Party and DRV's increasing monopoly and centralization of state power. At the same time that a full-scale colonial war erupts between the French forces and the DRV in December 1946, the Republic of Cochinchina and the DRV began to disintegrate.

Chapter Five describes how the failures of the French and Vietnamese state projects gave rise to a new one: the "Bảo Đại Solution." The dissident fragments of the DRV, the Republic of Cochinchina, and the Empire of Vietnam united in a fragile alliance under Bảo Đại, the former emperor and exiled supreme counselor to the DRV. Its supporters admitted the necessity of a renewed Franco-Vietnamese collaboration. In return, they demanded the right to form an alternative post-colonial state. In 1947, supporters of the solution transformed the remnants of these various states into a Central Provisional Government that was to prepare the way for an independent State of Vietnam in 1949. This was to be a more moderate national project, both non-communist and decentralized, and would pursue a graduated decolonization through accommodation and negotiation with France. However, French officials sought to use the Bảo Đại solution for their own ends, and guarded their continued influence and control over Vietnam.

Finally, Chapter Six concludes with a profile of the State of Vietnam's fitful existence, elaborating on both its promises and perpetual shortcomings. From 1949-1954, this state controlled roughly half of Vietnam's population and administered its major urbanities, from Hanoi south to Saigon. In the end, it was the victim of its own design as much as the DRV campaign to destroy it. Cobbled together from numerous state projects that preceded it, this bricolage state

failed to cohere and too often came apart. Much of the tension, however, resulted from the federal French authorities' insistence on their continued privileged role in the State of Vietnam's affairs. By 1953, France had thus made Franco-Vietnamese collaboration untenable for much of the Vietnamese political elite. The following year, the Geneva Accords would divide Vietnam at the 17th parallel and reconstitute the State of Vietnam in the south.

CHAPTER ONE

COLONIAL CIVIL WAR

* * *

On a December evening in 1932, a young Vietnamese student emerged from the metro at Place Defer-Rochereau in Paris. Like many of his peers who were attracted to communism, he was there to see a piece of revolutionary drama put on by the French Communist Party's theater group, the Federation of French Worker's Theater. Unlike his peers, he was there in his capacity as 'Agent Guillaume'. As a clandestine source for the French authorities, Agent Guillaume surveilled his Indochinese peers studying in France. He focused on this particular theater cooperative, which had long attracted Vietnamese audiences and speakers. Arriving early, he purchased his two-franc ticket to see *Bougres de Nha-Qués* a retelling of the Yên Bái mutiny that was led by the Vietnam Nationalist Party [*Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng*] two years earlier in Tonkin.

The three-act play began on a fictional Tonkinese plantation. Its overlord was a cruel *colon*, a French colonialist. His secretary Pierre, however, is newly arrived from France and shocked by the poor treatment of the Vietnamese plantation workers. When a Vietnamese lawyer named Nguyễn Văn Tót arrives to lodge a protest, the *colon* refuses to even see the man. It would be a mistake, he says, to treat a Vietnamese with such dignity. Pierre retorts that “all humans must be respected” and invites in Tót. Just then a wealthy French labor recruiter arrives and dictates instructions to government officials visiting the plantation. Capital, it is clear, controls colonial administration. As the recruiter leaves, he is assassinated in a scene recalling the murder of the labor recruiter Alfred Bazin, which hastened the Vietnam Nationalist Party's Yên Bái uprising in 1930.

The second act opens as the lawyer Tót, now revealed to be a leader of the Vietnam Nationalist Party, debates a representative of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). A heated argument over the nature and timing of revolution in Indochina consumes the whole scene. Tót reasons that Vietnamese intellectuals should lead the masses against the colonial state, and do so immediately. The communist retorts that the timing of this revolution would be wrong, as would its leadership. A *révolution démocratique* will not do. Indochina needs a dictatorship of the workers and peasants, he protests. The argument only ends when the secretary Pierre arrives, fully disillusioned and ready to join forces with the Vietnamese. He informs them that the authorities have begun raiding suspected Vietnam Nationalist Party cells. “The hour has come,” the narrator explained to the audience, “nationalist revolution or communist revolution, it matters little, but the revolution must begin.” Just then, colonial militiamen storm their headquarters and capture all.

The third and final act centers on the subsequent police interrogation of Tót. In response to an officer's questions about his communist affiliation, Tót proclaims that he is not a communist but a republican fighting for an independent state that defends all Vietnamese. Tót is led to prison as the curtains close.¹

Bougres de Nha-qués was not significant itself. Agent Guillaume saw to that in his report. The Paris prefectural police banned the play before the week was out. More significant is what its curious narrative says about the Vietnamese community in 1930s France. The story of Yên Bái

¹ Report, Agent Guillaume, Entrevue du 31 décembre 1932, "Représentation de la pièce intitulée 'Bougres de Nhaqués', donnée au Théâtre Denfert Rochereau le 27 décembre 1932," series III-78, Fonds ministériels, Service de liaison avec les originaires des territoires français d'outre-mer [hereafter SLOTFOM], ANOM; "La F.T.O.F. proteste contre l'interdiction de 'Bougres de Nha-Qué'," *l'Humanité* 2 January 1933; This particular affiliate of the FTOF was the *Phalange Théâtre de Bellevilloise* theater and cooperative located Paris' 20th arrondissement. It had a history of Vietnamese participation in its events, Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 135.

naturally evoked several themes: valiant Vietnamese resistance to colonial oppression, the excesses of French plantation capitalism, or perhaps the dissonance between France's *mission civilisatrice* and its application. Curiously, this play derived its narrative tension from the dissonance among Vietnamese. Its dramatic climax was the disagreement between Tót and the communist cadre, between the Vietnam Nationalist Party and the ICP. The playwrights did not make this choice because it reflected the events of 1930 at Yên Bái, but rather the arguments of their day, two tumultuous years later in 1932.

Like their counterparts in Indochina, Vietnamese expatriates in France were divided over the choice to reform French imperialism from within or resist it from without, just as they were over the merits of competing nationalist and communist modes of development. From the late 1920s Vietnamese elites committed themselves to these different, antagonistic ideological models. By 1932, this fracture within Vietnamese elite society had long been on display in cafés and journals from Paris and Marseille to Kunming and Canton. As in *Bougres de Nha-Qués*, the primary schism was between the ICP and the Vietnam Nationalist Party. Well aware of that division, the French Communist Party sought to recapture the Vietnamese community with the play's fictional inclusion of the ICP at Yên Bái. On that winter night, the intended message was clear: valiant though the Vietnam Nationalist Party had been, the prudent path was one of Marxist revolution.

But Vietnamese as a whole were not convinced that communism was the best means to transcend their colonial condition. Almost from the moment colonial rule arrived, Vietnamese elites began seeking out new models of state organization, social order, and political organization. Some turned to moderate republicanism and constitutional reform, many to Marxist revolution, and others still toward armed, nationalist uprising. Where these ideas circulated more freely – among émigré communities in southern China, France, and Siam – Vietnamese contested each

other's vision of the post-colonial state and the form of modernity it would pursue. It was not just the colonial authorities that stood in the way of those dreams, but their compatriots vying for leadership of the postcolonial state. Though much of this violence was done by the pen, all sides deployed the sword when they saw fit. Vietnamese politics remained dynamic nonetheless, alternating between extremes of low-scale internecine war to uneasy entente or amicable cooperation in pursuit of their shared aspiration for independence. While the endurance of a more conciliatory pattern of Vietnamese politics remained possible, it was undermined by the more common reversion to partisan conflict.

The polarized conflict between rival state projects in the State of Vietnam and Democratic Republic of Vietnam originates in this earlier era, when their leaders came of age and began their political activism. Here in France and southern China we see Hồ Chí Minh, Nguyễn Văn Tạo, Tạ Thu Thâu, Nguyễn Thế Truyền, and Bảo Đại begin their political lives. Here too we see the persistent dilemma that they and their forebearers had faced: whether to accommodate the French presence in Indochina so as to pursue their own strategies of social and political development, or whether to implement their plans by force of arms. Here too these political elites fractured over the choice between communist models of modernity and nationalist paths to independence. As they circulated from the metropole back to Indochina, they found the same dispute underway between the ICP and nationalist organizations including the Vietnam Nationalist Party. Only with the collapse of the colonial state in 1945-1946 would this low-scale civil war finally erupt in a full-scale conflict. Therefore, in examining how Vietnamese reformism and radicalism took shape during these two decades, this chapter broadens our understanding of the next three, highlighting the sources of political conflict that consumed Vietnam between August 1945 to April 1975.

Colonial Encounters: Resistance and Accommodation

Vietnamese did not have a timeless character nor a uniform response to colonialism. Reigning dynasties and revolutionaries alike engaged foreign states or the specter of intervention through a succession of strategies that range from armed opposition to mutual cooperation.² The extension of the French protectorate over Indochina in the late 19th century elicited both extremes of armed opposition and willing cooperation. But the response of most Vietnamese elites and political organizations varied between these two extremes, oscillating between resistance and accommodation.

During the 1880s members of the royal court led by Tôn Thất Thuyết and later Phan Đình Phùng initiated a prolonged insurgency, known as the *Cần Vương* [Save the King], calling on their subjects to rise up against France and Vietnamese Catholic communities. Yet much of officialdom heeded the call of Hoàng Cao Khải and Nguyễn Văn Tường, two mandarins that warned resistance was futile and a sure means to exacerbate the suffering of the people. Some officials vacillated. Initially opposed to French rule in Vietnam, Hoàng Kế Viêm led his troops against French forces until 1884, but eschewed the *Cần Vương* insurgency. Hoàng Kế Viêm and others believed, for a time, that French protectorate status would not dramatically impede the mandarin's control of cultural and official life.³ Rather than expire as a rebel (as did Phan Đình Phùng in 1896) or languish in exile (as did Tôn Thất Thuyết until 1913), most Vietnamese chose to accommodate French rule and try to manage its influence on the country, perhaps in ways that

² Keith Taylor, "Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region," *Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 4 (November, 1998): 971.

³ Keith Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 472-479; Christopher Goscha, *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), 88-92.

would promote their domestic agenda. In the early 20th century, Vietnamese would continue to grapple with the potential of resistance against colonial rule and reform from within it.

Though emperor Thành Thái (r. 1889-1907) began his reign as a boy under the heavy hand of the French protectorate, he and the mandarin ushered in an era of reform within colonialism. While elite education had long been modeled on the Confucian examination system in China, Thành Thái and Nguyễn Dynasty mandarin were conscious of the differences between themselves and America and Europe. They paid particular attention to the transformation of Meiji Japan into a world power and the growth of reformism in Qing China. In 1906 Thành Thái issued new curriculum for the mandarin school system in Annam and Tonkin. This new program modernized the traditional Sino-Vietnamese system of administrative education, which demanded mastery of the Confucian teachings in written classical Chinese, and instead created alternative courses that focused on contemporary administration through vernacular Vietnamese (in a more accessible Latin script) and French. Yet reform had its limits. The next year Thành Thái was deposed by the French and sent into an Algerian exile.

His modernization program, however, continued. By 1910 the Nguyễn dynasty's highest educational authority modified the curriculum of the Imperial Academy in Huế. In a series of official guidelines and text, the mandarin Phạm Quang Sán published Social Darwinist self-criticisms that implicitly linked Vietnam's colonial subordination to its lagging modernization and belated incorporation of Western ideas. While Phạm Quang Sán conveyed that scientific knowledge to an educated Vietnamese audience, mandarins were already engaging themselves with writings of Chinese reformist thinkers who inspired China's republican revolution in 1911. Soon those trained under the new educational regulations, like Dương Thiệu Tường, began to enter administrative duty. Unlike his predecessors, he had passed the final Confucian exams in

1919 with an essay written in vernacular Vietnamese and which boldly acknowledged that Vietnam's traditional scholastic culture was anachronistic, its practices outmoded for the modern world. Through the century's first decades, the first strand of Vietnamese reformism originated within the traditional Nguyễn institutions of governance and in accommodation with the encroaching rule of the French protectorate.⁴

But from this traditional elite emerged a countervailing sentiment, one not interested in reforming the traditional institutions from within, but transforming them from without. Vietnamese began to go abroad, seeking foreign assistance to overturn the French colonial regime and obtain the knowledge and training to transform their country. Foremost among the destinations was Japan. It was Emperor Thành Thái himself who hastened his own fall from favor in 1907 when he publicly called on Japan to attack France and liberate the Vietnamese empire. As the French shuttled Thành Thái into exile, Vietnamese were heeding his call. Already in Tokyo were two of country's leading revolutionaries, the scholar Phan Bội Châu and the exiled Nguyễn royal prince Cường Để.

Circuits of revolution in Vietnam would continue, as they long had, to intertwine themselves with larger imperial networks. Cường Để was a direct descendant of the Nguyễn dynasty founder Gia Long, the monarch who unified modern Vietnam for the first time in 1802. Just as Gia Long fled to Siam to stage his conquest of the usurping Tây Sơn Dynasty (1778-1802) and relied on assistance from a diverse coterie of European and Asian advisors. Cường Để and

⁴ The educational modernization undertaken by Thành Thái deserves further study. Liam Kelley has addressed them in some detail via several short articles. See Liam Kelley, "Emperor Thành Thái's 1906 Promotion of Western Learning," 11 November 2016; "Rethinking the History of Early-Twentieth-Century Vietnam," 6 November 2016; "The Quốc Tử Giám and the Transformation of Traditional Learning in 1910s Vietnam," 5 November 2016, all available at <https://leminhkhai.wordpress.com/> (accessed January 13, 2017); Goscha, *A History of Vietnam*, 95-96.

Phan Bội Châu sought the assistance of Japan to expel the French from Indochina. By 1907 their *Đông Du* movement had brought more than a hundred Vietnamese students to Japan to receive a modern education, exploit the freedom to organize, and obtain the imperial government's assistance in overthrowing the French regime. Paris, however, soon succeeded in cauterizing this revolutionary flow eastward. With the passage of the Franco-Japanese treaty, Tokyo withdrew their support for a pan-Asianist movement under the Japanese banner. Cường Để and Phan Bội Châu would need to look elsewhere for support.

At the same time this group of scholarly elites rejected mandarin reform in favor of resistance, another segment chose to accommodate French power and encourage French colonialism's better impulses. Foremost among these men was Phan Châu Trinh, a scholar who had passed the highest imperial exam yet quickly resigned from the mandarinship after concluding it was outmoded and ineffective. He had visited Phan Bội Châu and Cường Để in Tokyo and was likewise inspired by the Japanese example of modern education, something that Phan Châu Trinh has diagnosed as a necessary precondition for the democratic republic he hoped to establish in Vietnam. Rather than smuggle students abroad, Phan Châu Trinh and another disillusioned mandarin named Huỳnh Thúc Kháng resolved to begin a modernization of Vietnamese educational and political institutions at home – and in league with France.

What good, Phan Châu Trinh asked his countrymen, would overthrowing French colonial rule serve if the mandarins and monarchy remained intact? He insisted that Vietnamese independence would prove illusory if the country did not first evolve from its feudal past. Like other colonized peoples, Phan Châu Trinh believed in the potential for colonial modernity.⁵ The French

⁵ Michael Robinson and Gi-Wook Shin, eds., *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999).

mission civilisatrice, if applied in earnest, could bring democracy, the universal rights of man, modern education, and infrastructural improvements to Vietnam, something that seemed more practical and productive than revolution from abroad. *Ý Pháp cầu tiến bộ* [Rely on the French for Progress] and *Tôn dân bài quân* [Up with the people, down with the monarchy] became the slogans for this reform movement. A people uplifted and enlightened, and invested with the right to self-rule, could then demand independence.⁶

By imploring this republican empire to live up to its own ideals, Phan Châu Trinh and other reformers reasoned that France could be an ally in its own peaceful decolonization. To that end he published an open letter to Paul Beau, the Governor General of Indochina, presenting an unvarnished account of rural poverty, a corrupt mandarin state, the cruelty of French settlers, and an enabling colonial system that had not yet enacted its republican values. This warning and call-to-action met deaf ears in the French administration. These ideas did, however, remain an inspiration to a rising generation of Vietnamese elites who would attempt to leverage Franco-Vietnamese collaboration to reform colonialism from within. Yet at the time it was painfully obvious to Phan Châu Trinh that France was not willing to disburse the imperial trust nor put trust in its subjects.⁷

⁶ Vinh Sinh, *Phan Châu Trinh and His Political Writings* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2009), 14-36; Quoted by Phan Bội Châu in *Overturned Chariot*, trans. by Vinh Sinh and Nicholas Wickenden (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 126.

⁷ Goscha, 102-04.

Radicalism and Republicanism

In 1908, a tax revolt erupted in Huế followed shortly by a foiled bomb plot. Startled, the colonial administration arrested and imprisoned the one figure who was willing to work with them on equal terms: Phan Châu Trinh. After stints at infamous colonial prisons, he was ultimately exiled to France. In the City of Light he was the leader and luminary for a small but growing community of Vietnamese in France. His apartment became the living and working quarters for the lawyer Phan Văn Trường, a young philosopher and engineer named Nguyễn Thế Truyên, and



Figure 1: Phan Văn Trường. 59836, 1W1154, Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Paris.

a recent arrival named Nguyễn Tất Thành. All were politically active and opposed to colonial rule. In the summer of 1919 these compatriots saw in the Treaty of Versailles as an opportunity to advance their cause on the world stage. Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points and the transition of German colonial territories into 'mandates' had interjected an element of morality into the European colonial enterprise and an opportunity for colonized peoples to assert their right to self-determination.

Once again Phan Châu Trinh issued an open letter calling on France to apply its republican ideals throughout its empire. The group drafted a text that reiterated their elder scholar's program of moderate reforms, including freedom of press and association, elected political representation, and legal reform. While Phan Văn Trường and Nguyễn Thế Truyên, the more skilled Francophone linguists, produced their written texts, the newcomer Nguyễn Tất Thành was tasked with their dissemination – the others having run afoul of French law too many times already.

Together these five Vietnamese called themselves "the Group of Vietnamese Patriots." The letter was signed with their pseudonym, Nguyễn Ái Quốc (Nguyễn The Patriot).⁸ Nguyễn Tất Thành went about town, acting as the face of the group and the pseudonym became his own. He delivered their letter to the delegations of Woodrow Wilson and French President Georges Clemenceau. He would retain the Nguyễn Ái Quốc pseudonym for the next twenty years, abandoning it definitively during World War II in favor of a new name: Hồ Chí Minh. At the time, however, the entire clan remained close. They were the "Five Dragons" [*nhóm ngũ long*], as later generations called them.⁹

While the members of this group could agree on the broad strokes of republic reform, they were by no means in lockstep. Indeed, the prospect of obtaining foreign support to overthrow French rule always lingered in their minds. The lawyer Phan Văn Trường was prone, in the heat of debate, to accuse France of being “a nation of the incapable and degenerate” – one that could not be entreated or even shamed into respecting the people of Indochina. Undoubtedly, he respected aspects of French culture. Like thousands of other Vietnamese, he had served in the French military during World War I. But the war had hardly been won, when Phan Văn Trường began speaking wistfully of the enemy: a resurgent German empire. Like France, England had relied on thousands of Indian colonial soldiers to win the war. Despite their service and sacrifice in Europe, the French and English remained unwilling as ever to see the Vietnamese, Indians, and Africans as equals. In the mind of Phan Văn Trường, a German world-order held out the possibility of being a more equitable one for the Vietnamese.¹⁰ It may seem contradictory for these

⁸ Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: the missing years* (London: Hurst & Company, 2003), 11-18.

⁹ Hồ Hữu Tường, *41 năm làm báo* (Paris: Đông Nam Á, 1984), 24-25. It is unclear from Tường's writing if this was a name used by the five men to describe themselves, or a name that later arrivals gave them.

¹⁰ Note n. 2, “Surveillance exercée à l'égard d'Indochinois,” 17 December 1919, F/7/13405, ANF.

men to bitterly criticize France, to even look toward imperial Japan or Germany, while still fighting on behalf of the colonial empire. Yet accommodation and resistance always resided on the same spectrum of response to the colonial experience, as options to advance their own and their countrymen's interests.

As time passed, more Vietnamese living in Paris began to stray from Phan Châu Trinh's moderate brand of republican reform. Even as Nguyễn Ái Quốc attempted to address the Versailles delegations in 1919, he had been drawn to a more radical agenda. In print, the name Nguyễn Ái Quốc still served pseudonymously as the *nom de plume* for the Group of Vietnamese Patriots, depending on the pen of Phan Văn Trường or Nguyễn Thế Truyền.¹¹ But on his own, Nguyễn Ái Quốc adopted a more assertive, leftward, tone in public speeches. Not only was he deeply impressed by international communism, but determined to intervene in the French Section of the Workers' International (*Section française de l'internationale ouvrière* or SFIO) internal debates over the new ideological line that Vladimir Lenin proposed in the Bolshevik-led Third International.



Figure 2: Hồ Chí Minh's 1919 papers. Under justification, it reads "Letter from M. Renault. Library card from the bibliothèque nationale issued on the recommendation of M. [Jean] Languet, deputy," a socialist in the Third Republic.

¹¹ Phương-Lan, *Nhà Cách Mạng Tạ Thu Thâu, 1906-1945* [The Revolutionary Tạ Thu Thâu, 1906-1945] (Saigon: Nhà sách Khai-Trí, 1974), 89-90. The author was a close friend of Tạ Thu Thâu, who was closely connected to Nguyễn Thế Truyền and the 1920s political scene in Paris. There is corroborating evidence collected by French police surveillance, detailed in Quinn-Judge, *Hồ Chí Minh*, 16-17.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc sought out and joined the SFIO's more radical youth organization, the *Jeunesse Socialiste*. He attended chapter meetings across the arrondissements of Paris, delivering lectures on the prospects of Bolshevism in Asia while styling himself the *secrétaire du parti socialist Annamite de France*. He criticized not just national exploitation, but class exploitation too. At a meeting near his home in the thirteenth arrondissement, Nguyễn Ái Quốc implored the *Jeunesse Socialiste* members to see the virtue of Lenin's vision, emphasizing that his brand of communism offered Vietnam, Ireland, and Egypt the best path out of colonialism. It proved persuasive. The chapter voted to adhere to the Third International.¹² Far from a passive colonial subject, Nguyễn Ái Quốc succeeded in some part in pushing these Frenchmen toward a more radical agenda that also addressed colonial exploitation.

Over time he also helped push the small Vietnamese community of Paris toward a more radical style of politics than that of their elders. He and Nguyễn Thế Truyền joined the Intercolonial Union, a close affiliate of the French Communist Party that highlighted colonial issues. Soon Nguyễn Thế Truyền took the lead in publishing the Union's official paper, *Le Pariah* [The Pariah], which touched not only on affairs in Indochina but other French colonies. Meanwhile, Nguyễn Ái Quốc worked to broaden the reach of the Union beyond their small community of educated elites. Most Vietnamese in the metropole were not Sorbonne students like Nguyễn Thế Truyền, but demobilized soldiers, poor laborers, or apolitical students. To that end, Nguyễn Ái Quốc began administering to colonial troops still in France. In this task he relied on the help of other Vietnamese. He depended in particular on Dr. Nguyễn Văn Thinh, the future

¹² Hồ Chí Minh introduces himself as the *secrétaire du parti socialist Annamite de France* in "La Municipalité de Saint-Denis célèbre ..." *Le Populaire*, 2 Feb. 1920 and "Les Démonstrations Ouvrières," *L'Humanité*, 30 March 1920; his speech on Bolshevism is announced in "Parti Socialiste," *L'Humanité*, 11 Feb. 1920; and his speech on the Third International is detailed in: Note [unnumbered], 27 March 1920, 1W1142, no. 59497, PDP.

president of the Republic of Cochinchina, to provide the medications that he distributed. Nevertheless, their efforts did not dramatically increase political participation. A common lament about the more affluent Vietnamese of Paris and Aix-en-Provence was that they attended "Café University" or "Billiard College," preferring to spend their leisure time at sidewalk cafés or pool halls.¹³

It is was only after the future Hồ Chí Minh embarked for Moscow in 1923 that Vietnamese students began to radicalize. As editor, Nguyễn Thế Truyên raised the circulation of *Le Paria* to over 2,000, and upwards of 5,000 for special issues. He also published *Le Procès de la Colonisation Française*, a monograph indicting the conduct of France during its occupation of Indochina. Though its authorship was solely attributed to Nguyễn Ái Quốc, Nguyễn Thế Truyên wrote the introduction and much of the text based on research that the two of them had completed at the Sainte-Geneviève Library adjacent to the Panthéon in Paris.¹⁴ While the research was a

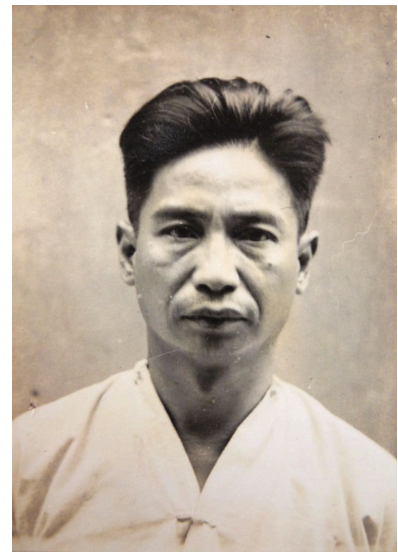


Figure 3: Nguyễn Thế Truyên, likely prior his forced deportation to Africa in World War II.

¹³ This appears in Trần Văn Ân's writings in *Annam Scolaire*, a student newspaper published in Aix-en-Provence during the 1920s, and was a lament of Hồ Chí Minh and Nguyễn Thế Truyên in *Le Procès de la colonisation Française*; For Nguyễn Văn Thinh, see "Note de la Direction de la Surete Generale a.s. de Nguyen-Van-Thing (sic)," 12 March 1920, 364, Haut-commissariat de France pour l'Indochine, Service de Protection du Corps expéditionnaire français en Indochine [hereafter HCI-SPCE], ANOM. There is no direct evidence of Thinh's aid, but the agent notes that Vietnamese in Paris relied on Thinh for medical assistance, and the visit coincides with his efforts to provide aid to Vietnamese tirailleurs. These reports provide no other evidence of where Nguyễn Ái Quốc obtained the medicine.

¹⁴ Note n. 791, 14 April 1924, Prefecture de Police, 1W1142, n. 59799, Archives de la Préfecture de Police. Hồ Hữu Tường, *Le Défi Vietnamien* (Unpublished memoir, dated 30 June 1969), p. 236. My thanks to Hue-Tam Ho Tai for allowing me to read her father's memoir.

collaboration, the writings reflected the less doctrinaire views of Nguyễn Thế Truỳền, while emphasizing their shared critiques of French colonial exploitation. Though Nguyễn Thế Truỳền was a member of the French Communist Party like his good friend, but remained less enamored with the ideology than its revolutionary potential for Indochina. He was, moreover, a member of the Human Rights League. Nguyễn Ái Quốc, however, had denounced the League and Freemasonry as "engaging in class collaboration and not class struggle," and supported the Comintern decree that barred communist party member from joining either organization.¹⁵

By comparison, a more flexible ideological stance enabled Nguyễn Thế Truỳền to engage with a wider range of Vietnamese in France, from dockworkers in Le Havre to university students at the Sorbonne. Not yet thirty years old, he became the uncontested leader of Vietnamese radical politics and, to a degree, pan-national anti-colonial politics in Paris. As more Vietnamese students began to arrive in the metropole, the gradual radicalization of politics was likely helped along by the absence of the elder, moderating influence of Phan Châu Trinh and Phan Văn Truờng, who had returned to Cochinchina.¹⁶

Political Participation in the Colony

The return of Phan Châu Trinh to Indochina in 1925 coincided with the rise of Vietnamese political participation in the colony. While the "five dragons" made their appeal for colonial reform at the Versailles conference in 1919, the monarchic and republican brands of reformism began a

¹⁵ Pierre Brocheux, "Une histoire croisée : l'immigration politique indochinoise en France (1911-1945)" *Revue Hommes et Migrations* 1253, no. 1 (January-February 2005): 30.

¹⁶ Nguyễn Thế Truỳền's father was Nguyễn Duy Nhạc, the *tri phủ* [county chief] in Sơn Tây, Tonkin. Upon learning of his radical activities, his father cut off all financial support to Nguyễn Thế Truỳền. *Renseignements divers* (un-numbered), September 1927, 380, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

revival in response to Governor General Albert Sarraut's declared policy of 'Franco-Vietnamese association', which held out the possibility of Indochinese autonomy and even, perhaps, independence. In the southern colony of Cochinchina, a new segment of elites formed the Constitutionalist Party to capitalize upon Sarraut's promises.

Representing the rising middle class of Cochinchina, the Constitutionalist Party aimed for modernization and progress via collaboration with the French administration, allowing for greater Vietnamese participation in governing bodies, local press freedoms, and an extension of French citizenship rights to more Vietnamese. "There are two means to win liberty," the Constitutionalist party newspaper declared, "by cannon or by culture; we are for culture." Among its members were the engineer Bùì Quang Chiêù, Nguyễn Phan Long, the businessman Trương Văn Bền, and journalists like Nguyễn Văn Sâm; other notable affiliates included the World War I veterans Dr. Nguyễn Văn Thịnh, Dr. Trần Văn Đôn and the jurist Dương Văn Giáo. Relying in part on the power of mass journalism, they sought the rationalization of the state on republican terms, allowing Vietnamese to begin in earnest the political transformation that Phan Châu Trinh had put forward a decade earlier.¹⁷

In the protectorate of Annam, where the Nguyễn mandarin state still ruled in name, the scholar and administrator Phạm Quỳnh likewise sought to use the emergent public sphere to take control of colonial modernity. Using his popular journal *Nam Phong* [Southern Wind], Phạm Quỳnh and the reformist segments of the mandarin state imagined a larger role for their Confucian past. A king was needed to personify and unite the Vietnamese nation, he wrote, but a parliament was needed to bind and invigorate it. Phạm Quỳnh sought a rather republican structure, similar

¹⁷ R.B. Smith, "Bui Quang Chieu and the Constitutionalist Party in French Cochinchina 1917-30," *Modern Asian Studies* 3, no. 2 (1969): 131-150.

to the Constitutionalists, that saw a gradual increase in political enfranchisement commensurate with the political education of the public. They saw no reason to break their traditional social order circa 1930. Neither republican France nor China had granted women the right to vote (1945 and 1947, respectively). Like many of their European contemporaries, Phạm Quỳnh and Bùi Quang Chiêu initially saw politics as an elite affair, reserved for educated men who would take a paternal and patronizing interest in the affairs of the lower classes.¹⁸ These men were reformers, not revolutionaries.

Yet France remained convinced that these reformers were deeply subversive. Radical organizations, though ambitious and adventurous in their pursuits, could be surveilled and suppressed. In Minister of Colonies Léon Perrier's mind, the moderate milieu of Phạm Quỳnh and Bùi Quang Chiêu that promoted Franco-Annamese collaboration and self-government represented the existential threat. "In reality," Perrier concluded, "the Constitutionalists want to use our aid to educate themselves and obtain a trained administration that will then evict us." He cautioned that these moderates offered but "a temporary collaboration, only alluding to the present, because they have an interest in concealing their plans for the future," which he feared was an independent Vietnam bound to France by nothing more than an alliance and cultural amity.¹⁹ Perrier was right. But the Constitutionalists couldn't let him know it. For Franco-Vietnamese collaboration to succeed, they had to mollify these colonial anxieties, placing distance between their program and the more radical programs like those of Nguyễn Thế Truyền, the Trotskyists, and the Vietnam Nationalist Party. And so the advocates of colonial reform always found

¹⁸ For example, Bùi Quang Chiêu did not favor the extension of suffrage to less educated Vietnamese, even if they had served in World War I.

¹⁹ Letter n. 335/CAI, *Ministre des Colonies*, 'Memorandum du Parti de l'Indépendance,' 2 April 1927, III-3, SLOTFOM, ANOM.

themselves in an insolvable dilemma: at once mistrusted by their ostensible French partners and those Vietnamese political actors hoping for more immediate or extreme change.

These moderate organizations and actors were not mistrusted at large by the Vietnamese public. While the famed revolutionaries of this era lived abroad for decades, exerting a comparatively minor influence on Indochinese society, the aforementioned characters were engaged in the mass publication of journals, newspapers, and novels while effecting meaningful if modest changes to colonial policy. While leaders of the Vietnam Nationalist Party were serving in the Republic of China's army and Hồ Chí Minh was helping organize Asian communist parties in Moscow, Phạm Quỳnh successfully overturned the French colonial monopolies and instituted educational reforms. The Constitutionalist were able to wrest Vietnamese representation on the Colonial Council of CochinChina.²⁰

The public took notice. The popular southern journal *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* [Women's Review] initiated a mock election in 1930 to nominate ten representatives of the people in preparation for the moment when France granted Vietnam some measure of self-rule. Phan Văn Trường, now back from Paris and editing a Saigon newspaper, earned the top slot. Six of the following places went to Constitutionlists, including Bùi Quang Chiêu, Nguyễn Phan Long, Dương Văn Giáo, and Diệp Văn Kỳ. Though Phạm Quỳnh was a monarchist and lived in the protectorate of Annam, he was also elected by the readers of *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* to the list. The public held these moderate

²⁰ Gerard Sages, "'Indigenous Representation is Hostile to All Monopolies': Phạm Quỳnh and the End of the Alcohol Monopoly in Colonial Vietnam," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 1-36; William Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1901-1940* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 130-32.

political forces in high regard, seeing their potential ability to reconcile the reality of French colonialism with the aspirations of Vietnamese.²¹

At midpoint in the 1920s, the gulf between these moderate, reform-minded segments of Vietnamese society and its more radical fringes had not yet widened. Reconciliation and even respect among Indochina's reformers and revolutionaries was possible. When Phạm Quỳnh and the famed writer Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh traveled to Paris, they were greeted warmly by the 'five dragons' as fellow patriots. As Phạm Quỳnh noted in his journal after one of several meetings with Hồ Chí Minh and the other dragons: "Ate our rice, spoke our language, discussed our country's affairs, truly it was delightful and fun. Ate 'til full, drank 'til drunk, laughed and laughed, talked and talked."²² Though Hồ Chí Minh's government would later endorse the execution of Phạm Quỳnh in the August 1945 revolution and consign Vĩnh to the same class of 'race traitor' [*Việt gian*], in these early years there was a greater awareness that resistance and accommodation were strategies to the same end, in substance if not style. Within just a few years these paths would diverge sharply, and the divisions harden. Yet at this moment it remained an open question whether liberty would

²¹ This facet has been obscured by post-colonial writers. For example, David Marr's descriptions of Phạm Quỳnh have a bias all too common in the literature that privileges the perspective of the DRV. Marr mocks Phạm Quỳnh ("Ironically, Pham Quynh almost surely considered himself to be a Vietnamese patriot ...") and asserts without evidence that his political platform was stillborn ("too sycophantic to interest anyone except perhaps minor clerks who wanted to know the latest colonial party line..."); David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 155. In addition, his work selectively cites evidence, like this poll, to eliminate the appearance of public support for the Constitutionals and Phạm Quỳnh. The full results were: 1. Phan Văn Trường, 2. Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, 3. Nguyễn Phan Long, 4. Diệp Văn Kỳ, 5. Lưu Văn Lang, 6. Bùi Quang Chiêu, 7. Trần Trọng Kim, 8. Dương Văn Giáo, 9. Trần Trinh Trạch, 10. Phạm Quỳnh. "Ngày chằm cuộc thi lớn kỷ niệm Phụ-Nữ Tân-Văn đầy tuổi," *Phụ-nữ Tân-Văn*, n. 64 7 August 1930.

²² Phạm Quỳnh's journal from 1922 was published by the 'PhamTon' blog run by two of his sons, Phạm Tuyên and Phạm Tôn. "Nhật ký 1922 tại Pháp của Phạm Quỳnh [Phạm Quỳnh's 1922 journal in France]," https://phamquynh.wordpress.com/2013/01/03/nhat-ky-1922-tai-phap-cua-pham-quynh-_p2/ (accessed, February 8, 2017). This version of events is confirmed in French police reporting in 364, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

come by the cannon or by culture – even the fiery Nguyễn An Ninh conceded in 1926, "we don't yet know which side victory will favor."²³ While Vietnamese were already divided over the means to pursue, from this moment they would become increasingly divided over the political character of that victory as well.

Old Revolutionaries and New Ideology

After 1945 Vietnamese political life was dominated by a conflict between communist and nationalist organizations that originated in southern China two decades earlier. Phan Bội Châu's 'Go East' movement had collapsed following the Franco-Japanese Treaty of 1907. In response he and Cường Đè established the Vietnam Restoration League [*Việt Nam Quang phục Hội*], shifting their revolutionary network to Guangxi province in China, which was home to a large Vietnamese émigré population and shared a border with Tonkin. Foremost among their allies was Nguyễn Hải Thân. Condemned to death by French authorities a decade earlier, by 1925 Nguyễn Hải Thân was a veteran of the 'Go East' movement and a revolutionary with ties to the local Kuomintang authorities in southern China. The Restoration League's first major challenge came not from French authorities, but from the nascent Vietnamese communist organizations.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc departed Moscow in late 1924 and soon arrived in Canton. He was determined to organize a communist-led organization in Indochina and throughout Southeast Asia. China was the logical place to begin. The Soviet Union had recently brokered the First United Front, offering military assistance to a unified Chinese government composed of both Sun Yat-sen's Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party. Together they pledged to unify a fractured

²³ Quoted in Agathe Larcher, "La voie étroite des réformes coloniales et la 'collaboration franco-annamite, (1917-1928)," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre mer* 82, no. 4 (1995), 419.

state and expel Western imperial powers from China's shores. A more discerning class revolution would only come following this national revolution.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc pursued a similar national line. His first step was to reorganize the Vietnamese émigrés currently under the sway of Nguyễn Hải Thân and Phan Bội Châu's Restoration League. Though Nguyễn Ái Quốc and Phan Bội Châu initially corresponded by letter, beneath a veneer of affability Phan Bội Châu was clearly wary of the younger communist-trained revolutionary, using self-deprecating and meek language to obliquely acknowledge the transparent attempt to supplant him and Nguyễn Hải Thân. Part of his friendliness seems genuine. Phan Bội Châu had met Nguyễn Ái Quốc two decades ago, and above all seems to have wanted the younger revolutionary to include him in the new preparations. In one of his letters, the Confucian trained Phan Bội Châu repeatedly invoked his age and experience as characteristics the younger revolutionary distrusted: "if you don't have too much disdain for my age, write to me sometime, I'll be happy," and then " If you deign to trust the experience that the old horse has acquired, he will do his best to be useful for you." His tone was friendly at times, but more often resentful and pleading. In an earlier letter he made clear his opposition to their forming a competing revolutionary organization. Phan Bội Châu reminded Nguyễn Ái Quốc and his associates of the adage "Better to have fewer of something than to have an excess" [*Chẳng thà rằng thiếu, chứ không nên lạm quá*] and "Better to not have something, than to have something divided" [*Không trọn vẹn thì chẳng thà không có*].²⁴ The message was clear. Phan Bội Châu and Nguyễn Hải Thân wanted to remain at the center of émigré politics in China, a scene that they had unified and which Nguyễn Ái Quốc seemed intent to divide.

²⁴ Letter, Phan Bội Châu to Lâm Đức Thụ, 12 February 1925; Letter, Phan Bội Châu to Ly Thụy [Nguyễn Ái Quốc], 21 February 1925, both in 351, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc must have confirmed Phan Bội Châu's fears of being *tenue à l'écart* when he publicly attacked the theories of this elder revolutionary and asserted the superiority of his Leninist concept of revolution.²⁵ Phan Bội Châu and Nguyễn Hải Thân were troubled by this Moscow *arriviste*, and distrusted the Chinese communist and Soviet advisors who provided him with the institutional support to establish an organization in Canton that rivaled theirs. The United Front held however. Like their Chinese hosts, these two Vietnamese organizations maintained an entente, cooperating despite their disagreement over the character of the coming revolution.

The tension beneath that entente was soon revealed when French authorities arrested Phan Bội Châu in Shanghai. Accused of insurrection, he was shuttled to the infamous *Maison Centrale* prison in Hanoi. There Phan Bội Châu wrote to the incoming French Governor General Alexandre Varenne. In the letter he explained why he had been glad to be arrested and escape southern China. He had not yet made a grand sacrifice for his country, and was willing to do so at the guillotine. Moreover he disagreed with adopting the Soviet and Chinese communist model of revolution, which he found ill-suited to Vietnam, but was nevertheless gaining ground in southern China. For the moment the letter had no effect. The old revolutionary was brought to the French courts and delivered a sentence of life imprisonment. A wave of student demonstrations and strikes erupted in protest of the verdict.²⁶

²⁵ The critiqued pamphlet, *Cách Mạng*, was published under the name of Phan Bội Châu's secretary, Nguyễn Thượng Huyền, which was a common practice. It seems that its intended audience would have understood it as Phan Bội Châu's writing, as French security officials did at the time. The ideas were well known as those of Phan Bội Châu, and the critique constituted an attack on Phan Bội Châu's legacy.

²⁶ See the first letter written by Phan Bội Châu to French authorities after his capture on 30 June 1925 in Agathe Larcher, "La légitimation française en Indochine: Mythes et Réalités de la 'collaboration franco-vietnamienne' et du réformisme colonial (1905-1945)," (PhD Diss., Université Paris VII, 2000), 296; Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, 76-77.

At the height of the protests, Resident Superior Pierre Pasquier visited Vietnam's most famous prisoner at the *Maison Centrale*. On behalf of the Governor General, the Resident assured Phan Bội Châu that he would be freed – but what was it he wanted? Phan Bội Châu claimed that he only wanted to reform the protectorate. Through his travels he had seen that Vietnam could not rely on Japan, nor could it look to a troubled China. Phan Bội Châu noted that "the political situation of Indochina is actually endangered by communism, which has taken over China." Only by cooperating with France could progress be achieved, he claimed. And so he offered his mind and his pen to Pasquier. He would write to his colleagues and try to convince them that Franco-Vietnamese collaboration was in the country's best interest. Pasquier replied that France was interested in calming tensions, not inflaming them. No letters should be written. But if he agreed, he could return home to Huế and live a quiet life with his friends, writing educational brochures or perhaps a journal that exposed his new ideas.²⁷ Phan Bội Châu agreed. Three days later he left the *Maison Centrale* and returned home.

As he had promised M. Pasquier, Phan Bội Châu penned an open letter to the Saigon press. "Since long ago I've renounced the use of politics of resistance, adopting another course of action, the policy of collaboration." If he found that Sarraut's reforms were being duly implemented in Annam, then he would support cooperation with the French protectorate. Members of the radical Jeune Annam group frantically sent telegrams to newspaper offices, suspecting that the letter was a French ruse. There could be no mistake, however. Phan Bội Châu was simply repeating the concepts he first enunciated in his 1917 pamphlet *Pháp Việt Đè Huế* [Franco-Vietnamese

²⁷ "Compte-rendu de l'entrevue qu'a eu M. le Résident Supérieur Pasquier avec M. Phan Boi Chau dans la prison de Hanoi, le 21 Décembre 1925," box 900, folder 2649, AGEFOM, ANOM. He also offered to help monitor the actions of British agents in China.

Collaboration]. Soon he was making visits to the famous National Academy in Huế. There he encouraged the students and attested that the French educational system was the world's finest. A Tonkinese correspondent for the popular newspaper *L'Echo Annamite* questioned whether Phan Bội Châu had betrayed his country. Two young activists who later occupied important posts in the Indochinese Communist Party published a menacing tract that warned Phan Bội Châu that he might only salvage his honor if he shut his mouth and stowed his pen.²⁸

In southern China, Nguyễn Ái Quốc soon learned of Phan Bội Châu's speech at the National Academy. He concluded that it was time to "write him a letter of censure and, at the appropriate time, use violent means against him." These leftist organizations, which would merge into the ICP three years later in 1929, now deployed Phan Bội Châu as a foil in their political training. He was accused not only of having a crude theory of revolution, but of exploiting his compatriots for monetary gain. And Hồ Chí Minh's sister, Bạch Liên, walked about the boulevards of Huế openly insulting Phan Bội Châu.²⁹ Pardoned by the French, the old revolutionary found himself increasingly condemned by other Vietnamese.

The pardon of Phan Bội Châu revealed not just an emergent conflict between communist and non-communist Vietnamese revolutionaries, but a broader process of political polarization in Saigon. Three months after the trial ended, students and political activists mobilized once again upon news of Phan Châu Trinh's declining health. Nguyễn An Ninh seized the chance to

²⁸ "Une Lettre de Phan Bội Châu," *L'Echo Annamite* 20 January 1926; "A propos de la lettre de Phan Bội Châu," *L'Echo Annamite* 21 January 1926; "A travers la presse locale," *L'Echo Annamite* 21 April 1926; Tô Giang Tu, "Après la libération de Phan Bội Châu," *L'Echo Annamite* 28 January 1926.

²⁹ Nguyễn Ái Quốc quoted in Larcher, "Les réformes coloniales," 413; On critiques, see Hoàng Đức Thi's memoir in: Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine, *Contribution à l'histoire des mouvements de l'Indochine Française: Vol. 1* (Saigon: Direction des Affaires Politiques et de la Sûreté Générale, 1933), 38; Hoàng Văn Hoan also notes these critiques in his memoir, *A Drop in the Ocean* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1988).

commemorate his former mentor in France and advance his new political movement, the Jeune Annam party. The party dropped any pretense of Constitutionalist deference to France and its civilizing mission. Instead, Jeune Annam attempted to bring Saigon's moderate political scene into a more direct confrontation with colonial authorities. After Nguyễn An Ninh denounced the French presence in Vietnam and threatened violent resistance, French security officers placed him under arrest just as news spread of Phan Châu Trinh's death.

The Constitutionalist Bùi Quang Chiêu arrived at the port of Saigon that same day. He was met by a crowd of eight-thousand. Among them were French agitators threatening to harm him for having just lobbied Paris to increase the political rights of the Vietnamese in Cochinchina. Bùi Quang Chiêu managed to safely disembark his ship, but not to placate the partisans of Jeune Annam. No doubt he was upset by Nguyễn An Ninh's actions, which offered the French settler community a pretext to claim that the Constitutionlists were indeed anti-French plotters. Speaking at the funeral of Phan Châu Trinh, Bùi Quang Chiêu attempted to mollify colonial authorities and the Vietnamese frustrated by the oppression of the former. He maintained the advisability of Franco-Vietnamese cooperation and moderate political reform. These were words that the members of Jeune Annam had heard before and ones that they rejected.³⁰

The funeral and arrest of Nguyễn An Ninh polarized the divisions between the accommodations elements of Vietnamese political society and its more radical partisans of resistance brought forward by Jeune Annam. Well into the summer of 1926, students in Saigon organized strikes, refusing to attend classes. Moderate political leaders like Bùi Quang Chiêu and Phạm Quỳnh publicly counseled the students to reenter school and devote their energies to

³⁰ Philippe Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 137-139.

education, which both men argued was a more productive venue for their advancement. Just a few months removed from prison, Phan Bội Châu also cautioned the students to cease striking over such a small matter. He reiterated his support for a conditional collaboration with France, but he cautioned that the Vietnamese had already done their part to fulfill the collaborative project. If it still failed, it will be the fault of France, who still seemed reluctant to embrace the policy. The more radical student leaders at Chasseloup Laubat high school did not take kindly to the old revolutionary's advice nor his moderate tone. Now their former hero's conduct became part of the polemic.³¹ As the strikes dragged on, school administrations began to expel the student leaders and more active partisans of Jeune Annam, leaving them to seek out new outlets for their anti-colonial activism.

Anti-Imperial Exodus

Some of the expelled students moved north to learn more of the Chinese revolution and perhaps take part in it. Others went west to France, where they could continue their political education. There they connected with an older generation of Vietnamese revolutionaries – Nguyễn Ái Quốc and Nguyễn Hải Thân in Guangxi and Guangzhou, and with Nguyễn Thế Truyền in Paris. France became the "anti-imperial metropolis."³² Here radicals from the colonial world could meet one another to discuss the politics of empire and interrogate its alternatives. Divisions soon emerged that pitted Vietnamese against one another, driven by local events as much by international forces, which presaged the lines of conflict that erupted in 1945. Students and workers

³¹ See the column by Hường Giang, "Nouvelles de l'Annam (sic)," *L'Echo Annamite* 23 June 1926 and Hường Giang, "Nouvelles d'Annam," *L'Echo Annamite* 26 July 1926; Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 167.

³² Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*.

who joined the Vietnam Nationalist Party and the Indochina Communist Party were drawn into ideological conflict not just by their particular disagreements, but by the larger Chinese civil war fought by their respective ideological allies in the Kuomintang and Chinese Communist Party after 1927. The fractious split between supporters of Joseph Stalin and Léon Trotsky, further polarized Vietnamese leftists.

When expelled students like Tạ Thu Thâu and Nguyễn Văn Tạo arrived in France, Vietnamese politics still remained separate from associational life. As had been the case in the early 1920s, amicability reigned. Broad lines of agreement existed between those seeking reform and revolution. As happened in Saigon, however, the turn to radical politics in Paris also brought about adversarial politics. The political ideologues were, of course, a minority amongst their peers. France now hosted nearly 1,700 Indochinese students, and hundreds more who worked at the shipyards and ports in Marseille and Le Havre. Most remained concerned with their studies, enjoying French culture, or spending their leisure time with friends at 'Billiard University'. Ideology would begin to infringe on the apolitical life of the typical metropolitan student in 1927.³³

That year witnessed the rise of a more visible and assertive brand of Vietnamese anti-colonialism. Newly arrived members of Jeune Annam found in Nguyễn Thế Truyền a leader who embraced their radicalism. They could even agree on much with the younger Constitutionalists like Dương Văn Giáo, who was not afraid to critique the French colonial administration and

³³ Trần Văn Ân, "Tương-lại nước nhà ở nơi ai?," *Việt-Nam học-sanh Báo* n. 4, July 1927; Scott McConnell, *Leftward Journey: The Education of Vietnamese Students in France, 1919-1939* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 52-53.



Figure 4: Five of the delegates to the 1927 Anti-Imperial Conference in Brussels. Standing (L-R): Dương Văn Giáo, Nguyễn Thế Truyền, and future DRV minister Bùi Công Trùng. Seated (L-R): Trần Văn Chí, Hoàng Quang Giu(?).

corruption in the mandarinat.³⁴ In February, Nguyễn Thế Truyền helped Dương Văn Giáo organize a Vietnamese delegation to attend the 'League against Imperialism and for National Independence' forum in Brussels, Belgium. Led by Dương Văn Giáo and several former Jeune Annam members, their delegation pled for Vietnam's independence and made important connections with Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohammad Hatta, Madame Sun Yat-sen, and other anti-colonial activists. Beyond the Constitutionals like Dương Văn Giáo, other Vietnamese delegates included Hoàng Quang Giu, Bùi Công Trùng, and Trần Văn Chí who respectively represented

³⁴ Dương Văn Giáo publish an article under the pseudonym 'Ly Sa' that rebuked the visit of a high mandarin to France, Letter 2241/CAI, Ministre des Colonies, 21 Sept 1927, III-12, SLOTFOM, ANOM.

the Restoration Society and Jeune Annam. Their respective profiles illustrated the dramatic fracture of politics in the coming years. Nguyễn Thế Truyền later joined the State of Vietnam, Trần Văn Chí served as its first Minister of Agriculture, and Hoàng Quang Giu would take a leading role in Trotskyist politics before siding with the State of Vietnam in 1954. Bùi Công Trùng would soon head to Moscow, and later serve as the DRV Minister of Economics and on the Standing Committee of the communist party.



Figure 5: The 1927 League Against Imperialism Conference. 1. Dương Văn Giáo, 2. Mohammad Hatta, future prime minister and vice president of Indonesia 3. Lamine Senghor, Senegalese political activist, and 4.(?)Jawaharlal Nehru, future prime minister of India.

In June, Nguyễn Thế Truyền organized the Vietnamese community behind a more assertive nationalist platform in his Vietnam Independence Party [*Việt Nam Độc Lập Đảng, Parti Annamite de l'Indépendance*] (VIP). The party sought a moderate Franco-Vietnamese association on equal terms, between France and a Vietnamese state that was independent. While that aim was similar to the ultimate designs of the Constitutionals, Nguyễn Thế Truyền and the VIP

demanded that independence come now, in 1927, and not in the vague, perhaps distant, future. If there was a distinction between this program and his earlier political mobilization, it was that his new organization grew increasingly distant from the French Communist Party.

Though Nguyễn Thế Truỵền had been a member of the French Communist Party, he became skeptical of the communists' sincerity, their ideological zeal, and authoritarian inclinations. Writing in the VIP party journal in the summer of 1927, Nguyễn Thế Truỵền explained how the VIP's more assertive program had created a paradox. Several weeks prior, he issued a memorandum calling for an "Evacuation Commission" that would begin to place Vietnam and France on equal footing as two allied, independent states. French colonial authorities in Indochina denounced Nguyễn Thế Truỵền's announcement as a call to revolt. The VIP founder also came under attack from the French Communist Party and the French colonial establishment. Nguyễn Thế Truỵền reflected on the absurdity of the situation:

Well! What if I told you that in the eyes of the communists this statement was, to the contrary, too moderate, too pacific, and not very ... well ... communist. What if I told you that it was following this disagreement, amongst others, that I resigned from the French Communist Party? What if I told you that, just as I was suspected for being acquainted with the Constitutionalist leader Bủi Quang Chiếu after having proposed to include him among the members of the 'Evacuation Commission', so too is Bủi Quang Chiếu accused on the other side for having connived with the Vietnam Independence Party? Is it not funny and contradictory at the same time?³⁵

At some point in the spring of 1927 Nguyễn Thế Truỵền formally resigned his position on the French Communist Party's Colonial Commission, forfeiting the generous stipend that came with the post, his wife said, to be rid of the party's "*caporalisme*" [militant authoritarianism].³⁶ Instead, he

³⁵ Nguyễn Thế Truỵền, "Vive Amédée Clémenti," *La Nation Annamite* n. 2, August 1927.

³⁶ "Note sur la propagande revolutionnaire interessant les pays d'outre mer" 31 October 1927, III-145, SLOTFOM, ANOM; According to Truỵền's wife, "the party's authoritarianism [*caporalisme*] weighed heavily on him." Sủretẻ Générale, Indochine, "Note sur l'activite des parties d'opposition antifrancaise en Indochine, premier trimestre de 1928," 1569, Indochine, Nouveau Fonds [hereafter INDO-NF], ANOM.

spent time with his wife and three children. Showing how important the conception of a historical nationalism was to activists like Nguyễn Thế Truyền, he had named his two daughters Trung Trắc and Trung Nhị, and his son Quốc Tuấn. The names derived from historical figures that dated back two millennia and were then being reimagined as Vietnamese national heroes.³⁷

Free from the French communists, Nguyễn Thế Truyền devoted his energies to the VIP. The party proclaimed itself "Neither Separatist! Nor Communist! Nor Nationalist!" Its journal carried portraits of Phan Bội Châu and Phan Văn Trường. Accordingly, the VIP did not aim to separate all ties between France and Vietnam, nor adhere to communist dogma, nor to European chauvinistic nationalism that had given rise to World War I. Instead, its tripartite platform called for Vietnamese independence, an equal diplomatic alliance with France, and membership in the League of Nations. Invoking the empire's own language, the party supported what it called "true collaboration between Vietnamese and French." That required the two countries to engage one another as independent equals, not as ruler and subject. "We are not separatists" the VIP declared in the fall of 1927, "because we still want for Annam an alliance with France, just like Japan is allied with England; an alliance means two sides equal to one another, that take up with one another out of a sense of friendship and not a sense of ownership over an inferior, which is how France currently treats Annam."³⁸ Unsurprisingly, the talk of independence drew an outcry from the conservative French press. "They want to throw us into the sea," a leading French colonial

³⁷ Nhà Viêt Báo Ng.-Thế-Truyền, " *Sài Gòn Mới* 15 April 1950.

³⁸ "Việt Nam Độc Lập Đảng," *Việt-Nam* (Le Havre) n. 1, September 1927. This paper was published by the VIP after its other two papers, *Việt-Nam-Hồn* and *Phục-Quốc* were banned by French authorities.

affairs publication said of the VIP leaders. Another labeled them "evictionists."³⁹ For the colonial lobby, Vietnamese independence was indeed a separatist aim.

By never trusting their Vietnamese partners, the French colonial establishment diminished the appeal of collaboration and the stature of its advocates. Men like Dương Văn Giáo quickly found that among younger, radical Vietnamese the Constitutionalist platform was losing out to the VIP's more assertive agenda. When a non-partisan congress of Vietnamese students was held in late 1927, the organizers chose Aix-en-Provence as a venue knowing that a congress in Paris would almost certainly erupt into political feuding between VIP members (many of whom either sympathized with or had joined the French Communist Party), Constitutionalists, and the apolitical students. Trần Văn Mai, soon a graduate of the Stalin School and a future DRV diplomat, was then a student in Toulouse. Writing after the congress, he decried the idea of an "entente Franco-Annamite" or "dêhuêisme," which invoked Phan Bội Châu's 1917 work *Việt-Pháp Đê huê*. For Trần Văn Mai, Dương Văn Giáo's talk of obtaining independence gradually, peacefully, and in stages seemed but a justification for another sixty years of colonial rule. His was far from the only attack on the Constitutionalists. While Dương Văn Giáo and Nguyễn Thế Truyền remained close personal friends in the ensuing decades, the former was taken aback by the treatment he received from some VIP members in the late 1920s. Writing to Nguyễn Thế Truyền, he lamented the criticism he received in Vietnamese student publications, asking: "We seek the same objective, only we used different weapons. Why then these attacks?"⁴⁰

³⁹ Nguyễn Thế Truyền, "Le Parti Annamite de l'Indépendance: ce qu'il est, ce qu'il n'est pas," *La Nation Annamite* n.1-2, June 1927. The quoted editorial is from *La Dépêche Coloniale*.

⁴⁰ "Lettre de M. Trinh Dinh Thao," *L'Annam de Demain: Organe mensuel de la Jeunesse annamite* (Toulouse) n. 4, 15 November 1928; Trần Quốc Mai [Trần Văn Mai, Sidarov], "La Guerre Hors la Loi," *L'Annam de Demain* n. 2 15 September 1928 - ironically this student seemed unaware that Phan Bội

One reason was the close circulation of Vietnamese and Chinese students in France. Since the mid 1920s Chinese students and revolutionaries like Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai, had made their way to Paris, bringing with them China's contentious politics. Vietnamese were eager to take a leading role in the debates surrounding the Chinese revolution. Through 1925-1927 the demonstrations to commemorate Sun-Yat Sen and the revolution were always heavily attended by Vietnamese students. Perhaps due to the French Communist Party's stronger ties to Indochinese leftist, Vietnamese speakers often delivered the featured speech at events on the Chinese revolution.⁴¹

On April 12, 1927 the Chinese United Front government collapsed. The Kuomintang coup at Shanghai marked the beginning of the Chinese Civil War, but also a new era of polarization in Vietnamese politics. "The Indochinese are inundated with Chinese propaganda tracts" the French security services reported, with each Chinese faction attempting to win them over to their side. While Cheng Tcheng and other leading communists in Paris denounced the Kuomintang's "White Terror" at Shanghai, so too they focused on "White Terror in Indochina," accusing Dương Văn Giáo and the Constitutionals of betraying their compatriots. At VIP meetings in Paris, dozens of Vietnamese listened to rival appeals, on one hand from the communist Cheng Tcheng, and on the other from the Kuomintang representative Laiu Tchou. Yet Cheng and Laiu's lofty appeals to the Vietnamese ended with each hurling abuse on one another.⁴² For their part, some Vietnamese leftists readily took up Cheng's call to action, denouncing the Kuomintang. Soon activists like

Châu was himself a proponent of *déhuéisme*; Note, n. 91-S, Office de la Sûreté Cochinchine, 9 January 1928, 380, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

⁴¹ Marilyn Young, *The Found Generation: Chinese Communists in Europe During the Twenties* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), 192.

⁴² "Note sur la propagande révolutionnaire intéressant les pays d'outre-mer," 30 September 1927, III-67, SLOTFOM, ANOM. My thanks to Marilyn Young for sharing this document with me.

Hoàng Quang Giu, who the prior year had worked closely with Nguyễn Thế Truyền in the VIP and attended the Brussels conference, now denounced the Kuomintang and championed news that some 600 Vietnamese in Canton had joined the fight alongside the Chinese Communist Party.⁴³ The era of united front politics was over in China. So too it would it end in Europe.

The Comintern's support for broad based, even national, coalitions came to an official end in 1928. That year its Sixth Congress issued a call for sectarianism: a confrontational, militant focus on communist orthodoxy. Under the new line backed by Joseph Stalin, nationalists and moderate leftists were no longer considered allies. Though partially a response to the failure of the Chinese United Front, its motivation also lay close to Stalin's desire to eliminate domestic rivals. While the French Communist Party's adoption of the Stalinist line would further fracture the Vietnamese political community, it was ultimately the Vietnamese who chose to take it up.

Under the United Front period, the VIP had counted on the support of the French Communist Party. Now the French communist leadership singled them out for attack, pitting Vietnamese students against the VIP leadership. French communists printed posters that accused the new leader of the VIP, Tạ Thu Thâu, of associating with extreme right parties. The French Communist Party elevated a younger class of Vietnamese communists like Nguyễn Văn Tạo and Trần Văn Giàu, encouraging them to propagandize among sailors, cooks, and working class Indochinese. Nguyễn Văn Tạo had served as the Indochinese representative to the Sixth Congress in the Soviet Union and upon returning published *Lao Nông* [*Worker & Peasant*], a Vietnamese language journal that propagated the new Comintern line and supported the French Communist

⁴³ "Le 8e congrès du Kuomintang en Europe s'est ouvert aux Sociétés savantes," *L'Humanité* 18 July 1928; "Note sur la propagande revolutionnaire interessant les pays d'outre-mer," 20 September 1927, VIII-6, SLOTFOM, ANOM.

Party. *Lao Nông*'s first issue was devoted to articles written by French communist leaders. Subsequent issues focused on critiquing the VIP and its leadership.⁴⁴

Tạ Thu Thâu responded by distributing a series of tracts which decried the French Communist Party as "louche" and "criminal" for its divisive campaign against the Vietnamese community. After French authorities outlawed the VIP, some leftist members including Tạ Thu Thâu and Huỳnh Văn Phươg gravitated to a Trotskyist orientation. From that vantage, these two were able to decry the communist version of Franco-Vietnamese collaboration, one that they charged saw Nguyễn Văn Tạo subordinate Vietnam's interests to those of the Soviet and French communist parties. In their minds, this was nothing more than "red imperialism."⁴⁵ Unlike the Stalinist students, the Trotskyists maintained a close relationship with former VIP members who were radical but non-communist.

The radicalization of the *Association Générale des Étudiants Indochinois* (AGEI) the following year demonstrated how the alliance of radical nationalists and Trotskyists had supplanted the moderate Vietnamese politics of the early 1920s and politicized associational life in France. Initially founded by the Constitutionalist Dương Văn Giáo, the AGEI was intended to promote the benefits of studying in France and provide emotional and material support to Vietnamese students. A controversy arose in June 1929 when the AGEI president pledged the association's support for a government sponsored 'Indochina House' for Vietnamese students at the Cité Universitaire in Paris. In response, radical nationalist students and Trotskyists, including as always Tạ Thu Thâu and Huỳnh Văn Phươg, denounced the president's collaboration with the French government and

⁴⁴ McConnell, *Leftward Journey*, 112-117. See for example *Lao Nông* n.6 1929.

⁴⁵ Telegram n. 165, 11 Feb 1929, Ministère des Colonies, Direction des Affaires Politiques, Service de controle et d'assistance en France des indigenes des Colonies Francaises. III-3, SLOTFOM, ANOM.

resigned their positions at the AGEI. Particularly galling for the protesting students was that the president was quite willing to praise collaboration with France, yet he had never attended the memorials for Phan Châu Trinh. As the president had lauded the Indochina House as a concrete manifestation of Franco-Vietnamese collaboration, the two-hundred AGEI members passed a resolution averring that their education in Paris was a means to fulfill the future liberation of Vietnam. They then elected a new AGEI cabinet led by nationalists Lê Bá Cang, Hồ Văn Ngà, and Nguyễn Văn Khải, and the Trotskyists Trần Văn Thạch.⁴⁶

Less than a year later, the fracture of the Vietnamese community peaked with the Vietnam Nationalist Party's abortive uprising at Yên Bái. Like earlier reform movements, the Vietnam Nationalist Party drew on the ideology of Sun Yat-sen's revolution in China and the Kuomintang party. While it had a significant presence in Tonkin, it only arrived on the French political scene in early 1930, following its failed uprising at a colonial garrison in Yên Bái.

The colonial authorities' suppression of the Yên Bái uprising – and the pending execution of Vietnam Nationalist Party leaders – caused an uproar among the French public and mobilized the Indochinese student population into more direct, militant action. When a Vietnamese mutual association in Bordeaux sent a letter requesting clemency for the accused revolt leaders, the AGEI in Paris published an open letter that accused the Bordeaux group of bourgeois perfidy, arguing that their deferential request implied loyalty to the French colonial project.⁴⁷ The AGEI preferred a different tact. Though the Parisian police had preemptively arrested dozens of suspected Vietnamese agitators, the AGEI president Lê Bá Cang managed to attend the ceremony for the Indochina House's official inauguration. The ceremony was attended by the young emperor Bảo

⁴⁶ "Nos Compatriots en France," *L'Ere Nouvelle* n. 54, 8 June 1929;

⁴⁷ McConnell, *Leftward Journey*, 133.

Đại, the French President Gaston Doumergue, and Vietnamese inhabitants of the house. When one of the latter, Nguyễn Văn Báu, began to speak of his respect for France, Lê Bá Cang and other AGEI members shouted him down as a traitor while throwing leaflets that demanded the liberation of the Vietnamese Nationalists Party leaders awaiting execution.⁴⁸

Foreshadowing future lines of conflict after 1945, the Vietnamese Stalinists were already gaining a reputation for sectarianism among their broader political community. Rumors circulated in Paris that the arrest of Vietnam Nationalist Party members after Yên Bái was enabled by cadres of the ICP. It was the communists who had informed the colonial security forces of their whereabouts, according to the rumors. The Paris-based communists soon received an inquiry from the Soviet Union. Its author was Hồ Tùng Mậu. Now training in Vladivostok, he previously served as an important collaborator of Nguyễn Ái Quốc as they supplanted Phan Bội Châu's network in southern China; he would also go on to become a member of the Vietnamese Communist Party's Central Committee in 1951. But now, twenty years earlier, Hồ Tùng Mậu specifically wanted to know if the apostate Nguyễn Thế Truyền was responsible for spreading these stories about the ICP.⁴⁹

Nguyễn Thế Truyền, they knew, had left the party in 1927 and returned to Indochina in 1928. There he spoke favorably of Chiang Kai-shek and met privately with leaders of the Vietnam Nationalist Party, including the party's leader Nguyễn Thế Nghiệp. It was not long before Vietnamese Stalinists in France denounced this doyen of the community as "the traitor Nguyễn

⁴⁸ Jehnie I. Reis, "L'identité indochinoise en question : Idéalisme français et dissidences à la Cité Universitaire de Paris dans l'entre-deux-guerres" *Migrations* 39 (October 2012): 7-19.

⁴⁹ Letter, (n. 10), Hồ Tùng Mậu to Đỗ Ngọc Du, 14 November 1929, III-129, SLOTFOM, ANOM; Sûreté Générale, "Note sur l'activite des partis d'opposition antifrancaise en indochine (sic)," First trimester of 1929, 1568, INDO-NF, ANOM.

Thế Truỳền" in their party journal, alleging his betrayal of international communism by "not only deceiving the Indochinese workers, but also the French workers."⁵⁰

An all too familiar pattern was emerging among the Vietnamese, one which would shape events for decades to come. Factionalism was becoming the predominant trend among this rising political elite, but fleeting moments of compromise and cooperation could be realized in pursuit of their shared goals. Just a few weeks after the Indochina House demonstration, the same group of AGEI and former VIP leaders joined with their Trotskyist comrades to mount a larger protest against the Yên Bái trials. Demonstrating the lingering potential for a broader Vietnamese anti-colonial front, they even included Stalinists like Nguyễn Văn Tạo and Trần Văn Giàu. However, when they met in a Latin Quarter brasserie the meeting descended into a violent argument between the Trotskyist organizers and invited Stalinists, which almost resulted in a restaurant brawl.

Later that evening cooler heads prevailed. Tạ Thu Thâu visited the student leaders at their apartments and reached an agreement. The following afternoon 300 Vietnamese demonstrators assembled in front of the Élysée Palace to demand the liberation of the Vietnam Nationalist Party members captured after Yên Bái.⁵¹ French police arrested the protest leaders, including the Trotskyist activists Tạ Thu Thâu and Huỳnh Văn Phụng, among others. They had traveled to Paris after 1926, following their participation in the student strikes after the death of Phan Châu Trinh. Now they were expelled back to Indochina, though far more radicalized and organized.

⁵⁰Trần Văn Mai, "Le traître Nguyen The Truyen est arrivé en France," Translation of *Vô Sản*, n. 4, June 1934, attached to Sûreté Générale, note n. 2964, 27 September 1934, 380, SPCE, ANOM.

⁵¹ McConnell, *Leftward Journey*, 134.

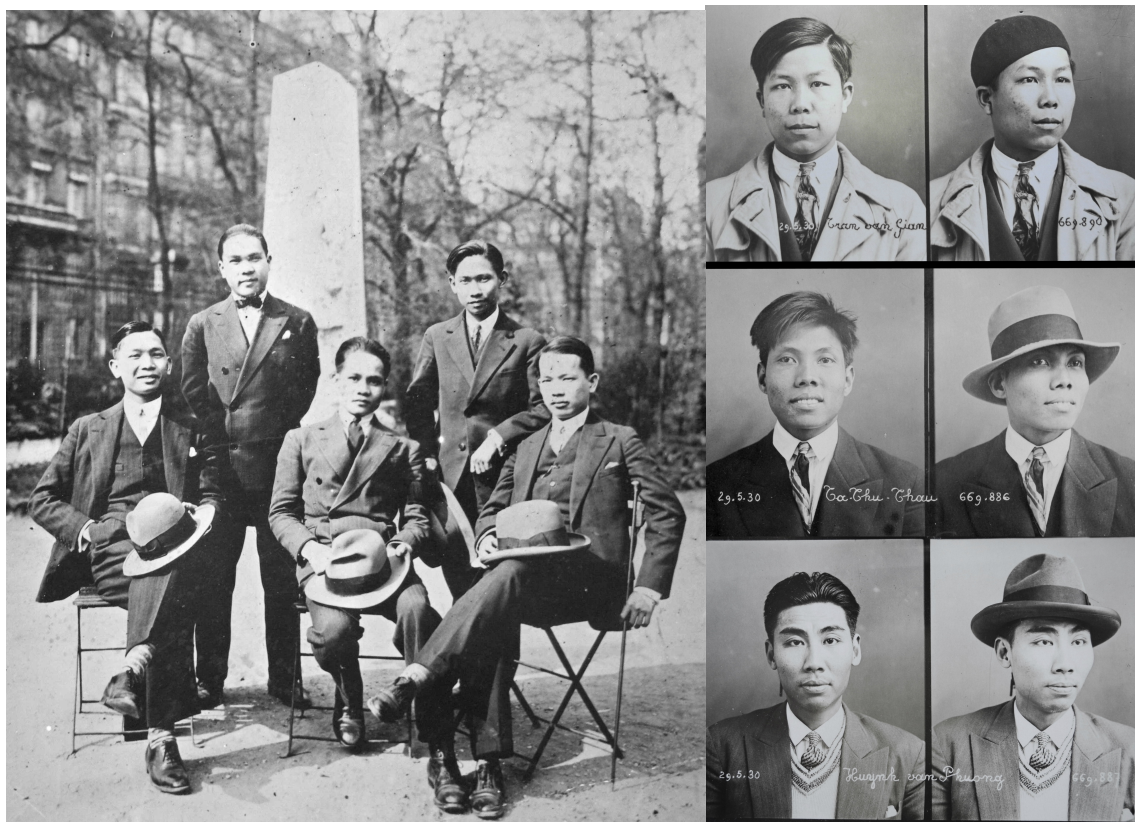


Figure 6 & 7: At left, the new AGEI leadership. Seated are (L-R) Nguyễn Văn Khải, Hồ Văn Ngà, and the Trotskyist Trần Văn Thạch; standing are (L-R) Hình Thái Thông (?) and Lê Bá Cang. At right are three mug shots showing (top-bottom) the Stalinist Trần Văn Giàu and the Trotskyists Tạ Thu Thâu and Huỳnh Văn Phương. This followed their arrests at the May 1930 protest at the Élysée Palace. Trần Văn Giàu and other ICP members organized the suppression of the Trotskyists and non-communist opposition in 1945, including the execution of the three Trotskyists and the nationalists Lê Bá Cang and Hồ Văn Ngà pictured here.

The appearance of the Vietnam Nationalist Party in France further factionalized the Vietnamese into communist and non-communist organizations, foreshadowing the civil war that would grip the country for three decades. Understanding the threat posed by this new revolutionary party, in the weeks after Yên Bái the Stalinist Nguyễn Văn Tạo tried to recruit new members by falsely claiming that Nguyễn Ái Quốc's newly formed ICP had led the Yên Bái uprising. At a February meeting of Vietnamese activists, he hectored the audience not to act like the "cowards" in the VIP, who were in the audience, and who Nguyễn Văn Tạo accused were

"locked away in their rooms studying the French Revolution and the works of Marx." It was the communists, he claimed, who had organized the uprisings.⁵²

Nguyễn Văn Tạo's overconfidence may have signaled his insecurity about the potential declining fortunes of Vietnamese communism in France. By year's end his fears had manifested. Common now at student meetings were critiques of the ICP and debates about the relative merits of communist and nationalist revolution. In Marseille, support for the Vietnam Nationalist Party saw its largest rise. At one meeting, an associational leader named Hoàng Kim Phụng led a bitter critique of the ICP. While the French Communist Party and the ICP had only propagandized and printed leaflets, he told those present, the Vietnam Nationalist Party was launching major attacks on French colonialism. He concluded by declaring that the communists' goals did not appeal to Vietnamese nationalists. These final words led the communist attendees to walk out. Similar scenes played out at other meetings. When pressed, ICP supporters like Trần Văn Mai retorted that theirs was an ideology with a global view, with global force. Presaging the events of 1949, Trần Văn Mai assured the meeting that aid soon would come from the Chinese Communist Party, allowing them to bring revolution to Vietnam in earnest.⁵³

Initially, the relationship between the communist and nationalist Vietnamese vacillated between competitive and cooperative. While Hoàng Kim Phụng was critical of the ICP, he was willing to aid Vietnamese communists in material matters. In May 1931 he and another Nationalist Party member, Lý Nghị, sent 300 francs to enable the Marseille section of the ICP to print a series of tracts heralding the communist Nghệ-Tĩnh Soviets uprising in Vietnam. At that moment they were

⁵² Ministère des Colonies, n. 538, 19 March 1930, III-181, SLOTFOM, ANOM.

⁵³ McConnell, *Leftward Journey*, 133; Report n. 477, 17 March 1931, Service de Contrôle et d'Assistance en France des Indigènes, Ministère des Colonies, Bureau de Marseille; Report n. 1517, 17 Dec. 1930, III-131, SLOTFOM, ANOM.

confident, having won an increasing number of recruits to the north in Paris, Le Havre, and Dunkirk. Their attitude was also a product of the Vietnam Nationalist Party's attempt to win new adherents through ideological flexibility. Earlier in 1931, Lý Nghi had received instructions from party members in Vietnam to intensify recruitment and build working relationships with the ICP despite ideological differences. When Lý Nghi went aboard the *SS Lamartine* to recruit its Vietnamese sailors in Marseille, he assured them that the Vietnam Nationalist Party permitted them to belong to the ICP as well. Both had the same goal, he said, their country's independence.⁵⁴

This development concerned both the French Communist Party and Vietnamese ideologues. Members of the Central Committee of the French Communist Party met with their Vietnamese counterparts in Marseille, demanding an active campaign against the Vietnam Nationalist Party. They emphasized that this new party, "of which the doctrine, purely nationalist, must be considered as anti-communist," and therefore they should "denounce the campaign in favor of the Vietnam Nationalist Party and show their comrades the benefits they will have by registering in the French Communist Party." After the consultation, the Marseille members of the ICP refused to meet the visiting members of the Vietnam Nationalist Party. The following year concern grew over the detailed information that the Sûreté had accumulated on the activities of the ICP in Marseille. Suspecting the Vietnam Nationalist Party members of informing on their rivals, the French Communist Party encouraged the ICP in Marseille to form a "*Đội hồng Quân*" [Red Army Squadron] that would identify and suppress police informers.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Letter n. 552, 16 April 1931; Letter n. 729, 27 Mai 1931; Letter n. 415, 21 Mars 1931; Letter n. 380, 13 Mars 1931 all in III-12, SLOTFOM, ANOM.

⁵⁵ Letter n. 1533, 22 December 1930; Letter n. 508, 9 April 1931, both in III-12, SLOTFOM, ANOM. "Note sur la propagande révolutionnaire," n. 176, 14 February 1931, III-81, SLOTFOM, ANOM.

While some Vietnamese distanced themselves from the French Communist Party's divisive tactics, others embraced them. One of the former was Hồ Tá Khanh, a student in Marseille who refused to break off relations with his nationalist brethren. Trần Văn Giàu was one of the latter. After the tumult of Yên Bái and overtures for Vietnamese unity, he issued an open letter in a Toulouse publication that made plain his and the ICP's stance: *Une réponse: ne chantez plus 'l'Union Nationale'* [A reply: speak no more of the 'National Union']. The text explained that those students appealing for national unity were ignorant. "Division is necessary and inevitable," Trần Văn Giàu wrote. Yên Bái was only important insofar as it had initiated "the distinction of classes." Uniting the working class with the Vietnamese bourgeois, Trần Văn Giàu concluded, was no more feasible than uniting the Yên Bái rebels with their French captors.⁵⁶

By the following year, in 1931, this harder line against nationalist politics had become the party line. On the advice of the French Communist Party, Nguyễn Văn Tạo oversaw the publication of a Vietnamese language communist journal, *Vô Sản* [*The Proletariat*], just in time to address the broadening rift between the ICP and Vietnam Nationalist Party. Its appearance also coincided with news of the revolutionary Soviets that the ICP had helped form in Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh provinces.

That spring *Vô Sản* went on the attack. The front page of its first issue offered readers a comparison of communism and nationalism. Just weeks after the leaders of the Vietnam Nationalist Party were executed for leading the Yên Bái uprising, *Vô Sản* singled them out for criticism. In addition to heralding Nguyễn Văn Tạo, the paper also targeted ostensibly communist publications that still spoke in terms of a "Vietnamese nation," a "lost country," or the coming "democratic

⁵⁶ Tract, "Une réponse: ne chantez plus 'l'Union Nationale'" Trần Văn Giàu [1930], III-14, SLOTFOM, ANOM.

revolution." Either they didn't understand Marx and Lenin, or they were nationalists masquerading as communists the journal warned. "Perhaps there will come a day when we work with the nationalists against imperialism, but in this case, we will only be their allies," the editors of *Vô Sản* reminded their readers, but "the proletarians of Indochina do not want democracy, they want Soviets."⁵⁷ The convivial atmosphere of 1920s Paris was gone, replaced now by the conflict between communist and non-communist revolutions.

The War at Home

The events in Paris and Marseille were echoes of two conflicts, one localized in Vietnam and the other internationalized in southern China. After Chiang Kai-shek's violent purge of communist elements in April 1927, the polarization of the Chinese civil war was transferred to some extent on to Vietnamese politics. Following the failed Yên Bái uprising, surviving members of the Vietnam Nationalist Party leadership including Nguyễn Thế Nghiệp and Vũ Hồng Khanh fled to southern China where they joined with the remnants of Phan Bội Châu's network, still led by Nguyễn Hải Thân. In the Kuomintang they found an ideological patron. Both parties were guided in part by Sun Yat-sen's national political philosophy.

That placed the Vietnamese nationalists in an ideological conflict with the ICP, which was further polarized by the increasing violence of Chinese politics. Since Chiang Kai-shek's coup, the communist Vietnamese had been arrested, forced to flee to communist strongholds, or work clandestinely. Much as in Paris, ICP journals in Tonkin denounced the "counterrevolutionary"

⁵⁷ *Vô Sản*, n. 1, 31 August 1930; *Vô Sản*, n. 7, 7 March 1931.

Kuomintang government and their allies as "militarists" and "bourgeoisie" to be suppressed. Instead, they championed Mao Zedong and the Chinese "red army."⁵⁸

The ICP leadership looked upon the Vietnam Nationalist Party as a serious competitor, perhaps an ally of expedience, but ultimately a class threat to overcome. Beginning in late 1929 the ICP Central Committee instructed its cadres to cooperate with the Nationalist Party and other nationalist bourgeois organizations for the moment. But the entente would be temporary. Cadres were to propagandize the Nationalist Party members and lead them towards the ICP. "This means," the Committee clarified, "that the Communist Party will be secretly leading [the Vietnam Nationalist Party]." If the party resisted their conversion to communism, however, the ICP would cease all cooperation. Reports from January 1930 confirmed that the Nationalist Party had a strong organizational presence in the areas north of Hanoi. The ICP cell in Phúc Yên and Vĩnh Yên requested the Central Committee send them "a comrade who possess eloquence and military skill to intimidate them and suppress their activity," allowing the cadres time to infiltrate these Nationalist Party cells and "enlighten" them in the class struggle.⁵⁹

Over the next decade the Vietnam Nationalist Party and ICP fluctuated between low-scale civil war and expedient alliance. In late 1930, it seemed head for the former. Each party's attempt to overcome the other led to assassinations and subversive infiltration of party cells. That June, a liaison agent of Nationalist Party named Bao was traveling by train from Kunming when he was stabbed on a train by a Vietnamese assassin. French police later learned that the attack was ordered

⁵⁸ Vũ Hồng Khanh, *Việt-Nam Quốc-Dân Đảng Đảng-Sử* (Saigon: self-published by author, 1966), 40-41; *Huấn Luyện Báo*, n. 7, 23 Juin 1930.

⁵⁹ "Le Comité Central du Parti Communiste Indochinois aux membres du Parti Communiste Annamite en Chine," 4 October 1929, III-129, SLOTFOM, ANOM; Sûreté Générale, report n. 896/SG, "Rapport des deux provinces Phuc-Yên et Vinh-Yên, Secrétariat Particulier du 5^e 'Xứ-Bộ' du Tonkin," 12 Feb 1930, III-131, SLOTFOM, ANOM.

by the ICP cell in Yunnan. They had suspected Bao was a spy who had recently provided the Nationalist Party with detailed information about the Yunnan ICP cell's activities.⁶⁰ At the same time, Nguyễn Hải Thân attempted to blunt the impact of the ICP's infiltration campaign. Though there were over 4,000 Vietnamese affiliated in some way with the Nationalist Party in Yunnan alone, there were signs that the communists had penetrated cells in other provinces. By early 1933 Nguyễn Hải Thân advised the Nationalist Party cells in Tonkin to sever contact with the Nationalist party cells across the border in Guangxi, fearing that they had been compromised by ICP agents and could no longer be trusted.⁶¹

The battle between the ICP and Nationalist Party was perhaps at its fiercest inside the colonial prison system. Confinement in close quarters led to an intense ideological conflict between the two parties, and even resulted in violent reprisals as each side attempted to siphon the members of its rival. At its most intense, Vietnamese revolutionaries saw their domestic rivals as the primary threat to their ascendancy, not the colonial state. A copy of the Nationalist Party's twelve-point platform for 1935 discovered in Hanoi's *Maison Centrale* revealed as much. Its first two priorities: "1.) Raise awareness of the nation [*Đề cao tư-tưởng Quốc-dân*], 2.) Eliminate communism [*Đảo-Cộng*]."⁶²

The fixation was mutual. Throughout the 1930s the ICP worked to convert members of the Nationalist Party, succeeding most famously with the future Việt Minh military leader Nguyễn Bình and the historian Trần Huy Liệu. Violent fights were not uncommon; one of Nguyễn Bình's

⁶⁰ Sûreté du Tonkin, Note Confidentielle n. 138/C, 22 June 1930, 6990, Résidence Supérieure du Tonkin, Nouveau Fonds [hereafter RST-NF], ANOM.

⁶¹ Letter n. 163-CS, L'Administrateur-Adjoint de Laokay to Résident Supérieur au Tonkin, 8 April 1933, 1598, RST-NF, ANOM; Sûreté du Tonkin, Note Confidentielle n. 12097/S, 23 Sept 1930, 6990, RST-NF, ANOM.

⁶² Sûreté au Tonkin, Note Confidentielle N. 608-S, 18 Jan. 1935, 7069, RST-NF, ANOM.

eyes was badly damaged during a brawl between ICP and Nationalist Party members at the fishery on the infamous Côn Đảo prison island. In other cases, they carried out assassinations of rivals or members who had betrayed their party by joining the other. Trần Huy Liệu recalled that by 1934 the prison grounds on Côn Đảo had effectively been divided between partisans of the Nationalist Party and ICP. At times the guards had to forcibly segregate the two sides to prevent further bloodshed. "The cool ocean breeze on Côn Đảo," he later remembered, "could not dissipate the smoldering atmosphere that enveloped part of the island."⁶³

It was the changing political winds in Moscow that began to dissipate the tension between the Nationalist Party and ICP. In the summer of 1935 the seventh congress of the Comintern overturned its prior advocacy of class-based revolution. Instead the new party line called for another united front between nationalist and communist parties to stem the rise of fascism in Europe and Asia. Then serving on the Comintern Executive Committee was a member of both the Chinese and Soviet communist parties, Lê Hồng Phong. As the de facto leader of the ICP, Lê Hồng Phong returned to Vietnam to form an Indochinese front that would match the Popular Front government that had just arrived in power in France. Upon return, he found the Vietnam Nationalist Party remained deeply suspicious and mistrustful of the ICP.⁶⁴ For their part, the ICP cadres were taken aback by the change in tactics, either continuing to denounce nationalism or seeing the entente as unworkable. In one case, a communist cell had penetrated and taken leadership of a group of nationalist revolutionaries, but would not dare speak of the Chinese

⁶³ Trần Huy Liệu, *Hồi Ký Trần Huy Liệu* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1991), 157-159, 162-165; Nguyễn Hải Hàm, *Từ Yên-báy đến Côn-lôn, 1930-1945: Hồi ký Nguyễn-Hải-Hàm* (Saigon: unknown, 1970).

⁶⁴ Hải An (Lê Hồng Phong), "Về công tác trong ba năm qua và tình hình Đảng Cộng Sản Đông Dương," 15 January 1935, in Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập 5, 1935* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2002), 393.

revolution, the Soviet Union, or class struggle. So great was their "fear that this party will attack them and no longer work with them," that they chose not to reveal their communist affiliation.⁶⁵ While Nguyễn Hải Thần and Nguyễn Ái Quốc had cooperated in southern China circa 1926, the ideological and physical violence of the intervening decade made a renewed united front far more difficult in 1936.

Beyond the Nationalist Party, the ICP found it difficult to cooperate with other rival political groupings. In the early 1930s, the ICP had led a global campaign against "reformist nationalists" [*quốc gia cải lương*], denouncing it in official communiqués that spread into Siam, China, and France. Singled out for specific criticism was the Constitutionalist Party of Bùi Quang Chiêu and Dương Văn Giáo in Cochinchina, as well as Phạm Quỳnh and the scholar Huỳnh Thúc Kháng in Annam, and Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh in Tonkin. The ICP charged that their attempts to reform the colonial state were simply maneuvers to benefit the bourgeoisie and betray the laboring masses.⁶⁶ The ICP was moreover concerned by these reformist nationalists' invocation of Sun Yat-sen's republicanism [*chủ nghĩa Tôn Dật Tiên*] and Ghandi's non-cooperation movement [*chủ nghĩa Găngđi*] in India. As ideological barriers to the communist party's advancement, the ICP denounced each.⁶⁷ More important for the prospects of an Indochinese united front were the frequent attacks that the ICP levied against the Trotskyists who had led the VIP in Paris. In Saigon, the Trotskyists held considerable influence over political journalism and local politics. Influenced

⁶⁵ "Mật trận dân chúng thống nhứt tranh đấu phản đế," June 1936, in *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập 6, 1936-1939* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2002), 41.

⁶⁶ This particular communique from the ICP Central Committee was found in Le Havre. Trung-ương Lâm-thời Chấp-uy của Đảng Cộng-sản Đông-Dương, "Những nhiệm-vụ căn-bản của cuộc sách-mạng Đông-Dương" [1933], F/7/13407, ANF.

⁶⁷ *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập 5, 1935* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2002), 446-447.

by the Soviet Stalinists campaign against Trotsky, by the decade's end Nguyễn Ái Quốc and other ICP leaders routinely called for the extermination of the Trotskyists.⁶⁸

On the eve of World War II, Cochinchina's various journalist met to celebrate the liberalization of the press under the French Popular Front. Present were journalists affiliated with all of Indochina's major parties. Nguyễn Văn Trán, a well-known Stalinist trained in Moscow, stood and delivered a speech as a representative of the ICP journal *Dân Chúng* [The Masses]. Then in the last days of the ICP's national democratic front – it would be outlawed by colonial authorities after Germany's invasion of Poland – Nguyễn Văn Trán spoke of a strong national spirit and identity that united those present. His speech elicited an emotional reaction, but not the one intended. The audience "listened in silent laughter," so absurd was it to hear nationalist platitudes from a Stalinist like Nguyễn Văn Trán who had long advocated a class-based international revolution.⁶⁹ Just five years after his rousing speech, Nguyễn Văn Trán would continue his activities as the DRV political commissar and then as a lecturer at the communist party's political institution, the Nguyễn Ái Quốc Party Academy.

The softened emphasis on class enemies in favor of national unity couldn't overcome a much longer history of political division among the ICP, Trotskyists, National Party, and Constitutionalists. Similar to the grievances enunciated by Tạ Thu Thâu in 1929, the Trotskyists mistrusted the Stalinist French Communist Party and its lack of support for Indochina or the colonial issue. When the socialist Minister of Colonies Marius Moutet visited Indochina in 1937, the ICP reaffirmed their commitment to work with the French Communist Party and the new

⁶⁸ For example see Hồ Chí Minh's denunciations of Trotskyism midst Stalin's show trials, PC Line [Hồ Chí Minh], "L'activite des Trotskystes en Chine," *Notre Voix* 9 April 1939, and "Lettre de Chine: Sur le Trotskysme," 23 June 1939.

⁶⁹ "Kỷ-niệm Ngày Báo-Chí Quốc-Âm ở Nam-kỳ được tự-do xuất-bản," *Diễn Tin* 28 August 1939.

French government. The Moscow-trained Stalinist Dương Bạch Mai even declared his support for "Franco-Vietnamese collaboration" and the French defense program (including recruitment of Indochinese for the European war effort).

These statements by the ICP were denounced by Hồ Hữu Tường's more radical Trotskyist publication *Vanguard* [*Tiền Quân*]. They took glee in noting that the ICP was now advocating the same reformist policy as the Constitutionalists. In response to the criticisms, Nguyễn Văn Tạo published a call to harden the ICP's position against the nationalist bourgeois parties. Other members of the ICP leadership continued to advocate for a grand democratic front, not aware that the coming war in Europe would end these plans.⁷⁰

To the north, in Annam and Tonkin, similar conflicts between the ICP and moderate nationalists reemerged. The ICP had long since marked the ideological icons of "reform nationalism," men like Phan Bội Châu and Nguyễn Thế Truyền, as "révolutionnaire démodé," obsolete and outmoded personalities.⁷¹ In response to the Stalinist ICP's partisan campaigning, Phan Bội Châu re-emerged on the national scene in late 1938. He gave an interview more broadly on the state of the country and specifically on his views of communist class-struggle. In forceful terms, he declared: "In sum, those who exploit socialism do so to split the ranks of the nation, to destroy our unity, and to annihilate our peoples' national spirit."⁷² This was the first time that the former revolutionary had publicly declared communism as unsuitable and attacked its proponents

⁷⁰ *Tiền Quân*, n.1 15 February 1937, and n. 2 of 1 March 1937, translation in Sûreté Générale GGI, n. 1822/G, 27 April 1937, 2667, INDO-NF, ANOM; Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, 231-232.

⁷¹ Note n. 7243-SG, Governor General, 21 December 1930, 351, SPCE, ANOM.

⁷² "Phông vấn nhà cách mạng Phan-Bội-Châu đối với vấn đề giai-cấp tranh-đấu," *Tràng-An Báo*, 7 October 1938.

in Indochina. His long-simmering feud with Vietnamese communists was now in the open. In making clear his opposition, he had also marked himself as a foe of the ICP.

Just a few months after the interview, the ICP retaliated in-kind. The pretext came when Phan Bội Châu sent a note to the outgoing French résident in Hanoi, Jean Châtel. The note once again endorsed a program of "loyal Franco-Vietnamese collaboration." News of this reached two of the ICP's most important voices, the future General Võ Nguyên Giáp and Trường Chinh ['Long March']. Trường Chinh had grown up in the same village as Nguyễn Thế Truyền (Hành Thiện, Nam Định province). But as Nguyễn Thế Truyền renounced communism in the late 1920s, Trường Chinh had developed into a committed Stalinist. He would go on to become the de facto head of the communist party in the 1940s and 1950s, helping oversee the brutal land reform campaign in northern Vietnam. He and Võ Nguyên Giáp had also recently co-authored a communist treatise, *On the Peasant Question* [*Vấn đề dân cày*] and were now responsible for editing the ICP's official Hanoi-based, French-language publication *Notre Voix*. That spring, Võ Nguyên Giáp and Trường Chinh launched a forceful counter-attack.

"We have seen," they wrote in *Notre Voix*, Phan Bội Châu "publish the disjointed and unintelligible ideas of a witless child." To make him aware of "the consequences of his acts," they endorsed a guest column calling for Phan Bội Châu to be brought before the court of public opinion. The author noted that a foot-soldier who had violated his duty may be forgiven. "But a chief who has betrayed his troops, that's an unpardonable crime! Yes, it's unpardonable!" they concluded hinting at the favored verdict and sentence. Võ Nguyên Giáp and Trường Chinh would go on to claim that their take-down of Phan Bội Châu had won unreserved approval from

Vietnam's leftist community.⁷³

The affair set off a public debate. Indeed, as Võ Nguyên Giáp and Trường Chinh claimed, some ICP affiliated journals echoed the denunciation of Phan Bội Châu. In one case, a journal altered the tones of the old revolutionary's name in headlines to read "Châu The Traitor" [*Phản Bội Châu*]. Influential ICP members like Trần Huy Liệu forbid their colleagues from further visits to Phan Bội Châu's home in Huế.⁷⁴ Non-communist commentators responded to the accusations and pointed to the ideological motivations behind them. They accused Võ Nguyên Giáp and Trường Chinh of maligning and threatening Phan Bội Châu because he was a nationalist revolutionary and reformer, but not a communist adherent of the ICP.⁷⁵

Today, Phan Bội Châu remains a Vietnamese hero, second only to Hồ Chí Minh. In the years after 1945, the DRV promoted a version of the past that erased these tensions and portrayed the ICP as the natural and favored successor to Phan Bội Châu's nationalist movement. Such a narrative was crucial to legitimating the party and the DRV. Historians have maintained this narrative for different reasons. But it is a constructed narrative, and one that belies the origins of the Vietnamese civil war in late colonial Vietnam.

⁷³ "Lettre ouverte a M. Phan-bôi-Châu," *Notre Voix* n. 11, 26 March 1939; "Réponse aux 'défenseurs de M. Phan-bôi-Châu" *Notre Voix* n. 16, 30 April 1939.

⁷⁴On other papers, see the memoir of Trần Huy Liệu's lover: Thu Tâm (Phạm Thị Bạch), *Những ngày xa xưa ấy: Hồi ký* (Garden Grove: Thế kỷ, 1996), 61-62.

⁷⁵ "Le cas Phan-bôi-Châu: deux sons de cloche," *Notre Voix*, n. 20, 28 May 1939; "Le cas Phan-bôi-Châu: l'autre son de cloche," *Notre Voix*, n. 21, 4 June 1939; an article of support appeared in "Muốn cho chính sách Pháp Việt Đê-Huê được thực-hiện," *Tràng An Báo* n. 415, 28 April 1939.

CHAPTER TWO

THE REPUBLIC OF COCHINCHINA 1945-1946

* * *



Figure 8: Nguyễn Văn Thinh, President of the Republic of Cochinchina, sitting at his desk in 1946. *Tân Việt* 1946.

The villa at 89 Rue Verdun still had its lights on late in the evening of November 10, 1946. Though identical to many of the residences on Saigon's boulevards, for the past six months this villa had served as the seat of government of the Republic of Cochinchina [*Cộng hoà Nam kỳ*], a French sponsored government for the colony of Cochinchina. But it was also the personal home of the Republic's president, Dr. Nguyễn Văn Thinh. Frustrated by French colonial administrators' refusal to turn over the grand Norodom Palace to the Republic of Cochinchina, Nguyễn Văn Thinh made his personal home the government's unofficial headquarters. It was a symptom of what ailed the Republic and its renewed attempt at Franco-Vietnamese collaboration. French officials never came to respect or trust their Vietnamese collaborators.¹ What they failed to realize was that in an

¹ Christopher Goscha, *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam* (London: Penguin, 2016), 128.

era of decolonization, trust and respect were likely the only means that could have preserved French influence in Indochina.

The Republic of Cochinchina and its French sponsors claimed that it – and not Hồ Chí Minh's revolutionary Democratic Republic of Vietnam – had the right to administer Cochinchina within a federal framework that would accommodate Paris' influence in the five territories of Indochina. In concept and conduct, the state was anti-revolutionary. It was a reaction to the violence that had accompanied the August Revolution and the collapse of the social order that Vietnam's bourgeois elite had known. Nguyễn Văn Thinh and French administrators cooperated in the pacification of the countryside by the Vietnamese soldiers of the Republican Guard [*Cộng hoà Vệ binh*] and French forces. In return, the French had promised that the Republic would be invested with real administrative power and political autonomy in the new French Union.

The doctor's actions that night indicated things were not well. Most evenings he closed the shutters at 7:00 pm, retreating indoors until the morning. But for the past three days, the lights remained on all night. To those he met, it was clear the doctor had not slept. Then on the night of the 10th, two guests arrived late in the evening. Street vendors on Rue Verdun watched from afar and later guessed that they were Frenchmen, being dressed in the typical garb of colonial officials. Half an hour later, clad in his pajamas, Nguyễn Văn Thinh saw the two men out. He then wrote out a short letter and retired.

As usual, early the following morning Hồ Biểu Chánh arrived at the villa. Though he now served as the general secretary to Nguyễn Văn Thinh, he was also a renowned writer and novelist, credited with introducing the modern novel to the growing community of *quốc ngữ* [Romanized

Vietnamese alphabet] readers in colonial Cochinchina.² No sooner had Hồ Biểu Chánh entered the villa that morning, then he ran back out crying. Nguyễn Văn Thinh was dead. The president of the Republic of Cochinchina swayed beneath a noose tied to his bedroom rafters.

The doctor's death was reminiscent of others past and those yet to come. In manipulating Vietnamese politicians and potentates to legitimize their colonial rule, France compromised the legitimacy of the very local agents on whom they relied. And by depending on French support to effect their rule, these Vietnamese compromised their own sovereignty. The combination often turned fatal. As the French Résident at Huế had noted some sixty years earlier, the Vietnamese had long since "noticed the fragility and shortened lives of royals that France aimed to make with its own hands and how, in the end, the stigma of foreign investiture quickly killed men."³

Nguyễn Văn Thinh died under the weight of that stigma. His memory remains buried under it to this day. As a Cochinchinese politician in the 1920s-1940s, Nguyễn Văn Thinh was a leading figure in Saigon's official political community. Following the August Revolution in August 1945 and the emergence of the DRV state and its Việt Minh front organization, he agreed to cooperate with French forces that returned to Indochina intent on re-occupying the colonial territories they lost to the Empire of Japan in World War II. Nguyễn Văn Thinh worked with the French Governor General George Thierry d'Argenlieu and his plans for a separate Cochinchinese state that could preserve French influence in Indochina and thwart the DRV's drive for national unification. In mid 1946, Nguyễn Văn Thinh was elected president of the forthcoming

² This is the account that the journalist Trần Tấn Quốc provided in 1955. In 1946, he was writing for the paper *Tin Điện* in Saigon and interviewed witnesses the morning after Nguyễn Văn Thinh's death. "Quanh cái chết bí thảm của Thủ tướng Nguyễn Văn Thinh: ký ức của Trần Tấn Quốc," *Duy Tân*, 1955 [day/month missing, article accessed through General Sciences Library digital database].

³ Frédéric Baille, *Souvenirs d'Annam (1886-1890)* (Paris: E. Plon, Nourrit, et Cie., 1890), 182-183.

Cochinchinese republic by the reconstituted colonial council, which was itself appointed by d'Argenlieu.

Nguyễn Văn Thinh hoped that colonial officials might finally pursue genuine political collaboration with the peoples of their colonial territories. Yet as this chapter shows, he harbored much skepticism about the project and the intentions of his colonial counterparts in the recently christened French Union. Gone was the empire, supposedly. Charles de Gaulle promised at the 1944 Brazzaville Conference, and again in a 24 March 1945 declaration, that the French Union would award autonomy, citizenship, and political rights to the five Indochinese territories. French policymakers spoke of *la nouvelle France*, no longer interested in empire but intent on building a Francophone community of equals.

Nguyễn Văn Thinh and his cabinet of Vietnamese ministers gambled that the Republic of Cochinchina would be allowed to take up those promises and inaugurate an era of Vietnamese political independence that they had long awaited. Like French colonialists and Vietnamese communists, they too believed in the idea of a federative Indochina comprised of the five *pays* or *kỳ* [regions]: Laos, Cambodia, Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin. The last three, the Vietnamese *kỳ*, held a special place for them, however, as the *l'Union Annamite* or the Vietnamese Union.⁴ These Cochinchinese believed in a larger, national Vietnamese community within the Indochinese federation, bound by a cultural unity but possessing an administrative autonomy that matched the individual character of each region.

Yet even before the Republic's inauguration in June 1946, Dr. Nguyễn Văn Thinh and his supporters confronted the hostility of a majority of Vietnam's political elite. Hồ Chí Minh and the

⁴ "Nouvelles d'Annam," *L'Écho Annamite* 20 December 1926; "Le paysan Tonkinois à travers le parler populaire," *L'Écho Annamite* n. 1508, 10 June 1930.

leaders of the DRV, communist and nationalist alike, charged was that Nguyễn Văn Thinh was a proponent of "separatism," willing to sever Vietnam's sovereignty by forming a separate Cochinchinese state. Given that the core of the senior DRV leadership aspired for a unitary, centralized Vietnamese government based in Hanoi, the decentralized and "autonomous" state led by Nguyễn Văn Thinh was a direct threat to their vision of a post-colonial Vietnamese state.

Most of all, Nguyễn Văn Thinh abhorred the violence and disorder that had accompanied the August Revolution and the early rule of the DRV. Even before its official inauguration, the DRV revolutionary forces had assassinated several members of his government. In a performative act of sovereignty, his opponents sentenced him to death as an 'enemy', of not just their state, but as a "race traitor" [*Việt gian*] who had violated his duty towards the Vietnamese nation. Nguyễn Văn Thinh had himself survived two assassination attempts before taking office, leading him to send his family abroad for the duration of his presidency. The Saigon press, moreover, was overtly hostile toward him. But for the first and last time in Vietnamese history, the press operated without the state's prior censorship. Those few papers that provided positive coverage of the Republic saw their editors assassinated or wounded in botched attacks.

This chapter will recast the life and career of Nguyễn Văn Thinh as a means to tell the history of the Republic of Cochinchina and demonstrate that, contrary to the designs of French colonialists, its Vietnamese animators did not envision it as a separatist state. Furthermore, by expanding our view of the state to include events in the late 1930s, we will see that Republic of Cochinchina's willingness to compromise with foreign powers in pursuit of domestic political reform was not unique. Indeed, it shared much in common with the position of urban progressives,

conservative counselors, and even communists in 1939 during protests over the unification of Tonkin and Annam.

It moreover will become clear that Nguyễn Văn Thinh was not a mere French puppet, nor even a staunch defender of Cochinchina's wealthy elite. Prior to 1945, even Saigon's radical political community considered him a progressive politician, more in the mold of Phan Châu Trinh. And like this forebearer, Nguyễn Văn Thinh believed that Vietnamese could work with France to achieve a more modern, prosperous society. While Phan Châu Trinh sought French assistance to engineer a more democratic state and marginalize the Vietnamese mandarin, Nguyễn Văn Thinh hoped to exclude the terrorism and authoritarianism of the DRV, even though this meant collaboration with France and the return of its own colonial authoritarianism. He nevertheless remained skeptical of what French officials were capable or willing to do. But like a great many Vietnamese in this time, he risked much to bet on this potential post-colonial moment. That bet paid out a decade later for African political elites. In Vietnam, where conversely France had lost control of its colonies during World War II and revolutionaries had filled the void, that bet would prove disastrous.

Who exactly paid a visit to Dr. Nguyễn Văn Thinh late that November night is unclear. But their conversation likely confirmed what the doctor had realized: that *la nouvelle France* was the same old empire. Having staked his reputation on those promises, he now found his government under siege, beset by infighting, and without public support from his peers. For the last time, but certainly not the first, he had been let down by the promise of French ideals and disappointed in the hollowness of their implementation.

Beginnings

Three decades earlier, Nguyễn Văn Thinh had found great inspiration in those ideals. Like a great many other Vietnamese, he volunteered to defend them in Europe during World War I. He earned the *Croix de Guerre* for his service. Like his former friend Hồ Chí Minh, Nguyễn Văn Thinh began his political life in interwar Paris under the tutelage of the exiled Phan Châu Trinh. But Nguyễn Văn Thinh would remain an activist in the sense of his idol, working within the colonial system to effect its reform and as an active member of Saigon's professional and political community.

Much of his time was spent tending to his medical practice and promoting the study of medical sciences among Vietnamese. He played an important role in the journal of his friend and colleague, Dr. Trần Văn Đôn, who had founded Vietnam's first vernacular scientific publication in 1923, *Journal of Science* [*Khoa học Tập chí*]. Together they wrote numerous articles disseminating their European medical knowledge to Saigon's reading public. Their articles focusing on diseases that plagued urban life like tuberculosis, typhoid, and scabies.⁵

Their desire to improve their community led both men into colonial politics, where they believed they could ameliorate other aspects of society by joining the Colonial Council. By the mid 1920s, this consultative body was composed of two dozen councilmen, divided between seats reserved for Frenchmen and Vietnamese. Suffrage was limited to the small, elite community of about 21,000 men: French settlers and Vietnamese who had obtained French citizenship.⁶ In 1925,

⁵ Hà Dương Tường, "Đi tìm tạp chí phổ biến khoa học đầu tiên ở Việt Nam: 'Khoa-học Tập-chí'," *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu và Phát triển* 128, no. 2 (2016): 77.

⁶ R.B. Smith, "Bui Quang Chiêu and the Constitutionalist Party," *Pre-Communist Indochina*, ed. by Beryl Williams (New York: Routledge, 2009), 179.

as one of his first political acts, Nguyễn Văn Thinh and other Saigon elites published a tract that explained what their "nation" [*"quốc dân"*] hoped to achieve under the new Governor-General of Indochina, Alexandre Varenne.⁷

Nguyễn Văn Thinh soon joined with the Constitutionalist Party of Bùi Quang Chiêu to organize the funeral parade and memorial for Phan Châu Trinh, who had passed away in early 1926. Thereafter Dr. Thinh ran for a seat on the Colonial Council and found himself embroiled in one of the scandals familiar to Saigon's contentious political scene. A rival candidate published an article recalling the arrest of Phan Châu Trinh and his close associate, the lawyer Phan Văn Trường, in France during World War I. The article alleged that they were betrayed to the French police by a "*petit étudiant en medecin*" in Paris. Readers quickly understood the implication. As a medical student in Paris and then a practitioner at the Pasteur Institute and Institute of Colonial Medicine, Dr. Thinh rose to great professional heights. His stature, however, never had.⁸

Phan Văn Trường quickly came to Nguyễn Văn Thinh's defense, speaking with authority as a pillar of Saigon's political community. He endorsed the doctor's "moral and intellectual valor" and assured the public "in voting for Doctor Nguyễn Văn Thinh, you vote for a scientist as well a man of courage [*homme de coeur*]." Phan Văn Trường further attested that Nguyễn Văn Thinh had treated Phan Châu Trinh with great care in Paris when he fell ill. And the year prior, in Saigon, the doctor continued to tend to Phan Châu Trinh's health until his dying hour. Before expiring Phan Châu Trinh felt nothing but "a deep sense of gratitude" toward him. The sharp-tongued lawyer went further, offering that if instead of being "a native of a colony, Doctor Nguyễn Văn

⁷ "Quảng-cáo Đồng-bào, quan toàn-quyền Varenne đối với quốc-dân ta! Quốc-dân ta đối với quan toàn-quyền Varenne!," *L'Echo Annamite* 24 November 1925.

⁸ Quoted in Phan Văn Trường, "Les mensonges du 'Progrès Annamite', Le témoignage de Me Phan-van-Truong, Lettre ouverte au docteur Nguyễn Van Thinh," *L'Echo Annamite* 8 October 1926.

Thinh was a citizen of a free state, at this moment he would not just be a brilliant medical practitioner, but also a faculty professor and chief resident of the capital's hospitals. That is to say, he is one of those men who honors their heritage through their *savoir*.⁹ His unprompted testimony settled the affair. Dr. Thinh won election.

The Vietnamese representatives of the Cochinchina Colonial Council were not mere pawns, craven collaborators, nor anti-nationalists, contrary to what their communist and radical nationalist opponents later claimed. Of course, among them were those prone to familiar political vices and biases of their time. But from the moment that the Constitutionlists gained representation on the Council, they used their voice to seek a greater role in colonial politics and administration. They could, and indeed did to the surprise of some observers, make principled objections to French policy. The Constitutionlists protested the colonial state's repression of uprisings in Yên Bái and Nghệ Tĩnh. Their leader, Bùi Quang Chiêu, even called for the dismissal of the Tonkin Resident Superior.¹⁰

Constitutionlists members were already attentive years earlier, however, when Saigon's newspapers carried numerous stories on the Rif War in Morocco. In late 1925, they revealed that French authorities had dispatched Vietnamese *tirailleurs* [colonial infantrymen] to help prosecute their war. Not surprisingly, the besieged Rif state of Mohammed Abd el-Krim el Khattabi commanded the sympathies of Parisian radicals, including Vietnamese anti-colonialists like

⁹ Ibid; "Phan Văn Trường, "Nouvelle mise au point à propos du Docteur Nguyễn-van-Thinh," *L'Echo Annamite* 8 October 1926.

¹⁰ Megan Cook, *The Constitutionlist Party in Cochinchina: The Years of Decline, 1930-1942* (Monash: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1977), 28-29.

Nguyễn Thế Truyền. Yet it also received support from segments of Saigon's moderate and conservative Constitutionalists.

In December 1925, councilman Trương Văn Bền submitted a motion to the Colonial Council that critiqued the war and called for the return of the Vietnamese *tirailleurs*. Among the French councilmen, only one supported the proposal. Beyond a few progressive critics in the French community, the motion failed to arouse much opposition to colonial policy. But it did raise their ire. The conservative *colon* newspaper *l'Impartial* charged that Trương Văn Bền's motion was of "Bolshevik" inspiration.¹¹ While Trương Văn Bền and his son-in-law were connected to more radical Vietnamese groups in Saigon, the accusation likely caused laughter rather than consternation. Trương Văn Bền was decidedly a capitalist: a successful businessman who manufactured the famous soap *Xà Bông Việt Nam*, among other refined oil products.

Annam, Indochine, and Vietnam

Trương Văn Bền chose his soap's name to capitalize on the emerging national and regional consciousness of Vietnamese. With the onset of colonial rule, French colonial officials standardized the term Annam to refer to both the Vietnamese race and the kingdom located in the central *ky*. Simultaneously, through their colonial rule over Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, France promoted the idea of a unified Indochinese space, much the way that the Dutch rule over a disparate East Indies archipelago had engendered the concept of a single national space, Indonesia. By the 1920s, the idea of a traditional Annamese dynasty within a larger, coherent Indochina had wide currency. Most Vietnamese continued to use the terms *An Nam* [Pacified South], *Nam Việt* [South Việt] or

¹¹ See *La Cloche Fêlée*, 7 December 1925; Pierre Brocheux, "Phan Văn Trương, 1876-1933," *Moussons* 24 (2014); Jean Lacouture, *André Malraux* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 107.

Đại Việt [Great Việt] to identify the political space inhabited by Vietnamese speakers. Vietnamese communists similarly took up the concept of an Indochinese space, in keeping with the Soviet Comintern's directives to avoid organizing along narrow national lines.¹²

Prior to the 1930s, the term 'Việt Nam' was unknown to the average person. Instead, the rural majority of the country likely identified themselves by their immediate locality or perhaps as Annamese [*ngưòi Nam*]. The country's elites could identify as both Annamese and Indochinese, and perhaps by the region of their birth, be it Tonkin, Annam, or Cochinchina. There was at once a nascent sense of belonging and an enduring difference among the three Vietnamese *kỳ*. A popular song at the time advised those who moved outside their natal village on how to endure the travails of settling in another *kỳ*: "When one settles in a foreign land; Lower your head and work the land, ignore the mocking and laughs of others" [*Đem thân đi đến đất ngưòi; Cúi đầu già dai ai cười mặc ai*]. This sense of difference led Cochinchinese, Tonkinese, and Annamese to form mutual aid societies in urban centers across *l'Union Annamite* that rendered moral and monetary assistance to those who had also migrated from the same *kỳ*.¹³

The idea of a unified Vietnam began to overtake those identities in the late 1920s. By this time, European literature on nationalism had filtered back to Indochina, often by way of Japan or China. At the same time, Vietnamese students studying in the metropole were exposed to these ideas and returned home with a new consciousness. As a result, Vietnam's rising elite was accustomed to think of the lands occupied by ethnic Vietnamese as a single national space, rather than a diverse multi-ethnic space overseen by the Nguyễn Dynasty empire based in Huế.

¹² Christopher Goscha, *Going Indochinese: Contesting Concepts of Space and Place in French Indochina* (Singapore: NIAS Press, 2012).

¹³ "Nouvelles d'Annam," *L'Echo Annamite* 20 December 1926.

Like the imprisoned revolutionaries of the Vietnam Nationalist Party, Trương Văn Bền's soap evoked the belief in a national concept of Vietnam that stood above the colonial administrative state. In so naming his soap, Trương Văn Bền was taking up the rhetoric popularized by Vietnamese political activists in Paris, led by Nguyễn Thế Truyền, who had already begun using national terms for their country in the mid-1920s. But crucially, these politically active students felt that the question of whether Annam was a nation was not a given. It had to be argued and asserted in essays, newspapers, and at meetings.¹⁴

Such assertions of the nation were seen most prominently in Nguyễn Thế Truyền's Vietnam Independence Party [*Việt Nam Độc Lập Đảng*]. Newspapers founded by Nguyễn Thế Truyền included *Việt Nam*, *Việt Nam Soul* [*Việt Nam Hồn*], and *Restore the Country: a journal claiming the rights of the Vietnamese people* [*Phục Quốc: cơ-quan để yêu-sách quyền-lợi của dân Việt-Nam*] and likely had readership in France, Indochina, and even southern China.¹⁵ Not long after the Vietnam Nationalist Party took up "Việt Nam" in its name.

Yet still, the term was confined to a small segment of elite nationalists, radical and conservative alike. The Constitutionalists were vocal proponents of a federative Indochinese space, but of also of its constitutive national spaces. Dương Văn Giáo, one of Nguyễn Văn Thinh's close collaborators, wrote in 1927 that the Constitutionalists looked forward to a day when the League of Nations and international federalism took a greater role in international governance. In the meantime, they worked for an Indochinese federal state that would "endow to the Annamite nation,

¹⁴ Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 139.

¹⁵ Editions of *Restore the Country* were printed in Vietnamese, French, and Chinese.

the Cambodian nation, and the indigenous populations and ethnic minorities among us the constitution of a modern state."¹⁶

These ideas were not far from those advocated by the VIP and Nguyễn Thế Truyền. He was well aware of the similarities in their platforms and the opportunity to cooperate toward their mutual national goals. When French authorities announced their intent to send a French *commission d'enquête* to Indochina to investigate conditions in the colonies, Nguyễn Thế Truyền proposed instead a *commission d'évacuation*. Comprised of Vietnamese representatives, his commission would examine how to evacuate the French colonists from Indochina and establish normal state-to-state relations with Paris. Among the ten men he publicly nominated for the committee included the old revolutionary Phan Bội Châu, the scholar Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, the lawyer Phan Văn Trường, but also Dr. Nguyễn Văn Thinh.¹⁷

Imagining Vietnam took more than political tracts and meetings on Paris' Left Bank. It also came through popular culture and mass consumption, where business-minded Constitutionalists helped bring the nation into the popular consciousness. Trương Văn Bền, the Constitutionalist politician denounced as 'Bolshevik', likely did more than most political activists to bring the term *Việt Nam* into the daily lexicon via his soap and oil company. From 1930, his *Savon Việt Nam* [Vietnam Soap] became the most popular soap in the colony. In advertisements, Trương Văn Bền deployed an economic nationalist slogan that defined the Annamese as belonging to *Việt Nam* for likely the first time in popular culture: "Annamese should use Vietnam Soap" [*Người Nam Việt nên*

¹⁶ Dương Văn Giáo, "Le Parti constitutionnaliste et la politique de collaboration," *La Tribune Indochinoise* 15 August 1927.

¹⁷ "Un mémorandum annamite a été envoyé au Gouvernement français," *La Tribune Indochinois* 27 May 1927.



Figure 9: Annamese [người Nam Việt] should use Vietnam Soap. VIỆT-NAM brand soap, manufactured by Vietnamese, is now available. ... Helping each other, just like [our ancestors of] the Lạc-Hồng races.

dùng Savon Việt Nam]. Buying his soap, also known simply as *Ms. Ba* [*Cô Ba*] for the portrait of his wife on the packaging, meant that Vietnamese were supporting a Vietnamese business, rather than the soap manufacturers of Marseille or Chinese merchants. His tactic was similar to that of the Constitutionalist journalist Nguyễn Phú Khai, who helped organize economic boycotts in the 1920s of Chinese businesses that maintained undue control over the colonial economy. The branding was thus a political act and a shrewd business maneuver all at once.

Les Jeunes and Colonial Politics

However, it was Trương Văn Bền's financial holdings that caused Nguyễn Văn Thinh and other members of Saigon's rising political class to question the motives of older Constitutionalist party members. By the end of the decade, Nguyễn Văn Thinh and his fellow young professionals – including Dr. Trần Văn Đôn, the lawyer Dương Văn Giáo, and the former administrator Nguyễn Tấn Đốc – emerged as a rival, reformist faction known as *les jeunes* [the youngsters]. Pointing to the considerable financial holdings of Trương Văn Bền and other Constitutionalists,

les jeunes argued for the Constitutionalists to return to political agitation: improving the status of native Annamese vis-a-vis the French *colons*, elevating their social and political status in the colony, and working toward the political and economic autonomy of Indochina. Writing in the journal *L'Opinion*, the group argued that their concept of autonomy would mean, in essence, independence for an Indochina. They would remain "bound to the metropole *only by a tie of deferential affection.*" The Constitutionalists were in agreement on this point. But Nguyễn Văn Thinh and Dương Văn Giáo (the nephew of Bui Quang Chiêu) charged that the certain Constitutionalists ceased to embody them, distracted as they were by commercial interests.¹⁸

In the December 1930 Council elections, Nguyễn Văn Thinh and Dương Văn Giáo proposed a coalition between *les jeunes* and the Constitutionalists. This list, which they called *l'Union Annamite*, was meant to unify the Vietnamese councilmen in pursuit of their shared interests vis-à-vis the French settler community and colonial state. Both Nguyễn Văn Thinh and Dương Văn Giáo won alternate seats on the Council. The union proved fragile however. Within two months the leaders of *les jeunes* resigned, citing the Constitutionalist's "opportunistic" support for the recent passage of taxes that they argued unfairly saddled the average Annamite farmer with the state's tax burden.¹⁹

The failure of the union marked the end of *les jeunes* as a coherent political force. In the years afterwards, Nguyễn Văn Thinh maintained his professional activities as a doctor and agriculturalist. He owned some 268 hectares of land (equivalent to one square mile) in the Mekong Delta, but just 50 hectares was cleared for cultivation in 1933. Being a landowner of this size placed

¹⁸ Cook, 34-35. Emphasis mine.

¹⁹ Nguyễn Văn Thinh and Dương Văn Giáo, "Des explications sur leur attitude vis-à-vis des constitutionnalists," *L'Echo Annamite* 31 January 1931.

him in an elite status, but still far below the class of larger property owners who controlled six or more times the area of land.²⁰ Like his peers, he held a patronizing view of the peasantry and was biased towards the unequal social hierarchy that favored men of his station. He praised "the bonds of sympathy and affection between landowners and farmers" which he argued were characteristic of traditional Annamese society and its patriarchal values.²¹ He held leadership roles in landowner associations, but also in credit unions like the *Việt Nam Ngân-Hàng* [*Société Annamite de Crédit*] that extended Vietnamese their first opportunity to obtain non-predatory loans at just 2.5 percent interest per year. Joining Nguyễn Văn Thinh on the board of the *Société* was the lawyer Trịnh Đình Thảo, who would later go on to join the National Liberation Front in 1968 and serve in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam National Assembly after 1975.²²

In late 1936, Nguyễn Văn Thinh would revive his political aspirations. Like many others, he saw an opportunity in the electoral victory of the French "Popular Front" government that brought a coalition of leftist French political parties to power that year. Nguyễn Văn Thinh founded a new political organization, the Indochinese Democratic Party. Like *les jeunes*, the party drew upon younger Saigonese professionals who were dissatisfied with the Constitutionals' lack of progress and compromising business interests. Among the Indochinese Democratic Party's members was the lawyer Trịnh Đình Thảo, then known for his defense of prominent Vietnamese Trotskyists that colonial authorities harassed. Other party members included Dr. Trần Văn Đôn and the journalist Nguyễn Văn Sâm, who was the son-in-law of Trường Văn Bền and close with

²⁰ L. Lacroix-Sommé, R.J. Dickson, A.J. Burtschy, eds. *Annuaire complet (européen et indigène) de toute l'Indochine* (Saigon: Impr. A. Portail, 1933), 894.

²¹ Georges Boudarel and Daniel Hémery, *Tradition et révolution au Vietnam* (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1971), 151.

²² See advertisement "Việt-Nam Ngân-Hàng," *Sài Gòn* n. 472, 12 December 1934; Also see the add for the *Société* in *L'Echo Annamite*, 7 April 1939.

Saigon's Trotskyists. Đỗ Hữu Thịnh, the brother of the famous WWI aviator Đỗ Hữu Vị, was a co-founder of the party.²³

The party's express purpose was to seek dominion status for Indochina. Its goals included obtaining greater political and professional opportunities for the native population, reforming local communal governance, and abolishing abusive practices that affected the peasantry, notably the head tax. In a report to Moscow, the general secretary of the ICP described Nguyễn Văn Thịnh's party as "progressive capitalists and lower middle class. They approve of radical/progressive reforms, but are not active among the masses."²⁴ Conversely, the writer harshly criticized the Constitutionlists. But he noted that like them, the Indochinese Democratic Party was confined to a small elite membership of some 60 or more individuals. The legal front for the ICP's Stalinist communists in Saigon, represented by the journal *Le Peuple*, invited the Indochinese Democratic Party to form a union with the ICP. Nguyễn Văn Thịnh and his party members unanimously rejected the Stalinists' proposal.²⁵

Instead the Democratic Party of Indochina joined with the Trotskyists and their leader Tạ Thu Thâu. Once again, the preeminent historian of Saigon's colonial politics noted, Nguyễn Văn Thịnh's political party presented the Trotskyist Tạ Thu Thâu with a radical bourgeoisie ally.²⁶ Already in 1936 Doctor Thịnh had joined with Saigon's Trotskyists to form the *Comité Indochinois d'amnestie*, which worked for the release of political prisoners during the era of relatively liberal

²³ "A Travers l'Indochine," *Le Nouvelliste d'Indochine* 8 August 1937.

²⁴ The writer was Hà Huy Tập. "Báo cáo sáu tháng gửi ban phương đông quốc tế cộng sản" 5 April 1938, in *Hà Huy Tập - Một số tác phẩm* (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia, 2006).

²⁵ Trần Mỹ Châu, Phan Thị Trọng, *Trần Văn Thạch: Cây bút chống bạo quyền áp bức* (Victoria: Chau Tran, 2015), 105-106.

²⁶ This is the description of the historian of Vietnamese Trotskyism, Daniel Hémerly, *Révolutionnaires vietnamiens et pouvoir colonial en Indochine* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1975) 382n16; for the *Comité* see 195n133.

colonial rule at the beginning of the Popular Front. Soon after, Nguyễn Văn Thinh and Đỗ Hữu Vĩ joined with the Trotskyists to support the formation of an Indochinese Congress that would present a representative list of Vietnamese demands to a visiting French delegation. After local French authorities disbanded the congress, Nguyễn Văn Thinh and Đỗ Hữu Vĩ published their own list of demands to the French delegation that included autonomy for Indochina, reform of the commune, and greater medical assistance and socioeconomic reforms for the peasantry.²⁷

The promised delegation never arrived. Instead the left-wing politician and Minister of Health, Justin Godart, visited Indochina in its stead. While in the country, he accepted an appointment as *présidence d'honneur* of the Indochina Democratic Party.²⁸ The Trotskyists likely also approved of Nguyễn Văn Thinh's effort to lobby the colonial government to expand a program that cleared deltaic lands and awarded 10 hectare plots to peasant families. But they probably disagreed with Nguyễn Văn Thinh's focus on upholding the patriarchal social order that linked landholders and peasants.²⁹ The looming war in Europe would soon bring to an end to any hope of substantial reform. Colonial administrators rolled back the Popular Front rules and ended the opportunity for peaceful reform that Nguyễn Văn Thinh and others had long awaited.

²⁷ Đỗ Hữu Thinh, Nguyễn Văn Thinh, "Cahier des vœux et exposés de motifs présentés à la commission d'enquête coloniale (Saigon: Impr. du Théâtre, 1937).

²⁸ Louis Raymond, "Les événements d'Indochine, septembre 1944 - décembre 1946: entre discours et contre-discours," (SciencesPo Rennes, Mémoire de 4e année, 2013), 188.

²⁹ David Biggs, "Late Colonial Indochina, 1930-1945," in *Cultivating the Colonies: Colonial States and their Environmental Legacies*, eds Christian Folke Ax, Niels Brinnes, Niklas Jensen, Karen Oslund (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 2011), 109-132.

Tonkinese Separatism

While Nguyễn Văn Thỉnh saw his plans interrupted by the coming world war, the Nguyễn Dynasty Emperor Bảo Đại and his minister Phạm Quỳnh saw it as an opportunity to regain some measure of sovereignty for Vietnam. In the summer of 1939, the two statesmen traveled to France and pleaded with Minister of Colonies George Mandel to honor the 1884 Patrenotre Treaty that designated Tonkin and Annam as French protectorates. Legally, the Nguyễn court retained administrative control of Tonkin. Over time, however, the French colonial state had subordinated the court to French controls and removed Tonkin from its legislative reach, rendering each protectorate into a de facto colony.

Throughout the 1920s-30s, the Patrenotre Treaty served as a point of referendum on both the French and Vietnamese empires. The court mandarins in Huế resented how colonial officials had disregarded the treaty and superseded the already considerable authority that it granted French administrators. When Bảo Đại returned to Indochina in 1932 after a decade of French education, during which his tutors regaled him with the history of his royal court, he expected to have the power to rule as an enlightened sovereign. He found very little power was actually in his possession. But Bảo Đại was able to remake what remained of his realm. He dismissed all but one of the *Cơ Mật* [royal cabinet] members in favor of several young, ambitious reformers. Notable among them were Phạm Quỳnh and future president of South Vietnam Ngô Đình Diệm. Together, they undertook a series of modest reforms.

Even the journal *Annam Nouveau*, a familiar critic of the monarchy, lauded Bảo Đại's reforms as "stunning proof of internal sovereignty."³⁰ One of the aims of this reformist drive was brokering a deal with France that authorized the administrative reattachment of Tonkin to the Huế imperial court in Annam, thereby restoring the court and constructing a nation at once. This was, after all, what the 1884 Patrenotre Treaty had stipulated. For denizens of the court, monarchists and nationalists alike, the strict interpretation of the treaty was a means to restore a significant measure of sovereignty to the Vietnamese empire.³¹

On the eve of French defeat in September 1939, Bảo Đại appealed directly to the Governor-General of Indochina, General Georges Catroux. In an meeting with the general, Bảo Đại framed his reforms as a means to reinforce Indochina *and* greater France midst the German offensive. Just as he told Mandel in Paris, Bảo Đại argued that the reforms were not only correct, but necessary "to galvanize all their energy in service of France." This was impossible at present. His position as emperor afforded him no authority nor role in the administration of Tonkin. He pointed out to Catroux that French authorities "only relay to me insignificant affairs." When a new tax was announced, Bảo Đại noted that he had only found out by reading the newspaper.³²

After the meeting, Catroux replied to Bảo Đại in writing and rejected his proposal. Only after the war, Catroux promised, would France be able to give the emperor what he and his subjects wanted: a government that was no longer *fictif* but truly *effectif*.³³ The young emperor likely

³⁰ Quoted in Bruce Lockhart, "Monarchy in Siam and Vietnam, 1925-1946," (PhD Dissertation, Cornell University, 1990), 121.

³¹ Service de Controle et d'Assistance en France des Indigènes des colonies français to Ministère des Colonies, n. 1606-R, 6 October 1932, IV-9, SLOTFOM, ANOM.

³² Letter, 13 Sept 1939, Bao Dai to Général Catroux, 1190, INDO-NF, ANOM.

³³ Letter, Geroges Catroux to Bảo Đại, 23 September 1939, 1190, INDO-NF, ANOM.

began to realize that a reinvigorated monarchy and a peaceful transition from French colonialism to a Vietnamese constitutional monarchy would not happen with France's help. At least not now.

For many others, the *retour à 1884* and the return of Vietnamese royal sovereignty was far from progress. Instead, intellectuals and political activists saw the act as a reversion to an unmodern time that they preferred to leave in the past. It was the politics of Paris, Kunming, Tokyo, London, and Moscow that these Vietnamese looked to as models of inspiration for modern systems of political and social organization, not what they felt was an outmoded and ornamental Huế. When word of a possible Tonkinese reattachment spread earlier in 1932, one such group in Phan Thiết wrote to the Vietnamese leadership of the *Association des Étudiants de Marseille* in France and implored them to protest the action in Paris.³⁴ Ultimately, student lobbying had little effect. Instead, France opposed the reattachment of Tonkin because it would drain the colonial administration of the very sovereign power that it had spent much blood and treasure securing decades earlier.

This final, failed attempt at Tonkinese reintegration led in large part to the end of Bảo Đại's reforms in the 1930s. Ngô Đình Diệm resigned his ministerial post after just a year. In a resignation letter, he reiterated that the current protectorate status of the court remained in total violation of the Patrenotre Treaty. He concluded by noting his disappointment that Bảo Đại's return had not brought about the reintegration of Tonkin to the court at Huế.³⁵ Separate from the court, Vietnamese assemblymen elected to *Chambre des Représentants du Peuple* lodged similar protests through the 1930s. Hà Đăng, president of the *Chambre*, was censured by French authorities in 1934 as he attempted to give a speech calling for a genuine application of the Patrenotre Treaty. Three years later, when the French Guernut Commission arrived in Indochina to report on the plight of

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Lockhart, "Monarchy in Siam and Vietnam," 127.

its peoples, more assertive monarchists and nationalists publicized the 'return to 1884'. Members of the Tonkin's *Chambre des Représentants du Peuple* like Phạm Lê Bổng along with the former mandarin Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, once again advocated legal reforms that would restore the Patrenotre Treaty and the court's sovereignty.³⁶

The issue remained dormant for two years, until Phạm Quỳnh and Bảo Đại's 1939 voyage to France. In Hanoi, news of the trip and the prospect of Tonkinese reintegration was championed by journals that had long advocated a constitutional monarchy for Vietnam's future. Most vocal were *La Patrie Annamite* (edited by Phạm Lê Bổng) as well as *Nam Cường* and *Thời Vụ*. The writers at these publications argued for what they believed was a moderate, but perhaps realistic path out of colonialism. The essence of this tact was to not overturn the colonial relationship, but reset it to the time when French and Vietnamese authority were more commensurate. "If we radically adopt the terms of the 1884 Treaty," *Nam Cường* offered, "France will assist our Emperor to bestow upon us a constitution, a responsible national government, a cabinet that holds power, a united National Chamber like the lower chamber in France, which holds legislative powers and checks the autocratic impulse of the emperor." *Nam Cường* proposed that the existing strictures of colonial rule could actually allow for a modern constitutional monarchy, animated by democratic principles, all while ensuring "there will never be dictatorship again."³⁷

Far louder were the voices of protest. Seventeen journals in Hanoi joined to send a telegram to Minister of Colonies Georges Mandel. Hanoi's *Chambre des Représentants du Peuple* sent a delegation

³⁶ Ibid., 146-49.

³⁷ Quoted in Martina Nguyen, "The Self-Reliant Literary Group (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn): Colonial Modernism in Vietnam, 1932-1941" (PhD Dissertation, University of California-Berkeley, 2012), 171.

of its members to petition the Resident Superior of Tonkin, M. de Testes.³⁸ The most active protests came from Lê Thắng and Hoàng Đạo, two men who would play a central role in opposing Hồ Chí Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam and helping create the alternative State of Vietnam. Lê Thắng decried the maneuver as having been prepared in 1933. He believed that former members of the reformist imperial cabinet that included Ngô Đình Diệm were seeking to take advantage of the outbreak of World War II. More pointed was Hoàng Đạo, one of the preeminent writers of The Self-Reliant Literary Group and a future supporter of the Bảo Đại solution. He attacked the monarchy and mandarinat as outmoded institutions. Instead, it was the French model of a secular, liberal democracy that these writers hoped to see. The idea of a constitutional monarchy, though tolerable for Hoàng Đạo a decade later, now was unpalatable even if it restored a measure of Vietnamese sovereignty.

Members of the Indochinese Communist Party felt just as strongly. Their journal *Notre Voix*, operated by Võ Nguyên Giáp and Trường Chinh, proclaimed the *retour à 1884* to be a retreat to "feudalism that will return our history to an age of medieval darkness and inquisitorial domination." They, moreover, denounced the plan as fascist, thereby allowing them to proclaim that opposing the reintegration of Tonkin was an anti-fascist aim in keeping with Stalin's popular front strategy.³⁹ All these groups thus opposed the unification of Vietnam and the partial remittance of its sovereignty.

³⁸ "Contre le rattachement du Tonkin à l'Annam," *La Tribune Indochinoise* 16 August 1939. The telegram was signed by l'Effort, Dong Phap, Hanoi Soir, Viet Bao, Annam Nouveau, Doi Nay, Notre Voix, Ngày Mới, Dan Bao, Quoc Gia, among others. Members of the *Chambre* that petitioned M. de Testes were M. Nguyen Van Lo, Nguyen Van Hoan, Vu Van An, and Nguyen Van Nghiem, Pham Huy Luc, Le Thang, Bach thai Tong, Pham Huu Chuong, and Paul Sen.

³⁹ "Tonkinois, Annamites du Centre, Cochinchinois, unissons-nous contre le retour à 1884, contre les manoeuvres de la réaction coloniale et les monarchistes anti-nationaux," *Notre Voix* 18 August 1939.

While many of Vietnam's urban political forces supported the continuation of direct French rule in Tonkin as a means toward a more progressive political end, they did not believe that this position contradicted with their belief in a Vietnamese nation. The liberal elite of Tonkin explicitly labeled their opponents – those advocating a constitutional monarchy – as "anti-nationalist monarchists." Unlike the monarchists, the ICP leadership proclaimed that they merely awaited "a genuine unification of the Annamese nation" that took place on political terms that mirrored their agenda for reform.⁴⁰ Members of the Constitutionalist governing elite felt just as strongly. "In our quality as Annamites," the Constitutionalist politician Lê Quảng Liêm declared, "we cannot remain indifferent to this grave event." Though living under a separate juridical and colonial statute, they sympathized with the The Self-Reliant Literary Group's argument that a reversion to 1884 was illiberal and the antithesis of modern.⁴¹

A democratic ideal, one very much in the French model, was inherent within the Annamite according to Đỗ Hữu Thịnh, a co-founder of Nguyễn Văn Thịnh's Indochinese Democratic Party. Đỗ Hữu Thịnh would appear to be an archetype of Franco-Annamese collaboration. Like the future president of the Republic of Cochinchina, he hailed from an elite Cochinchinese family with French citizenship. And like Nguyễn Văn Thịnh, who had served in the French Army during World War I, his brothers Colonel Đỗ Hữu Chấn and Captain Đỗ Hữu Vĩ fought with great distinction in the European theater. The latter died a hero at the Battle of the Somme, not long after remarking to the Governor-General that he was both Annamese and French and therefore

⁴⁰ "Pour une véritable unification de la nation Annamite," *Notre Voix* 18 August 1939.

⁴¹ Đỗ Hữu Thịnh, "L'Idéal Démocratique est inné chez l'Annamite," *L'Echo Annamite*, 11 August 1939, "I am at once a Frenchman and an Annamite. My duty is therefore twice as profound" ["Tôi vừa là người Pháp, vừa là người Nam. Bổn phận tôi lại nặng gấp đôi ngài!"] he was known to have told the French Governor General Albert Sarraut.

his duty to serve was twice as pressing.⁴² Similarly, Đỗ Hữu Thịnh maintained that his and others' national identity as Annamese was not in conflict with their political status as French citizens. In opposing the *retour à 1884*, they were supporting their right to establish a more modern, democratic set of institutions than the mandarin state of yesteryear. This was an issue apart from their belief in a unified Vietnamese nation:

Do not believe, however, that the Annamites refuse to serve their patrimony or that they are not nationalists. They would like to have a central power that unites as one Cochinchina (if possible), Tonkin, and Annam. But they want a constitutional Charter that accords liberties and recognizes the rights of man and citizen.⁴³

Constitutionalists, communists, and progressive nationalist activists all agreed that continued French rule was preferable to an imperfect union, under what they viewed as an archaic regime. Five years later, Nguyễn Văn Thịnh and others would similarly reject Cochinchina's immediate integration to a DRV-led union that they believed was deeply flawed.

World War II and the French Return

In March 1945 General Charles De Gaulle, leader of the Free French Forces, promised the creation of an Indochinese Federation. The speech De Gaulle delivered, crafted in large part by the former colonial administrator Léon Pignon, promised to endow self-rule and political freedom to each of the five Indochinese *kỳ*. Rather than being subjects of an empire, De Gaulle pledged equal membership for the former colonies within a new French Union. Now was the time for "*la nouvelle France*" ["New France"], different from the colonial master of the past. At last, France seemed willing to remit to the Indochinese their sovereignty, ostensibly held in trust for some eighty

⁴² "Phu-công thứ nhất Đông-Dương, Đại-úy l Đỗ-Hữu-Vị," *Tràng An Báo* 24 September 1941.

⁴³ Đỗ Hữu Thịnh, "L'Idéal Democratique est inné chez l'Annamite," *L'Echo Annamite*, 11 August 1939.

years. In Vietnam, conservatives and radicals alike welcomed the proposal. But in time, all would find that France was neither willing to implement the declaration's terms nor its spirit.

At the end of 1945, that much was not yet clear. De Gaulle's Indochinese Federation held out more promise in the eyes of Nguyễn Văn Thinh than the Vietnamese revolution witnessed in Saigon. Able at last to challenge their class enemies, Vietnamese Stalinists had murdered longtime opponents for political power while criminals took advantage of the revolution to profit and commandeer the police powers that had formerly targeted them. As one witness described at the time, the word *độc lập* ["independence"] was heard everywhere. Yet in practice, for many *độc lập* had turned out to mean *đập lột* ["beat" and "steal"].⁴⁴

Close friends and acquaintances of Nguyễn Văn Thinh were among the victims. Nguyễn Thanh Liên, a member of the Indochina Federal Council, was among the first killed. Soon Saigon's most prominent Trotskyists, including Nguyễn Văn Thinh's onetime associate Tạ Thu Thâu, would fall victim to Việt Minh executions. So too did his friend Dương Văn Giáo, who was murdered alongside his uncle Bùi Quang Chiêu. Apart from the calculated executions, the revolution also brought indiscriminate terrorism led by local extremists and bandits targeting at random those with tangential connections to the colonial administration or even foreign merchants like Indian moneylenders.

The Indochinese Democratic Party had remained dormant throughout World War II. In 1939, Governor General Catroux had banned the political parties that had flourished during the Popular Front era, including the Indochinese Democratic Party, and sent notable political figures like Nguyễn Thế Truyên to exile in French African colonies. Nguyễn Văn Thinh remained active however. He served on the Indochinois delegation to Tokyo in 1941 that settled peace following

⁴⁴ "Tiếng dội phương trời, sự thật cần cho dân quê" *Tân Việt* 15 June 1946.

the war that had broken out between Siam and Indochina. Japan brokered the accord, acting in its capacity as occupier of Indochina. All the while, Japanese officials allowed their nominal allies in the Vichy French colonial state to remain in control of daily administration.

Only in early 1945 would the Japanese overthrow the French administration and provide Vietnamese the nominal independence that their Empire had promised in their slogan, "Asia to the Asians." Emperor Bảo Đại was invited to proclaim an Empire of Vietnam and compose a cabinet led by the distinguished scholar Trần Trọng Kim. Some measure of sovereignty was afforded to the Empire, but only in August would it be permitted to unify the three Annamite regions into a single Vietnamese Empire. Midst those changes, the war and Japanese policies had created a devastating famine in Tonkin in the spring of 1945. Dr. Think took charge of the mission to provide assistance to the suffering Tonkinese.⁴⁵ When the second Vietnamese revolution began in August 1945 and the Việt Minh came to power, they initially arrested Nguyễn Văn Think. He escaped the bloody fate of friends. It was apparently the doctor's reputation as the representative of both the International Red Cross for Indochina and the famine relief mission that led to his release.⁴⁶

The end of French rule had opened a new political space to Vietnamese radicals forbidden from colonial politics. The subsequent return of French officialdom re-opened a political space for those excluded from the Việt Minh or who had grown hostile to its character. British and French forces were soon in Saigon to receive the Japanese surrender and restore the *status quo ante bellum*, re-establishing European colonial rule which had ceased to exist for months. Allied troops attacked

⁴⁵ "Divers Faits," *L'Écho Annamite*, 26 February 1941.

⁴⁶ Directeur de la Police et de la Sûreté Federales, Note n. 1305/SG, 20 Oct 1946, 11, Haut Commissariat de France pour l'Indochine - Conseiller Politique [hereafter HCI-CONSPOL], ANOM; "Một kỷ-nguyên mới trong lịch sử Việt Nam," *Saigon*, 27 Aug 1945.

the DRV's rudimentary Việt Minh front, killing and arresting some while forcing the rest out of the capital and into the countryside. To the north, Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist Chinese troops received the Japanese surrender and occupied northern Vietnam. Having worked closely with Vietnamese revolutionaries exiled in China, Chiang's forces were sympathetic to Vietnamese demands for independence and bluntly informed Paris that they would not permit France to re-occupy the north. Though the Chinese occupation severely compromised the DRV's sovereignty, it allowed the fledgling government to retain power in northern Annam and Tonkin until December 1946, when war broke out between French and DRV forces in Hanoi.

The new French High Commissioner for Indochina, Admiral Georges Thierry D'Argenlieu, arrived in November 1945 to implement the terms of General De Gaulle's March declaration. In practice, that did not mean endowing the colonies with "autonomy" in a French Union, but rather restoring a French-dominated Indochinese political space. Yet with Chinese forces protecting the north, Paris was forced to begin negotiating the inclusion of the DRV into the French Union. Seeking to avoid war, Hồ Chí Minh declared he was willing to adhere to the French Union under terms that respected the DRV's independence. For his part, D'Argenlieu hoped that an autonomous DRV state could be managed if it remained one constituent among five federal Indochinese states subordinate to France. For now, colonial troops were confined to Cochinchina, the "pivot" from which French colonials hoped to eventually reassert control over all of Indochina.⁴⁷

Cochinchinese 'Separatism'

⁴⁷ Sûreté Fédérales, "Etude sur la situation politique en Cochinchine," 9 May 1947, 102, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

Doing so required D'Argenlieu and the colonial community to show that there was already an Indochinese federation in the making. A separate Cochinchinese state, on par with the DRV, was the first step necessary to incarnate the pentagonal Indochinese federation. Moreover, a separate state would also prevent politicians in Paris from working around the French colonials to broker an accord with the DRV that recognized a unified Vietnam or forfeited their economic interests.

Saigon's French *colons* and administrators began to look for allies in the political void opened by the violent expulsion of Việt Minh from Saigon. Among the first political parties to emerge was the Autonomous Indochina Party, which the French security services believe had 300 members. Its leader was Đinh Nho Hàng. Known simply as "Commandant Lang," he had spent time in the Free French armed forces, parachuting into Calcutta and China, before returning to Indochina in 1945. He was formerly a school teacher and affiliated with Saigon's communist *La Lutte* group in the late 1930s. At that time, Commandant Lang had also made contact with Maurice Honel in Saigon, the former leader of Paris' *Jeunesses Communistes* when Hồ Chí Minh and Nguyễn Thế Truyên frequented their meetings.⁴⁸

Radicalism now behind him, Commandant Lang joined with members of Saigon's more liberal elite to form the Autonomous Indochina Party. Their demand was simply the honest implementation of the terms declared by General De Gaulle in his March 24, 1945 declaration. He worked closely with a notable engineer, Nguyễn Văn Tỷ, and Doctor Nguyễn Văn Tùng who, according to French intelligence, served as their contact with the exiled emperor Duy Tân. After its formation, the Autonomous Indochina Party published tracts that bitterly criticized the history

⁴⁸ Nguyễn kỳ Nam, *Hồi ký: 1945-1964, Tập II: 1945-1954* (Saigon: Giáp Thìn, 1964), 267; Surete Federale en Cochinchine, envoi n. 16642/S, "Notice de renseignements: Đinh Nho Hàng alias Commandant Lang," 31 December 1946, 123-HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

of French colonial rule. Their underground newspaper, *A → I : Autonomy Toward Independence* contained the weekly column "A word from Satan" which reprinted racist and derogatory comments made by French colonial officials and *colons*. The intended warning was plain: much of the French presence in Indochina was pernicious. While they would support a Cochinchinese state, they would not support a "New France" that reverted to old form, espousing colonial racism and inequality.⁴⁹

The Autonomous Indochina Party warned that Vietnamese needed to have a role in political governance. While willing to engage in "free and loyal collaboration," the leaders wrote, "we may even say intimate association. But neither the one nor the other of these forms of working together is unilateral." They warned that "the colonial pact must become a thing of the past and we must take a new point of departure, a true rejuvenation." The warnings were frequent, but the majority of their editorial content was devoted to a positive view of a new Franco-Vietnamese partnership in which Paris supported an autonomous, and soon independent, Indochina. In this era, Vietnamese would have access to all administrative positions, possess their own assembly of representatives, live free from metropolitan rule, and be empowered to enact their own socioeconomic reforms.⁵⁰

Commandant Lang, however, did not see himself as the leader of this movement. It was Vĩnh San, better known as the exiled former Emperor Duy Tân, that they proposed lead their movement.⁵¹ In 1916, the French had sent Duy Tân into exile on the African island of Réunion

⁴⁹ See for example "Une parole de Satan," *Indochina Autonome* n. 3, 9 December 1945, in 123 HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

⁵⁰ "Vers la collaboration," *Indochina Autonome*, n. 27, 15 September 1946.

⁵¹ Note 610-SG, Surete Federales, 6 February 1946, 222-HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

following a foiled rebellion that took place when he was just sixteen years old. He joined his father, Emperor Thành Thái, who French authorities had exiled there a decade earlier. In Réunion, Duy Tân grew fond of the French ideals that were absent in Indochina.

When Hitler's forces marched on France, Duy Tân joined the Free French army and requested over and over again to be deployed in Europe. He was finally shipped off to Germany in the war's final days. With the outbreak of fighting in Indochina, Duy Tân proposed that French authorities permit his return to Annam as a potential solution. "Vĩnh San is nothing," he pleaded with his French interlocutors, but "Duy Tân has *valeur*. It's this *valeur* which can serve my country and yours." It was through his person, as the former leader of a rebellion against France and then a soldier for it, that Duy Tân believed Vietnam could be united. "My love for France was in perfect harmony with my duty to our country" he told the Vietnamese soldiers who were also serving in the French forces.⁵²

The Autonomous Indochina Party intended to animate Duy Tân's complicated sentiment. If the March 1945 declaration was actually implemented, they argued in their journal, France and Indochina could indeed live in harmony. General De Gaulle would endorse the return of Duy Tân to Indochina, only for the former emperor to die in a plane crash en route to Saigon in December 1945. Without Duy Tân, the Autonomous Indochina Party lost its place of primacy.

Nguyễn Văn Thinh and a revived Indochinese Democratic Party rose in their place. By February 1946 he had become the most prominent Vietnamese proponent of what some Saigonese journalists began to call "separatism" [*phân ly*].⁵³ In contrast to the national framework of Bảo

⁵² Conseiler Politique, "Vinh San: Prince d'Annam et Officer Français," 25 January 1946, 225 HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

⁵³ "Đây mới là tiếng nói của dân," *Tin Diển* 20 February 1946.

Đài's Empire of Vietnam (1945) and Hồ Chí Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Nguyễn Văn Thinh publicly supported the resumption of the Indochinese Federation.

In a long column published in a journal read by Saigon's *colon* community, he played to his audience, calling for a restoration of Indochina's five constituent pays (Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina, Laos, and Cambodia). Coming on the heels of the revolution's soaring rhetoric, the doctor took the uninspiring position that "complete" independence was an elusive concept in the current international environment. Instead he proposed autonomy for Indochina within the French Union, in the way that Canada or Australia resided within the British Commonwealth: possessing their own parliaments, budgets, and militaries but linked to the metropole via economic and cultural ties. This was the same position that he had advocated for a decade now, his fellow party members remarked. Nguyễn Văn Thinh also registered his distrust of mass-based movements, and his support for the mediating role played by educated elites. He was fond of invoking the Josephist principle "all for the people, and nothing by the people," a sentiment likely strengthened by the upheaval of 1945.⁵⁴

Much of this was exactly what Admiral D'Argenlieu wanted to hear. He likely agreed in principle to the Democratic Party's talk of independence and could tolerate his talk of commonwealth status. But whereas Nguyễn Văn Thinh believed that independence would come in a matter of months, French colonials thought of it as an aspirational end, decades away. D'Argenlieu and his political counselors thought they could manage the gulf between these visions. Certainly this was better than the alternative Autonomous Indochina Party and its plans for a reunified Vietnam under a restored Duy Tân-led constitutional monarchy. And unlike Commandant Lang's more radical background and his direct critiques of colonial inequality,

⁵⁴ "Le Programme du Parti Démocrate Indochinois," *Paris-Saigon* 6 March 1946.

Nguyễn Văn Thinh focused his Republican critiques on the monarchy and mandarinat. For now, the doctor remained on good terms with influential members of the French *colon* settler community.⁵⁵

When Admiral D'Argenlieu created a Cochinchina Consultative Council in Saigon in February 1946, he turned to Nguyễn Văn Thinh. It was an attempt, in many ways, to turn back time and recreate the model of colonial politics that existed in the 1920s-1930s. Yet unlike even that earlier era of limited suffrage, D'Argenlieu nominated all the Council's members. Four of its members were French, including the lawyer Joseph Béziat and the pharmacist M. Clogne, as well as the *métis* mixed-race planters William Bazé and M. Gressier. The eight remaining members were Vietnamese.⁵⁶ Among those eight councilmen, four came from Nguyễn Văn Thinh's Democratic Party and one from the Autonomous Indochina Party.

Vietnamese Members of the Consultative Council⁵⁷

| | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Indochinese Democratic Party | 1. Dr. Nguyễn Văn Thinh |
| | 2. Trần Thiện Vàng |
| | 3. Trần Tấn Phát |
| | 4. Nguyễn Thành Lập |
| Cochinchinese Popular Front | 5. Nguyễn Tấn Cường |
| 'Autonomous Indochina' | 6. Nguyễn Văn Tỷ |
| Independence Party | 7. Lê Văn Định |
| | 8. Nguyễn Văn Thạch |

Some of the Frenchmen on the council sought Cochinchina's transformation into a French possession. The creation of the French Union shifted the status of former colonies into overseas

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Philippe Devilliers, *Histoire du Viêt-Nam de 1940 à 1952* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1953), 110-111.

⁵⁷ Hoàng Cơ Thụy, *Việt Sử Khảo Luận - Cuốn 4* (Paris: Nam Á, 2002), 1924.

territoire and *département*, with the latter to be codified as part of De Gaulle's new Republic. This could potentially render Cochinchina, like Cannes or Clermont-Ferrand, into French land subject to French law. Within Saigon's *colon* community, a number of prominent French citizens advocated for the inclusion of Cochinchina into the French Union as a *département*. At the very least, they hoped for Cochinchina to remain a separate state within Indochina, thereby codifying their superior status within a federal Indochina and preventing the formation of a unified DRV state that would lessen, if not abrogate, their colonial privileges. Wealthy French citizens including William Bazé, Henry Lachevrotière, and Joseph Béziat formed the core of this lobby, and had worked throughout late 1945 and early 1946 to convince D'Argenlieu to form a separate state in Cochinchina, apart from the DRV.

The French lobby was joined in this effort by a Cochinchinese lobby. Some of these elite Cochinchinese also hoped that their *kỳ* would become a French *département* with full French legal representation.⁵⁸ But this minority view was overshadowed by the emergence of two groups in the last days of 1945: the conservative Cochinchinese Popular Front [*Mặt trận Bình Dân Nam Kỳ*] and the liberal Cochinchinese Popular Movement [*Phòng trào Bình Dân Nam kỳ*]. Both were united in their aim to protect Cochinchinese rights within a federal Indochinese framework. The more active organization was the rightist Popular Front, which grouped together Vietnamese functionaries and members of the upper middle class. Its leader was counselor Nguyễn Tấn Cường. The Popular Front organized popular demonstrations in Saigon, but also in Cần Thơ, Sa Đéc, and other

⁵⁸ Some elite-led protests did call for Cochinchina to become a French *département*. SESAG, BR n. 481, 6 April 1946, Valeur: B/2, 207, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

provincial capitals in the Mekong Delta, each bringing together anywhere from several thousand to upwards of ten thousand demonstrators.

Participants in these Popular Front rallies who shouted "Down with Tonkinese terrorism!" and "Cochinchina to the Cochinchinese!" Many likely did so out of genuine anger at the violence of the Việt Minh forces or the emergence of the centralized, northern DRV state. But the Popular Front also paid small sums to peasants to fill out their rallies. Others likely attended to take in the entertainment that accompanied the demonstrations, including boxing matches and raffles. In Saigon, the demonstrations took place in front of key French administration buildings, where demonstrators chanted "Establish a Cochinchinese Government now!"⁵⁹

The Republic of Cochinchina

The efforts of both lobbies paid off in the spring of 1946 when D'Argenlieu authorized the Cochinchina Council to form an Autonomous Republic of Cochinchina [*Nam kỳ Cộng hòa Tự trị*]. The Council elected one of their own members as president: Dr. Nguyễn Văn Thinh. His cabinet drew upon an array of moderate proponents of Franco-Vietnamese collaboration, most holding French citizenship. Several of his choices rejected the offer, including Dr. Nguyễn Văn Hưởng, who joined the Việt Minh and went on to serve as Minister of Health of the DRV. But in 1946, the contrast was not yet as clear. As a colleague and friend of Nguyễn Văn Thinh, he declined to

⁵⁹ "Một cuộc biểu tình ở Saigon," *Kiến Thiết*, no. 1, 15 April 1946; "Cuộc biểu-tình của Mặt-Trận Bình-Dân Nam-Kỳ," *Kiến Thiết*, no. 14, 2 May 1946.

join the Republic and warned him "You are going against the course of history, please reconsider."⁶⁰

In the wake of the August Revolution, Nguyễn Văn Thỉnh's actions thus seemed far from an accomplishment to his peers in Saigon. Yet across the Indian Ocean, in Madagascar, news of the Republic's founding appeared much different. The anti-colonial Cao Đài leader Phạm Công Tắc, whom French authorities had sent into exile during World War II, greeted the news as a major step forward.⁶¹ For decades, moderate and even radical Vietnamese activists had demanded an autonomous government. It had arrived at last. But when Phạm Công Tắc later told his story to the Hoà Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ – an active participant in the revolution – he was sternly reminded that his memory was false, that France had founded the "puppet government" in Cochinchina to betray the Vietnamese people. The revolution had raised expectations in ways that would not have been possible without the break in French control. The Republic of Cochinchina was a success by the 1940 standards Phạm Công Tắc had left, but a failure by those he returned to in 1947.

One of those still ascribing to 1940s standards was Nguyễn Phú Khai, the appointed Minister of Propaganda. He was the Republic's most senior member, a pioneer of Saigon's political press, associate of leading Constitutionalist like Bùi Quang Chiêu, and the organizer of economic nationalist boycotts in the 1920s that targeted Chinese merchant monopolies.⁶² The final cabinet

⁶⁰ Phan Phú Yên, "Nhà trí thức tiêu biểu của Nam Bộ - Bác sĩ Nguyễn Văn Hưởng," *Kiến Thức Ngày Nay*, no. 152, (October 1994), 36

⁶¹ Huỳnh Văn Trí (Mười Trí), "Công cuộc đi Tây Ninh," 9 March 1947, 152, Phòng Ủy Bản Hành Chính Nam Bộ [Records of the Southern Administrative Committee, hereafter PUBHCNB], TTLT3.

⁶² Surete de la Cochinchine, "Assemblée de Cochinchine, Séance du 7 Novembre après-midi," n. 13997-S, 9 November 1946, 96, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

also included individuals like Minister of Defense Colonel Nguyễn Văn Xuân, who saw much to admire in France but was more so determined that the Vietnamese should finally receive their autonomy and eventual independence. Doctor Thinh also included figures favored by the French colonial administration and *colons*, like Minister of Justice Trần Văn Tỷ, who remained mistrusted by even some of the Republic's other ministers and detested by the Việt Minh sympathizers.

Through the spring, Dr. Thinh had struck the right tone with the French press. Outwardly, he appeared an acceptable *collaborateur* to most French colonials and administrators. But privately, he spoke differently. By 1946, French security services had recruited a source within the Indochinese Democratic Party to report on their strategy sessions. The party members agreed that they would take up De Gaulle's March 1945 declaration for an Indochinese federation as "a basis of departure." Later they could seek a "fusion" of interests between all three *kỳ*: Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin. They would resist any maneuver to restore the monarchy and reintegrate Cochinchina into its domain. Instead, Dr. Thinh and his party hoped to reduce the French presence while elevating those Vietnamese who comprised "an elite of competent technicians dedicated to the interests of the county." The means to do so, they believed, was a representative Cochinchinese democracy with universal suffrage. Men and women aged twenty and older would elect notables who would in turn elect a provincial assembly that would send representatives, proportional to population, to a statewide parliament.

The French *colons* would be able to elect their own representatives in this plan. But their seats would also be proportional to the small French population in Cochinchina, thus drastically reducing French influence on the political process. Though Dr. Thinh and other councilmen held French citizenship, like the emperor Duy Tân, they did not conceive of themselves as French here.

Previously, their French citizenship had been a political status, one they felt no longer relevant, and not in conflict with their identity as Vietnamese.⁶³

It was on this contentious point that Saigon's journalists would question the doctor. One morning that spring, reporters from a moderate newspaper arrived at Nguyễn Văn Thinh's door, asking to know his opinion on the current state of the "Vietnamese homeland." Dr. Thinh emphasized that there was a way to work through the French toward a restoration – not of Indochina and its five *pays* – but the Vietnamese nation:

On the state of *Việt Nam* now, I feel similar to the statement Commissioner D'Argenlieu made that "The extended Vietnamese family [*đại gia đình*] will let Vietnamese decide for themselves." I also want this. But how too do we avoid being shamed by foreigners? First we must express a noble spirit to let them understand the Vietnamese race is one race with a glorious history, which is able to rule its nuclear families [*tiểu gia đình*], meaning that we must show we are capable of ruling an autonomous Cochinchina.⁶⁴

In this formulation, the Republic of Cochinchina, one of Vietnam's three nuclear families, would demonstrate that the Vietnamese were indeed able stewards of their extended family, *Việt Nam*. At the present moment, the doctor continued, they must pass through autonomy in order to attain independence. "We should trust the promises that France declared before the world about the fate of *Việt Nam*," Nguyễn Văn Thinh explained, which required cooperating with the French. On the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, he critiqued it as a "disorderly government" guilty of errors and prolonging the people's suffering. "In my opinion, Cochinchina should separate. I also know that the good sense of the Vietnamese people [*người Việt Nam*], won't let them forget their ancestors and origins. But reason forces Cochinchinese society to seek separation in the current

⁶³ Direction de la Police et de la Surete Federales, Bordereau d'Envoi n. 41879-P/D, 'Projet constitutionnel du Parti Démocrate,' 25 Jan 1946, 222, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

⁶⁴ "Cuộc phòng-vấn của Tân Việt: Từ vua Tự Đức đến vua Bảo-Đại - Hay là triều-đình Huế đã hai lần gây thảm hoạ cho xứ Nam-kỳ," *Tân Việt* 11 February 1946.

situation, because Cochinchina needs to rapidly recover. Autonomy is only a way to preserve [*bảo thủ*] the rights of Cochinchinese."⁶⁵

The journalist concluded by asking Nguyễn Văn Thỉnh about the opinions of his colleagues in Saigon's political scene who were demanding full "independence" and the unification of Vietnam's three *kỳ* at once. "With a discreet smile," Dr. Thỉnh replied. "Worrying about demanding independence and the unification of the three kỳ" he said before pausing, "that worry," he paused again, "my colleagues are too farsighted!" [*ông bạn đồng nghiệp của tôi thiệt quá lo xa ...* !].⁶⁶ Unification and full independence, in other words, were not yet in their grasp. They should instead worry about the more pressing challenges facing them.

What worried Nguyễn Văn Thỉnh and his allies at this time was the prospect that the *colons* would indeed turn Cochinchina into a *département* of Paris. The French security services learned that soon after his election, Dr. Thỉnh had privately assembled some of his cabinet ministers and told them that their actions were to be animated by the slogan "*Ne vendez pas la Cochinchine aux Français*" [Do not betray Cochinchina to the French].⁶⁷ Echoing this sentiment were the few Vietnamese newspapers that remained neutral or supportive of the new Republic of Cochinchina. *Renaissance* [*Phục Hưng*] was the most vocal. Its primary columnist was the writer J.B. Đông, who went on to work closely with the Bình Xuyên paramilitary organization that joined the Việt Minh and then the State of Vietnam. J.B. Đông warned his readers that the French members of the Cochinchina Council sought to replace Nguyễn Văn Thỉnh with a French president and eventually transform Cochinchina into a French *département*. The only thing preventing this was Dr. Thỉnh and his

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Surete Federale, n. 7.599-S, 18 July 1946, 96, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

cabinet, he argued, making it imperative to rally behind him.⁶⁸ In 1948, the preeminent journalist Phan Văn Thiết – a vocal proponent of unification and opponent of the Republic – would remind his readers that in his conversations with Nguyễn Văn Thinh, the doctor had emphasized that the Republic of Cochinchina was a "means" to avoid the *départementalisation* of Cochinchina and not an "end."⁶⁹ By late summer, just three months into the Republic's existence, *Renaissance* warned its readers that "They want to put the colonial yoke back on Cochinchina," alluding to the French community's neocolonialist aims.⁷⁰

The colonial administration began to realize almost immediately that Nguyễn Văn Thinh and his supporters did not support "separatism" in the same sense as them. The Republic was a provisional government, in their conception, intent on winning the same level of autonomy for occupied Cochinchina that Paris had recognized for the Tonkin-based DRV. Even newspapers supportive of the Republic hailed it only as a "provisional" [*lâm thời*] government.⁷¹ In its rural campaigns, the Indochina Democratic Party denounced acts of terrorism that they accused the northern DRV of committing, but stressed that "the three territories [Cochinchina, Annam, Tonkin] are brothers born from the same mother."⁷² A notable former Constitutionalist and

⁶⁸ "Những ông nghị Nam kỳ tán thành một dự-an ky hời để đem trở lại chế-độ thực-dân," and "Người ta muốn trông ách thực-dân trở lại xứ Nam-kỳ," both in *Phục-Hưng* 2 September 1946.

⁶⁹ Phan Văn Thiết, "Qu'on n'exploite pas le nom du Docteur Thinh!" *Tiếng Dội* 17 November 1948, translated copy in 96, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

⁷⁰ "Những ông nghị Nam kỳ tán thành một dự-an ky hời để đem trở lại chế-độ thực-dân," and "Người ta muốn trông ách thực-dân trở lại xứ Nam-kỳ," both in *Phục-Hưng* 2 September 1946.

⁷¹ One of the government's strongest supporters in the press called the new state the Provisional Republic Government [*Chính phủ Cộng hoà Lâm thời*], "Nguyên-văn bản Hiệp-ước phụ pháp-nam-kỳ," *Phục Hưng*, 5 June 1946.

⁷² Surete federales, Note no. 4592-S/G, 'Parti Démocrate indo-chinois,' 10 July 1946, 222, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

supporter of the Republic, Huỳnh Văn Chín, clarified that the three *kỳ* would retain administrative autonomy, and each possess their own unique characteristics, but "we still remember that together they are one Việt Nam union, that is, together there is one Vietnamese society."⁷³ At the same time, President Nguyễn Văn Thỉnh promised his cabinet that he would not to resign until he obtained the same rights for Cochinchina as France had accorded to Tonkin.⁷⁴

Among the other "separatist" parties, the majority favored Vietnamese unification. The Councilman Nguyễn Văn Tỹ, who also helped lead the Autonomous Indochina Party, openly proclaimed that the party was in favor of the unification of the three Vietnamese *kỳ* in the summer of 1946. The current stage of autonomy was an acceptable, temporary path towards that aim, he claimed. At the same time, the left-leaning Cochinchina Popular Movement declared itself in favor of forming a "United Republic of Vietnam." Their leader, 'Nicolas' Trần Cửu Chấn, would go on to



Figure 10: (Nicolas) Trần Cửu Chấn.

lead the State of Vietnam's School of Administration in Dalat. In 1946, he and his party of intellectuals hoped to preserve the Republic of Cochinchina as one member of a tripartite federal system that afforded each *kỳ* their own state parliaments and a unitary federal senate.⁷⁵ Observing this development, the French colonial administration and their allies in the rightist Cochinchina Popular Front mislabeled his Cochinchina Popular Movement as pro-Việt Minh.

⁷³ "... ta vẫn nhớ rằng chung một đoàn thể Việt-Nam tức là chung một xã-hội Việt-Nam ta là được." in "Kiến-thiết Xã-Hội," *Kiến-Thiết*, n.18, 7 May 1946.

⁷⁴ Directeur de la Police et de la Surete Federales, Note n. 1305/SG, 20 Oct 1946, 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

⁷⁵ Sureté Fédérales, n. 5664/SG, 12 August 1946, 127, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

High Commissioner D'Argenlieu and his political counselor Jean Cédile soon learned that the Republic's centrist supporters were also sympathetic to some of the Việt Minh's aims, even though detesting elements of its leadership and its tactics.⁷⁶ Privately, contacts of the Stalinist journalist Nguyễn Văn Trấn, an important DRV political commissar, reached out to Dr. Thinh and presented him with documents on the Việt Minh policy platform. In response, Nguyễn Văn Trấn recalled in his memoir, Nguyễn Văn Thinh replied "I agree with your policy. But I am not fond of your methods and actions."⁷⁷

Publicly, Vietnamese members of the Cochinchina Council distinguished between the Việt Minh and its leadership. That summer, the wealthy but progressive Võ Đông Phát gave an impassioned speech before the Cochinchina Council in defense of the Việt Minh foot soldier. They were patriots, according to Võ Đông Phát, who were resisting an occupation. In his opinion, this was no different than De Gaulle's Free French who had resisted the German occupation. He emphasized, moreover, that among the Việt Minh were their brothers and children.

From the start, the war was always a family affair. The brother of Lê Văn Hoạch, one of the Republic's ministers, was chief of a Việt Minh division outside the deltaic city of Cần Thơ.⁷⁸ Even President Nguyễn Văn Thinh's nephew, Nguyễn Tự Do, was serving on the DRV's Southern Administrative Committee, which set policies for Cochinchina.⁷⁹ Dr. Thinh's son-in-law remained

⁷⁶ For the break between the Cochinchina Popular Front and Popular Movement, which were once allied, see: Surete Federales, Note no. 3496-S/G, 'Propagande du Front Populaire de Cochinchine, 2 June 1946, 222, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

⁷⁷ "Tôi đồng ý với đường lối nhưng không xiêu lòng về phương pháp hành động," in Nguyễn Văn Trấn, *Viết Cho Mẹ và Quốc hội* (Văn Nghệ, 1995), 40-41, <http://www.vietnamvanhien.net/VietChoMevaQuocHoi.pdf> (accessed 15 October 2017).

⁷⁸ Note pour M. le Commissaire de la République en Cochinchine, No. 4.173-CP/AP/2, 21 November 1948, 778, Haut Commissariat de France pour l'Indochine [hereafter HCI], ANOM.

⁷⁹ "Ôm ba trái bị đến tặng cụ Hồ," *Phục Hưng* n. 239, 11 November 1946.

a partisan of the Việt Minh, working closely with Nguyễn Văn Sâm.⁸⁰ The sister-in-law of Councilman Nguyễn Văn Ty – who went on to serve as a minister in the State of Vietnam and Republic of Vietnam – would soon marry her fiancé: the Stalinist Trần Ngọc Danh. He was both the brother of the ICP founder and currently serving as the DRV representative in Paris. Furthermore, Nguyễn Văn Ty's brother-in-law served in the DRV's first National Assembly and died fighting with DRV troops in Cochinchina.⁸¹ And the daughter of the fiercely anti-communist Under Secretary of State for Security, Nguyễn Văn Tâm, had joined the Việt Minh in 1945. She eventually fled the movement after being punished for singing *La Marseillaise*. Nguyễn Văn Tâm's son-in-law, however, remained dedicated to the DRV cause, eventually going north in 1954.⁸²

"I ask you to pardon them," Võ Đông Phát asked the French councilmen and administrators, "because in all countries there are patriots." He continued: "It's you who have inculcated in our youth its beautiful ideal of liberty," in calling for a mass pardon.⁸³ That such close families and friends could choose different sides illustrated, as President Thinh had said, that all Vietnamese were largely united in their aims, and only divided over the means to arrive there.

⁸⁰ Letter, Nguyễn Phú Khai to Nguyễn Văn Xuân, 11 February 1947, 89, 174QO, MAE.

⁸¹ Thái Văn Lung was the brother-in-law. The French misreported that it was Nguyễn Văn Ty's daughter who married Trần Ngọc Danh, in "Notice sur Tran-Ngoc-Danh," 11 May 1949, XIV-3, SLOTFOM, ANOM.

⁸² See the memoir of Nguyễn Văn Tâm's daughter, Marie Tran Dinh Hoê, *Mille Lueurs Roses, Mille Bonheurs. Une déracinée* (Villejuif, Club Culturel des Vietnamiens, 2007), 65-70, 108.

⁸³ Service de la Surete federal en Cochinchine, n. 11888-S, 12 October 1946, 312, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

Artful though Võ Đông Phát's reasoning was, his speech won little sympathy among the French. They were unwilling to brook any comparison between their resistance and the Vietnamese. It lacked almost equal appeal among hardline Vietnamese in the Cochinchinese Popular Front, in particular its three most prominent supporters: Minister of Justice Trần Văn Tỹ, head of security Nguyễn Văn Tâm, and Saigon's security chief Nguyễn Tấn Cường (who was married to the cousin of Jean Lacouture, a French journalist and critic of Paris' Indochina policies).⁸⁴ All three were included in his cabinet because they were favored by the French administrators and *colons*, and they were effective administrators and energetic propagandists. There were also few other choices at Nguyễn Văn Thinh's disposal. Using tracts, demonstrations, and the Popular Front's official paper, *The Call*, they spread both truths about the Việt Minh's abuses, but just as often inflammatory rumors. In the spring of 1946, *The Call* would falsely claim

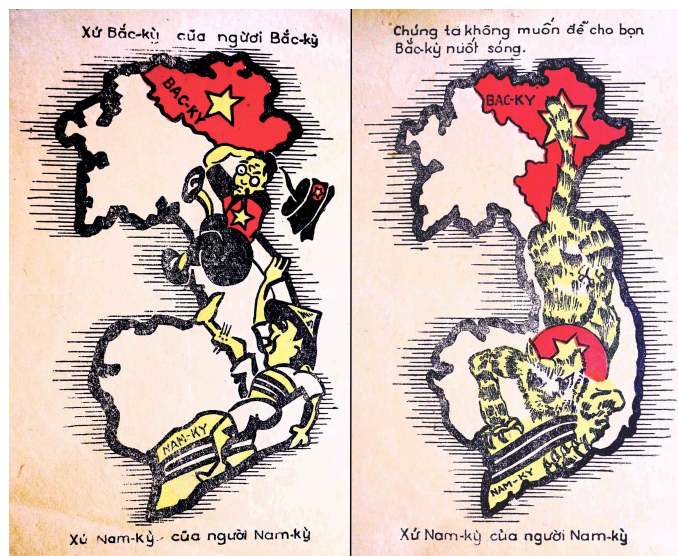


Figure 11: "The north belongs to northerners. The south belongs to southerners." Leaflets likely distributed by the Cochinchina Popular Front.

⁸⁴ Sylvie Crossman, *Jean Lacouture: la Biographie du biographe* (Paris: Éditions Balland, 1993), 42.

that the DRV was beginning to massacre Cochinchinese living in Tonkin.⁸⁵ Their tone contrasted with that of President Thinh, Minister of Defense Nguyễn Văn Xuân, Councilman Nguyễn Văn Ty, and other moderate members, ultimately preventing the Republic from making a convincing appeal to rally Việt Minh soldiers.

Sensationalist though it was, the Popular Front's propaganda invoked the Việt Minh's very real targeted campaign of terrorism. Through 1946, the Việt Minh attempted to eliminate their sovereign competitors: the Republic's leadership and its supporters. President Thinh survived three attempts on his life. Nguyễn Văn Cường survived two attacks and his adjoint survived one himself. The Việt Minh also launched grenade attacks on the Popular Front's party headquarters in downtown Saigon, but more often than not, simply claimed the lives of innocent civilians. More targeted measures did succeed on occasion. Two Vietnamese members of the Cochinchina Council were murdered by Việt Minh assassins that spring, dealing the government a significant blow on the eve of its inauguration. One of the murdered men, Nguyễn Văn Thạch, was killed by two Tonkinese assassins, which only further exacerbated tensions. It did not matter that Nguyễn Văn Thạch was in favor of the unification of Vietnam.⁸⁶

Despite their unpopularity, the need to restore security in Saigon made Nguyễn Văn Tâm and Nguyễn Tân Cường valuable members of the Republic. Effective practitioners of counterinsurgency, they worked with another Cochinchinese Popular Front leader named Nguyễn Phong Tân. Together, they weaponized the party. It now possessed paramilitary cells that began

⁸⁵ *Tiếng Gọi*, 7 June 1946, translated copy held in Service de Surete, Cochinchina, n. 5457-S, 7 June 1946, 4102, Archives de l'Indochine : sous-série 10 H (1867 - 1956) [hereafter 10H], SHD.

⁸⁶ "Chronique Judiciaire," *Sud* n. 23, 2 October 1946; "Một tên khủng-bố bị bắn chết," *Kiến Thiết* 19 April 1946; "Nouvel attentat terroriste contre un journaliste," *Journal de Saigon*, no. 190, 18 May 1946; "Terroristes assassins," *Le Journal de Saigon* 5 June 1946.

to root out Việt Minh networks in Saigon and the provincial capitals. They were aided by Nguyễn Văn Rót, who as the president of Saigon's *La ligue de Foot-ball*, drew on his connections to Saigon's youth to build out its ranks.⁸⁷

More than restoring security, they sought to dampen the appeal of the Việt Minh by summer's end. French and DRV officials announced had reached an accord in March 1946 to finalize the question of whether Cochinchina would exist as a separate state or be subsumed into the national DRV government. The compromise allowed for continued French control of Cochinchina, but established that a referendum would soon be held to resolve the question of unification. Nguyễn Phong Tân noted that in this battle between competing sovereignties, the vote was a question of life or death for the Republic. "Faced with terrorists," he told his colleagues, "we must oppose terrorism, otherwise we mind as well pack up and hand over power to them."⁸⁸

In the countryside, Popular Front party cells were comprised of those most affected by the Việt Minh: village notables, police officers, and businessmen.⁸⁹ The party headquarters came to operate as an informal prison. Saigonese disgusted by the Việt Minh's wanton abuse of power would not find the Popular Front much more redeeming. Though they did not engage in executions, like their opponents the Việt Minh, Nguyễn Tấn Cường and Nguyễn Phong Tấn found utility in summary arrests, extralegal detention, and torture.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Divers n. 68, "Front Cochinchinois," 15 April 1948, 4201, 10H, SHD.

⁸⁸ SESAG, BR n. 10052, 16 July 1946, 4201, 10H, SHD.

⁸⁹ SESAG, BR n. 10528, 21 August 1946, 4201, 10H, SHD.

⁹⁰ Directeur de la Police et de la Surete Federales en Indochine, Note. n.4883/SG, 20 July 1946, 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

The Republic and its Competitors

From its inception, the Republic was just one sovereign among several. Cochinchina was home to several states, all attempting to exercise their own authority. The editors of the Saigonese newspaper *Vietnamese Pen* [*Việt Bút*] observed that at summer's end, the individual in Saigon was subject to several different authorities. The creation of the Republic had merely layered one more state onto Cochinchina, which was still subject to the French federal state, with its own security and administrative services.⁹¹ Added to that, the Popular Front exercised parallel authorities separate from the Cochinchinese police. And opposing them was the heterogeneous Việt Minh with its own menagerie of administrative organizations that only further parceled the Republic's sovereignty.

Midst this confusing scene, Nguyễn Văn Thinh's cabinet struggled to clearly delineate its enemy. Their substantive critiques of the centralization and corruption in the Nguyễn Dynasty and the DRV government's terrorism tended to emphasize the northern character of each. Even the critiques of the novelist and presidential secretary Hồ Biểu Chánh struggled to find their target. In one editorial he accused the DRV of assassinating their political opponents and restoring to terrorism. But in concluding, he comparing Cochinchina to the eldest daughter of France. Sophisticated and educated, he noted that it would be foolish for France to marry 'her' off to an unpleasant suitor like Tonkin.⁹² Yet Hồ Biểu Chánh was not a separatist. He himself has written

⁹¹ "Responsabilité du Gouvernement," *Việt Bút* 6 October 1946, translated copy in 96, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

⁹² In one article, Hồ Biểu Chánh mocked the DRV's complaints about losing their "blood and flesh" in Cochinchina. "While we want to declare ardent affection for Cochinchina, they scatter propaganda tracts, they mobilize troops throughout Cochinchina, they shoot to death anyone who holds a different view, they created a horrible terrorist movement in Cochinchina, and all this is done

of the "patriotism" [*lòng ái quốc*] of "Việt Nam" years earlier.⁹³ While his seemingly separatist rhetoric in 1946 may have reassured and accommodated the French community, it failed to single out the DRV leadership and left the Republic highly vulnerable to charges that their state project was anti-nationalist and traitorous.

The DRV understood far better that marking their Republican opponents as enemies was necessary to negate those competing sovereign claims and consolidate their own. Thus, even the DRV security forces could acknowledge that all the states were attempting to trade with the same currency. "The people of Cochinchina, including the *Việt gian* [race traitors], are unanimous in their support for patriotism," noted once such DRV report.⁹⁴ Publicly, the DRV was direct and effective in denouncing the Republican leaders as enemies, sentencing them to death for their collaboration with France. During the DRV's "Cochinchina Day" celebration of its southern insurgency, official newspapers detailed how local authorities organized festive games that mimicked military maneuvers and comedic plays that featured the mock execution of Nguyễn Văn Thinh.⁹⁵ More important than legal decrees, the DRV had embedded its sovereign discourse in daily life.

Each morning the Saigonese reader could find newspapers and journals publishing articles that critiqued the Republic and assailed President Thinh. Outside of *New Vietnam* and *Renaissance*, the average person was far more likely to read the numerous centrist and leftist Vietnamese papers

in the name of the people's freedom!" "Cụ Hồ Biểu Chánh với vấn-đề Nam Kỳ," *Phục Hưng* n. 221, 19 October 1946.

⁹³ Hồ Văn Trung [Hồ Biểu Chánh], "Lòng Ái Quốc," *Nam kỳ Tuần báo* 26 November 1942.

⁹⁴ Translated document, "Rapport politique sur la situation du NAM BO à la vielle du Référendum," Cochinchine, Surete Interieure [DRV], BR n. 414/A, 3 May 1946, 207, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

⁹⁵ "Ngày Nam-bộ tai thu dô: Toàn thê đông bào đều kiên quyết ủng hô Nam-bộ [sic]," *Độc Lập*, 11 June 1946.

that were critical of the Republic or offered up glowing profiles of the DRV leadership. The two most popular newspapers, *Cochinchina* [*Nam kỳ*] and *Tin Điện* were openly in favor of unification and opposed to the Republic. The first was operated by 'Nicolas' Trần Cửu Chấn's Popular Movement and used its daily circulation of 14,000 to critique President Thinh and push him toward their party's stance. *Tin Điện*, however, boasted the highest readership. Its journalists, led by Trần Tấn Quốc and Nguyễn Kỳ Nam, were pointed in their criticisms of the Republic and denounced its very existence.

While *Tin Điện* serialized pro-Việt Minh works like Võ Nguyên Giáp's *The Liberated Zone* [*Khu Giải Phóng*] they were also willing to document the errors and crimes committed by the Việt Minh. Meanwhile, socialists among the French community like one M. Moreteau and his journal *Sud*, lamented "*Assez de Sang*" ["Enough Blood"] and championed an end to all conflict and Cochinchina's unification with the DRV. Other journals adopted a more violent tone in their critiques of the Republic, published glowing profiles of the DRV leaders or reproducing DRV propaganda.⁹⁶

Though the Republic did have a statute for the press, it did not institute a prior review for publication. And only once did it exercise that power. After a particularly inflammatory article appeared in *Tin Điện* in August, the Republic suspended its publishing license for one week. Otherwise the press operated freely, even in their praise for the DRV and criticisms of Nguyễn Văn Thinh. That angered some Cochinchinese councilmen who argued that their government

⁹⁶ For example see issues 1 and 2 of *Lên Đảng* in November 1946, which relayed news of the DRV assembly, published profiles of Hồ Chí Minh and Võ Nguyên Giáp, published the writing of the southern DRV official Phạm ngọc Thuần, and severely critiqued the Republic. "Báo 'Tin Điện' xuất bản ở Sài-Gòn trích đăng một đoạn trong cuốn 'Khu Giải Phóng' của ông Võ Nguyên Giáp," *Cứu Quốc* 24 October 1946; Service de la Surete federale en Cochinchine, "Notice sur les activités politiques en Cochinchine, pendant le mois d'Aout 1946," Undated, 96, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

needed more extensive powers, on par with the DRV. The state needed to "be respected and obeyed" one councilman complained at a humid summer council session, "if not what are we doing here? We'd be better off napping."

President Thinh and Minister Nguyễn Văn Xuân rebutted that claim, arguing that they aimed to build a democracy. Embracing freedom of the press was a fundamental means to achieve that end. "The truth triumphs always," Nguyễn Văn Xuân replied to the councilman. Nguyễn Văn Thinh further added that he would not respond directly to public criticisms, but rather show through his acts that the government was worthy of the people's support.⁹⁷ But his Republic seemed to have few merits worthy of praise and an abundance of faults. Yet it did merit recognition as the only Vietnamese state, then as now, to support a largely free press.

The DRV, by contrast, had no qualms about compelling support from the press. From the first months of the revolution, the DRV's Ministry of Information and Propaganda subject the press to a system of prior review and censorship modeled on the French colonial system. Censors forbade what was deemed contrary to the state leadership's interests, to include discussion of international events or criticism of DRV's policies vis-a-vis France.⁹⁸ In the south, the DRV instituted its own press controls over areas under its sway. But it also asserted a sovereign right over Saigon's press scene, sifting friend from enemy by targeting those *Việt gian* journalists who supported the Republic of Cochinchina. The director of *Renaissance* survived yet another assassination attempt in the summer of 1946, this one by a 17 year old female agent of the Việt Minh, whose life was

⁹⁷ Surete federale en Cochinchine, "Assemblée de Cochinchine, Séance plénière du 31 Octobre après-midi", n. 13603-S, 2 November 1946, 312, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM. There are some reports that the Popular Front attempted to intimidate certain reporters Nguyễn kỳ Nam, *Hồi ký: 1945-1964, Tập II: 1945-1954* (Saigon: Giáp Thìn, 1964), 321.

⁹⁸ David Marr, *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945-1946)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 5, 44, 94, 239, 241, 271, 312.

spared when the director asked for leniency at her sentencing. The paper's offices also suffered three grenade attacks. Shortly after, Chân Vĩnh Thanh, the director of *New Vietnam*, had escaped certain death when a Việt Minh assassin's gun misfired as he attempted to kill the director in front of his home; other journalists at *New Vietnam* were equally as lucky, narrowly surviving grenade attacks.⁹⁹

While struggling to compel behavior with the same effectiveness as the DRV, the Republic also failed to craft a compelling narrative of legitimation. President Nguyễn Văn Thinh was left to explain the nuance of his contingent collaboration with France. His abstruse critiques of the monarchy and state centralization found limited appeal. And though he could hint in the Vietnamese press and among his ministers about his eventual aims, publicly President Thinh was silent on whether he supported the Việt Minh's aims, namely the independence of Vietnam. One street merchant's response to President Thinh's platform seemed to sum up the problem: "On what he said about the Việt Minh and the emperors, I don't know anything."¹⁰⁰ It was not just that the DRV could better cultivate and coerce loyalty, but that its calls for "Unity or Death!" and "Down with French colonialism" were far more compelling to the average Vietnamese than anything the Republic could muster.

The irony was that despite the Republic's unpopularity, wide support existed for Nguyễn Văn Thinh's insistence on Cochinchinese administrative autonomy. When the French colonial administration conducted an unofficial survey, they found that even among the 7,000 Vietnamese militiamen in the Republican Guard [*Cộng hoà Vệ binh*] the ones they spoke with favored the

⁹⁹ "Chronique Judiciaire," *Sud* n. 23, 2 October 1946; "Một tên khủng-bố bị bắn chết," *Kiến Thiết*, no. 6, 19 April 1946; "Nouvel attentat terroriste contre un journaliste," *Journal de Saigon*, no. 190, 18 May 1946.

¹⁰⁰ "Ý-kiến các tầng lớp dân-chúng," *Tin Diển* 20 February 1946.

unification of the three *kỳ*). They were moreover disaffected by the presence of men like Trần Văn Tỳ and Nguyễn Văn Tâm, cabinet ministers who they believed were beholden to France. And within Saigon's *milieu intellectuel*, the surveyors found that most Vietnamese had no faith in the Republic. But all these groups still desired a Cochinchinese-led state government with administrative autonomy from a federal Vietnamese government.¹⁰¹ If stylistically the outward aims of the Republic matched the majority view, substantively, the Republic's subordination to France severely limited its appeal.

Even within the DRV's own ranks, there was a significant degree of support for an autonomous Cochinchinese government. The March 1946 accord between France and the DRV was deeply unpopular in the south. Its acknowledgment of the French presence in Cochinchina and the division of Vietnam (pending the referendum) was done without consultation with the southern resistance leaders. It seemed a betrayal to many southerners and a foreboding sign of how Hanoi would rule. Their confidence in the Hanoi-based government was further eroded by the harsh tactics and commandeering style of the DRV's military commander in Cochinchina, the Tonkinese Nguyễn Bình.

That spring, the leader of the DRV's Third Division rallied to the Republic of Cochinchina along with several hundred of his soldiers. That defector, Nguyễn Hoà Hiệp, was also a former member of the Vietnam Nationalist Party. He made his case in the Saigon press for the compatibility of Cochinchinese autonomy and the "Vietnamese nation," arguing that support for the former did not diminish the latter. Indeed, a strong Cochinchina within the forthcoming pentagonal Indochinese Federation would only strengthen Vietnam's interests, affording it three

¹⁰¹ CSTFEO, 2eme Bureau, "Resultats d'un sondage discret effectue dans quelques milieux cochinchinois," n. 5217/2, 30 October 1946, 107, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

votes instead of just one against Laos and Cambodia. But rallying as he did in the spring of 1946 – before there was any proof that the Republic would indeed be invested with power – Nguyễn Hoà Hiệp's conversion did not bring the wave of defections that the Republic had hoped. France had promised an autonomous government, but in practice had not yet delivered it.¹⁰²

There were more elements of the southern DRV state that were willing to rally to an alternative state under the right terms. They grouped themselves in the National United Front [*Mặt trận Quốc gia Liên hiệp*]. The front was opposed to the Republic of Cochinchina and its overwhelmingly bourgeois leadership, but many of its members remained in favor of a decentralized Vietnamese government with a separate southern administration. They harbored the same resentment as Nguyễn Hoà Hiệp, in particular how the March 1946 accord had signaled Hanoi's subordination of the Cochinchinese resistance.

The National United Front's leaders came from the south's prominent religious and political groups. Its membership included the Hoà Hảo Buddhists, syncretic Cao Đài religion, Bình Xuyên paramilitary group, and anti-colonial journalists and professionals who had led Saigon's radical political scene in the late 1930s. Prominent among them was Nguyễn Văn Sâm, son of the Constitutionalist Trường Văn Bền and a former affiliate of Nguyễn Văn Thinh's Indochinese Democratic Party. But instead of rallying to Nguyễn Văn Thinh's state, they led a propaganda campaign against it *and* the Việt Minh. The tracts they distributed in Saigon warned both that "the dictatorial character of the Việt Minh has brought its own demise" and "the word 'liberty' as employed by Dr. Thinh signifies 'slavery'!"¹⁰³ Ignorant of the local dynamics, D'Argenlieu and Jean

¹⁰² "Tân Việt phỏng vấn ông Nguyễn-Hoà-Hiệp," *Tân Việt* 4 June 1946.

¹⁰³ Translated copy of tract "Le Front National Unifié," and "Mặt trận Quốc gia Liên hiệp bố cáo số 2," both in 4201, 10H, SHD.

Cédile wrote off this group as just another DVR front organization, missing their chance to channel much of the DRV's forces in Cochinchina into an alternate state project.¹⁰⁴

Franco-Vietnamese Collaboration?

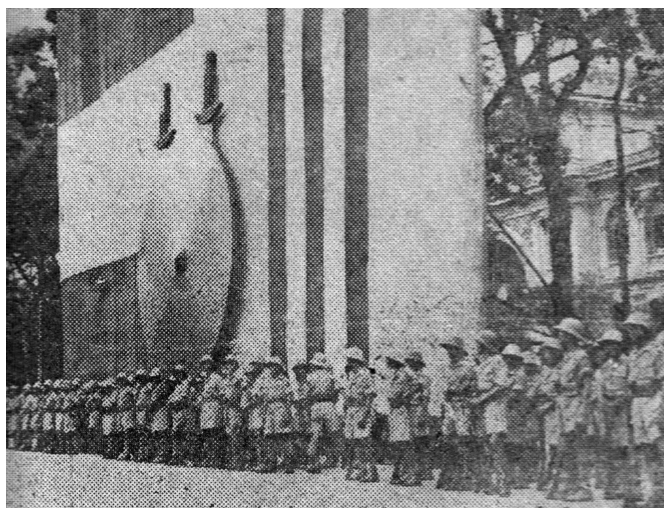


Figure 12: Vietnamese soldiers in the Republican Guard stand before the French and Republic of Cochinchina flags hanging at the entrance to Saigon's post office at the June 1946 inauguration of the Republic.

D'Argenlieu and Cédile were preoccupied with pushing ahead the Republic of Cochinchina and its seemingly more pliant partners in President Thinh's cabinet. But from inception, the lack of trust and respect shown to the Vietnamese threatened the credibility of the Cochinchinese state. At the conclusion of President Thinh's inauguration speech, D'Argenlieu and his entourage strode off the stage to their official automobiles to be chauffeured away from the crowd. President Thinh and his cabinet were left in the role of "subalterns," the French policeman observed, forced to leave the ceremony on foot. With President Thinh in sight, a voice from the

¹⁰⁴ Telegram n. 503, 20 June 1946, Haussaire Indo to Comite Indo, 47, Etats Associés [hereafter EA] section 174QO, MAE.

crowd called out "Here's the *petit garçon* trained by his big father. Pay attention, he'll have to recite his lessons learned or receive a spanking." The Franco-Vietnamese collaboration that was supposed to animate the Republic was stillborn.¹⁰⁵

Over the next two weeks, Cédile became so frustrated with President Thinh that he was ready to declare the experiment a failure. He seemed both surprised at the unionist tendencies of the supposedly "separatist" Republic's leaders, and personally insulted by the independence of Nguyễn Văn Thinh. A veteran colonial administrator, Cédile first expressed his frustration through the kind of racist behavior that the Autonomous Indochina Party had warned against. Cédile derided Dr. Thinh for performing his own chores at home and personally delivering his official correspondence to the French High Commission, comparing him to "a lowly orderly." He moreover ridiculed President Thinh's insistence that his government be allowed to occupy the true seat of power in Saigon, the *Palais du Commissariat de la République Française*, an act that would have signified that the Republic was indeed in possession of sovereignty. Cédile rejected the demand, instead offering a smaller building, *l'Hotel du Général de Division*, adjacent to the colonial *Maison Centrale* prison. President Thinh declined. He chose instead to make his office where he did his chores: his personal home.¹⁰⁶

The French not only denied the Republic the symbols of power and sovereignty, but went to great lengths to deny the Cochinchinese state the exercise of either. Soon after the June inauguration, President Thinh met with General Charles Chanson, then overseeing the pacification effort in Cochinchina. He had hoped to devise a plan that would augment

¹⁰⁵ Surete Interieure, Cochinchine, "Formation du Gouvernement de la Cochinchine et l'opinion publique," n.5265-S, June 1946, 96, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

¹⁰⁶ Direction de la Police et de la Surete, Note n. 3768, 14 June 1946, 207, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM; "Les attentats terroristes," *Le Journal de Saigon*, no. 205 6 June 1946.

Cochinchinese participation in the campaign to restore security in the Mekong Delta. They agreed that the primary need was the reinforcement of villages with local militia. Their initial plan would see thirty militia posts erected in Long An province, manned by 600 militiamen with 600 rifles. But at that moment, Minister of Defense Nguyễn Văn Xuân had committed his meager resources to the Republican Guard and could only provide some 100 rifles for 5 posts. With a penury of transports coming to Cochinchina, the French chose not to prioritize weapons for this native army.¹⁰⁷

President Thinh sought out a solution to the shortage. He held consultations with the British Consulate in Saigon, arranging the purchase of German weaponry to fulfill the weapons shortfall in the militia and Republic Guard. But as he finalized the shipment, Jean Cédile learned of it. He interceded to scuttle the arrangement. Writing to President Thinh, Cédile chastised him, explaining that for reasons of "*prestige et de simple dignité*" the Republic could not purchase weapons from any country but France, never mind that France was unable to provide such arms.¹⁰⁸

By July, Cédile has decided that President Thinh and his cabinet were hostile to the practice of French sovereignty in Indochina. In one report to D'Argenlieu, he labeled the cabinet "anti-federal" for their efforts to embellish the Republic of Cochinchina's powers at the expense of the French federal administration. He personally singled out Nguyễn Văn Thinh as "hostile" to all acts of the French administration.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, President Thinh had refused to sign a memorandum, drafted by the French, which enumerated the powers of the Republic in terms favorable to Cédile

¹⁰⁷ Letter n. 1550/2, Colonel Chanson to Commandant militaire de Cochinchine, 28 December 1946, 4201, 10-H, SHD.

¹⁰⁸ Letter n. 43/SG, 12 July 1946, Nguyen Van Thinh to J. Cedile (Commissaire de la République Française en Cochinchine), 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

¹⁰⁹ Jean Cédile, letter n. 43/HR, June 1946, 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

and D'Argenlieu. In their vision, the Republic's president would only have the power to name his ministers, hire state officials, and nominate province chiefs (subject to French approval). That would leave the French federal state to act apart and above the Republic's authority, retaining the real levers of power.

Cédile's attempt to render the Republic as a paper government worsened relations with President Thinh and his ministers. A month into the Cochinchinese experiment, Cédile complained that the facade of official relations between the French High Commission and Nguyễn Văn Thinh were proper. But in practice, he clarified, the president "responds systematically with coldness and distrust toward us." Cédile lamented that the French authorities has chosen men



Figure 13: Jean Cédile.

whom they thought seemed most worthy to lead the provisional Republic. A colonel in the French Army (Nguyễn Văn Xuân) and a former doctor at the Paris Hospital (Nguyễn Văn Thinh) seemed ideal collaborators. Now he wondered to D'Argenlieu, "but were they really?" He concluded in calling for their dismissal and the election of a new government. Even still, Cédile doubted if a new Vietnamese president could be any more trusted that the current one.¹¹⁰

President Thinh remained determined to persevere despite the aura of mistrust. He spent his first months working to slowly win over the practice of authority and force the French to codify the principle of it at a later time. Through the summer, he was fond of told friends that he was could not resign until he won for Cochinchina the same liberties that France had given Tonkin.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ "Note sur la situation politique en Cochinchine," Julliet 1946 [no day], 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

¹¹¹ Directeur de la Police et de la Surete Federales, Note n. 1305/SG, 20 Oct 1946, 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

The president continued to pursue diplomatic outreach to broaden the resources available to his government. French security services reported that he held further meetings with the British and American Consulates in Saigon, seeking American and English technicians and foreign investment for the Republic of Cochinchina in exchange for economic advantages or agricultural products. The French Commission saw his actions as a naked attempt to replace France. And like the Constitutionals and Nguyễn Thế Truỵ̀n's Vietnam Independence Party, the French accused President Thinh of seeking their "eviction on short notice."¹¹²

Domestically, President Thinh's cabinet attempted to win over popular support by enacting several broadly popular measures. First was the suppression of the much-maligned colonial head-tax. In its place was a "*Quốc Gia*" [national] defense tax, designed to support the Republican Guard, and which was graduated based on income. Other acts related to the mundane tasks of administrations, including reestablishing telegraph posts, budgetary measures, and personnel changes. The Republic also enacted a limited amnesty for political prisoners arrested by French forces upon their return in September 1945. French administrators suspected the pardons were designed to compensate for unpopular cabinet figures like Minister of Justice Trần Văn Tỷ and Nguyễn Văn Tâm. But what goodwill this measure earned them was likely counteracted by Nguyễn Tấn Cường and the Popular Front's extrajudicial arrests and the lack of tangible progress toward independence.¹¹³

In its first two months, the Republic had not made any great strides toward autonomy. Its ability to implement President Thinh's promised changes, like the democratic reform of the commune and a rural electrification campaign, could not take place without a clear elaboration of

¹¹² Surete Federal en Cochinchine, Letter n. 7599-S, 18 July 1946, 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

¹¹³ Ibid.

the Republic's rights vis-a-vis the federal French administration. Their chance to begin this process came in August, at a conference in the highland city of Dalat that brought together delegates from Cochinchina, Laos, and Cambodia. The French security services noted that prior to the August Dalat conference, President Thinh had only consulted with his Minister of Defense Nguyễn Văn Xuân. He ignored Minister Trần Văn Tỳ, like the public at large, believing he was overly sympathetic to the French administration.¹¹⁴ Citing other informants, the security services warned D'Argenlieu that President Thinh's loyalty was in question ahead of the conference. To the degree that the president was autonomist, it was because of the composition of the DRV's leadership. The Republic's president actually sought to be the "*Ho Chi Minh du Sud*," their source reported, realizing the union of Vietnam according to his own vision.¹¹⁵

D'Argenlieu would indeed find worrying signs at the Dalat conference. Colonel Nguyễn Văn Xuân acted assertively, demanding the nationalization of the Bank of Indochina. Along with the Cambodian delegation, the colonel protested against the empowerment of a French federal state, which he saw as a return to colonial governance. Most shocking to the colonial community, Nguyễn Văn Xuân declared to journalists what had heretofore been hinted: the Republic of Cochinchina's leadership did not seek a permanent separation of Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin. That would compromise the unity of the Vietnamese nation, he told the reporters. Instead, the colonel noted, "nothing would prevent the union of the three *kỳ* if the Hanoi government wasn't so leftist."¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Jean Cédile to D'Argenlieu, 24 August 1946, 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

¹¹⁵ Chef de la Surete Federale en Cochinchine, Letter n.8003-S, 25 July 1946, 96, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

¹¹⁶ Philippe Devillers, *Histoire du Viêt-Nam de 1940 à 1952* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 301.

D'Argenlieu and Cédile sought out a tactic that could contain President Thinh and Colonel Xuân, and placate the colonial lobby. They decided to reinforce the French councilmen in the Cochinchina Council by increasing the number of seats to 42 (28 Vietnamese, 14 French) and appointing councilmen they believed were more favorably inclined to France. "I have no reason to support a man who shows me, and some of my colleagues, an unjustified mistrust" Cédile told D'Argenlieu in reference to the president, "I believe that it would be wise to let the Cochinchina Council, if need be, undo what has been done." Cédile thus envisioned that an enlarged council would support French interests and, if things continued to deteriorate, also choose a new head of state more amenable to their aims.¹¹⁷ In his office's postmortem on the Republic of Cochinchina, future High Commissioner Léon Pignon would conclude that Cédile's actions were largely responsible for the state's failure. The enlarged Cochinchina Council would find itself incapacitated by internal divisions between the Vietnamese and French councilmen, while Cédile demanded that the state's sovereign functions remain the prerogative of the French federal administration.¹¹⁸

The Cochinchina Council's sessions that summer laid bare the mistrust at the center of the Franco-Vietnamese state project. The French councilman William Bazé denounced members of Nguyễn Văn Thinh's government as being anti-French and in league with the Việt Minh, including the president's confidant and chief of cabinet, the former *đốc phủ sứ* [district chief] Phạm Văn Chi. Bazé also railed against the Vietnamese province chiefs appointed by President Thinh, who he

¹¹⁷ Jean Cédile, Letter n. 43/HR, June 1946, 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM; *Phục Hưng* 2 September 1946.

¹¹⁸ Léon Pignon, Letter n. 139-CP-Cab, 12 January 1947, 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

claimed were using Vietnamese nationalist propaganda to win over members of the Việt Minh. For Bazé and the French *colons*, this was an act of betrayal. He issued a threatening reminder that "a total loyalty on the part of the Thinh government was the condition *sin qua non* of the confidence" that the French community had granted to him. The French councilmen moreover demanded the Republic's leaders provide assurances that they did not intend



Figure 14: William Bazé circa 1947.

to fuse their state with the DRV. In light of Colonel Xuân's statements at the Dalat conference, the councilman M. Béziat angrily announced, "Those hostile to us are right here in this council!" For his part, William Bazé quipped that "It would be preferable to negotiate with Hồ Chí Minh."¹¹⁹

Through the summer, President Thinh was indeed a difficult negotiator. That September, Commissioner D'Argenlieu was still directing Cédile to pressure Nguyễn Văn Thinh into signing the convention on the exercise of the president's regulatory powers. Soon thereafter, Nguyễn Văn Thinh rejected Cédile's request to form a 'permanent commission' that would settle issues arising between the Republic and the French authorities. The president likely saw through Cédile's maneuver, which was intended to weaken the Republic's powers and insert a binding mechanism in the relationship that would compensate for the lack of a formal convention.¹²⁰ By the summer's

¹¹⁹ "Compte-Rendu synthique de la Première Session de travail du Conseil de Cochinchine," September 1946, 312, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM; "Lời lẽ thống-thiết trong bức thư cuối cùng của bác-sĩ Thinh," *Trung Lập* 18 November 1946; "Où prendrait-on les membres du Gouvernement d'Union autonomiste?," *Sud* n. 58, 14 Nov 1946; Letter n. 2011-DS/Cab/SI, Cédile to D'Argenlieu, 6 September 1946, 778, HCI, ANOM.

¹²⁰ Letter no. 3247/CP-Cab, 4 September 1946, Haut Commissaire de France pour l'Indochine à Commissaire de la République Française en Cochinchine, 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM; Letter n. 181/SG, 18 Oct 1946, Nguyen Van Thinh to Commissaire de la République Française en Cochinchine, 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

end, the French members of the council and the High Commissioner's office felt that Minister of Justice Trần Văn Ty and his allies in the Council seemed to be the closest thing to a reliable partner they had inside the Republic.

But even Trần Văn Ty was willing to be critical. He employed similar tactics of refusal and withdrawal to prevent the federal French state from overtaking the Republic and his portfolio as minister of justice. He not only refused to sign a convention that delimited his powers at the expense of the federal Indochinese federation, but withdrew from performing the functions of his office until D'Argenlieu and French parliament agreed to finalize the statue of Cochinchina as either a territory or dominion, and thus either subject to French law or its own legal code. He lamented that as the



Figure 15: Trần Văn Ty wearing his *toque de velours* [velvet judicial hat] as a member of the court in Saigon. c.1940

Republic's minister of justice he was nothing more than a "*Garde de Sceaux*" [guardian of seals]. He even critiqued the role of Commissioner D'Argenlieu and the federal state as reincarnations of colonial control and protested D'Argenlieu's attempt to codify French as the official language of secondary education.¹²¹ Trần Văn Ty confided to an acquaintance – who was also the editor of *Tin Diển* and a prominent critic of the Republic – that he intended to get the powers that France had promised him. If not, he would soon resign.¹²²

¹²¹ Letter no. 69-M, Tran Van Ty (Minister de Justice) to Commissaire de la Republique Francaise en Cochinchine, 21 October 1946, 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM; Letter n. 2011-DS/Cab/SI, Cédile to D'Argenlieu, 6 September 1946, 778, HCI, ANOM.

¹²² The editor was Nguyễn Thế Phương, known as Nguyễn kỳ Nam. Nguyễn kỳ Nam, *Hồi ký: 1945-1964, Tập II: 1945-1954* (Saigon: Giáp Thìn, 1964), 340.

The Final Failure of 'Separatism'

By the end of October, the government of President Thinh had atrophied. Nguyễn Văn Tỷ and a younger councilman named Lê Văn Hoạch grew critical of President Thinh's inability to wrest full powers for the Republican government. They were moreover tired of the violence that still plagued the countryside, the lackluster performance of some ministers, and constant press criticism of their government. At Council meetings on 31 October, President Thinh and Nguyễn Văn Xuân were forced to defend themselves from these criticisms. Nguyễn Văn Thinh reminded them that he had pleaded with many of his colleagues to join the government (the former Constitutionalist Lưu Văn Lang and the future DRV Minister of Health Nguyễn Văn Hưởng among others) but all had declined. On insecurity in the countryside, Nguyễn Văn Xuân replied that the councilmen's expectations were unreasonable given that Cochinchina was still in a state of war with the Việt Minh, despite the March accords which called for an armistice. When the Council secretary Nguyễn Văn Tỷ retorted that he had more confidence in France to pacify the countryside, Nguyễn Văn Xuân stormed out of the assembly hall. The session concluded with a call for a vote. By a margin of 25-5, the Council called on President Thinh to name three new ministers.

On Thursday November 7, the Council met again. M. Béziat and Councilman Nguyễn Hữu Thuận opened the session by calling for a vote of confidence in the government. President Thinh replied in his defense. The critiques, he said, were all due to the "hybrid political regime" forced on Cochinchina. "Is it a colony or a Republic?" he asked. For he did not yet have the powers invested in a Republic. If there was any doubt as to the preferred outcome of the vote, the French Councilman Torel broke in and removed it. He read aloud a note that Jean Cédile had sent along, endorsing a vote to force a new cabinet within the next week. The vote passed 26-3. M. Béziat

remarked that though the French councilmen did not have confidence in the cabinet of President Nguyễn Văn Thinh, they did still however have confidence in him.¹²³

Over the weekend, the doctor seemed ready to regroup and continue. Things seemed to have changed on Sunday when Councilman Thái Lập Thành paid a visit to President Thinh at his home. He informed the president that plans were underway to reshuffle the cabinet. His minister of justice, Trần Văn Tỷ, had met with High Commissioner D'Argenlieu earlier in the day. But Thái Lập Thành brought more with him than just rumors. The minister of justice's chief of staff had given him a preliminary cabinet list, ostensibly one that Trần Văn Tỷ and D'Argenlieu had agreed upon earlier. A few new names were present, but many were the same. Except the position of president, beside which was written: Trần Văn Tỷ.¹²⁴

The list would be found by Saigon's police the next morning in the pajama pocket of Nguyễn Văn Thinh's hanging corpse. Saigon's political scene swirled with rumors of Nguyễn Văn Thinh's death. Some believed that it was the French who had killed the intractable doctor. Most journals soon proclaimed Nguyễn Văn Thinh had become a new Phan Thanh Giản, invoking the memory of the Nguyễn Dynasty mandarin who had committed suicide in 1867. Writers recalled how Phan Thanh Giản had tried to prevent a French military conquest, first by negotiating with Paris and earning the promise of Napoleon III to return the Nguyễn Dynasty's sovereign southern

¹²³ Surete de la Cochinchine, "Assemblée de Cochinchine, Séance du 7 Novembre après-midi," n. 13997-S, 9 November 1946, 96, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM; *Tin Diển*, 11 November 1946, translated extract in "Extrait de la Revue de la presse Annamite n. 197," 12 November 1946, 96, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

¹²⁴ Direction de la Police et de la Surete Federales, Note n. 9036/SG, 16 Nov 1946, 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

territories seized by French troops. France soon betrayed the agreement and attack the remaining provinces.¹²⁵

Writing in *Neutral* [*Trung Lập*], a publication operated by critics of the Republic, one journalist compared Nguyễn Văn Thinh to the mandarin Tôn Thọ Tường, a contemporary of Phan Thanh Giản who also served in the delegation that negotiated with Napoleon III. Tôn Thọ Tường was immortalized as a *collaborateur*, emphasized in official Vietnamese histories and Western facsimiles through an exchange of poems with his friend Phan Văn Trị.¹²⁶ While Phan Văn Trị retreated from administrative service under French rule, Tôn Thọ Tường chose to serve in the native administration. In November 1946, this writer saw a parallel. Both Tôn Thọ Tường and Nguyễn Văn Thinh were immensely talented men who felt "compassion" for the plight of the Vietnamese and worked to improve their lot. It was simply a shame, the author thought, that Nguyễn Văn Thinh had mistakenly thought that leading the Republic was the best means to do this.

As proof, he cited a conversation he had with Nguyễn Văn Thinh months prior. The President had framed the country's choice as binary: "nowadays, we simply accept one of two solutions. Either we get departmentalized [becoming French territory] or we accept autonomy with a government that is detached from the Hanoi government." The latter was the better choice, he added, "despite it falling short of independence and unified freedom, it is better than becoming a department." When the writer questioned him on the Republic's unpopularity, Nguyễn Văn

¹²⁵ Surete Federale en Cochinchine, BR n. 14090-S, 11 November 1946, 96, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

¹²⁶ This story of Tôn Thọ Tường and Phan Văn Trị as moral parable for Vietnamese history was imported in the 1960s and has remained ever since. David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 35; Ben Kiernan, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 300-303.

Thinh replied with a bit of self-deprecation that he knew this well. "But if we intellectuals think an act is right, then we continue to do it without asking the people's opinion." After all, he reminded the journalist, he abided the rule: "All for the people, but nothing by the people." The author concluded that the departed president "was not a race traitor [*Việt gian*] but not a patriot."¹²⁷

Nguyễn Văn Thinh soon spoke for himself. A suicide note emerged shortly after his death. The deceased president clarified that his act was not a renouncement. The letter was addressed to all his Vietnamese peers, "you my friends, the intellectuals of center, south, and north [*Trung, Nam, Bắc*]." He pleaded for them to act now, rather than "confine yourself in a criminal uncertainty," invoking the lack of support for his government and the consequent inability to win concessions from the federal French administration. "I die to show you the path of duty and of liberty in honor," he warned. And in a departure from all his previous statements, the doctor also warned the intellectuals against romanticizing the DRV government's leadership, which had recently purged its non-communist rivals in the summer of 1946. For the first and last time, the president directly criticized the Stalinist character of the DRV leadership. "I die to denounce the dangers of a menacing red dictatorship," Nguyễn Văn Thinh concluded before he hanged himself.¹²⁸

In the end, the president felt he had been naive. But not for trusting implicitly in the French colonial project. If he was inspired by certain French metropolitan ideals, he was wary of their colonial application. From the beginning, he mistrusted D'Argenlieu and Cédile. It was the intellectuals of Vietnam, from south to north, that he chose to admonish in his suicide note. More

¹²⁷ "Vì sao Bác-sỹ Thinh tự-vân?" *Trung-Lập*, 12 November 1946; See also the text in *Lược sử Chiến sĩ Quyết tử: Sài Gòn Chợ Lớn Gia Định 1945-1954* (T.P Hồ Chí Minh: Câu Lạc Bộ Truyền Thống 1992), 149-150. This text cuts out the sentences warning about the "menacing red dictatorship."

¹²⁸ Intercepted telegram n. 3218, 10 Nov 1946, Unknown to Journal Phuc Hung, 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM. The text of the note was anonymously sent to *Renaissance*.

than Cédile's subterfuge, he felt that his government (and his pride) had been done in by the great many Vietnamese elites that should have supported the Republic and thus enabled it to demand autonomy from France and avoid becoming a departmental territory. Instead, he lamented their sympathy for the DRV leadership or their noncommittal attitude toward his government.

Too late for the doctor, reinforcement came. Maurice Moutet, France's Overseas Minister, penned a letter to Commissioner D'Argenlieu at the beginning of November excoriating his and Cédile's management of the Republic.¹²⁹ He pointed out the absurdity that the Commissioner and his aid had awarded the government neither an official office nor a measure of autonomy. He noted that this was in France's own interest. If the Republic could build a measure of popular support, then France would not need to engage in the referendum that it had promised in the March accords. Instead they could act as an arbiter between the DRV and the Republic. The letter likely arrived after the president had passed.

Legacy

In death, the DRV leadership seized the memory of Nguyễn Văn Thinh to serve their own state project. Hồ Chí Minh could now afford to strike a more magnanimous tone when he addressed the doctor. He sought to turn the saga into a morale parable. No longer an enemy to be denounced by the DRV, Hồ Chí Minh likely reflected on their time together in Paris twenty-five years earlier, when Nguyễn Văn Thinh may have supplied medical goods that Hồ Chí Minh distributed to Vietnamese veterans of World War I. Hồ Chí Minh declared that "personally," this rival president was a "good-natured character and was an excellent medical practitioner. The

¹²⁹ Letter, *Ministre de la France d'Outre Mer* (Moutet) to d'Argenlieu, 3 November 1946, 33-40, 517/AP [Papers of Admiral D'Argenlieu], ANF.

fatherland needs technicians like this." However, it was his "political character" that Hồ Chí Minh found lacking. The choice to collaborate with France, he concluded, had led the doctor to an "unavoidable end" that even he had recognized before the moment of his passing.¹³⁰

Vietnamese politicians and French officials in Saigon came to agree with part of Hồ Chí Minh's assessment. By the year's end, it was clear that the French separatist strategy could not be revived. Emboldened by the death of one of their own, the Vietnamese politicians now leading the Republic spoke up, led by their new president Lê Văn Hoạch. He soon declared what doctor Thinh had only publicly hinted and privately confided: the Republic was not a separatist state, but rather one that would retain local administrative autonomy in a forthcoming "Vietnamese federation" of all three *kỳ*.¹³¹ When the government commemorated the life of Nguyễn Văn Thinh several months later, their official publication noted that his funeral procession had stopped before the "memorial to soldiers who sacrificed for *Việt Nam*." "Nguyễn Văn Thinh was also a soldier full of courage and sacrifice" who had fallen in battle on behalf of his country.¹³² The new Republican government now spoke openly of forming an alliance with moderate elements of the southern DRV's Việt Minh front.¹³³

The mood within the French administration began to shift too. Jean Cédile, the driving force behind the birth and death of the Republic, was transferred out of Indochina and replaced by the veteran administrator Léon Pignon. His first order of business was to commission a postmortem on the government of Nguyễn Văn Thinh. The failure was unavoidable, his staff

¹³⁰ "Hồ Chủ-tịch với cái chết của bác-sĩ Ng-văn-Thinh," *Dân Thanh* n. 349, 12 November 1946.

¹³¹ "Òu le docteur Hoach parle," *Sud* 30 April 1947.

¹³² *Tiểu sử bác sĩ Nguyễn-Văn-Thinh, Cố Thủ-tướng Nam-Kỳ Công-Hoà* (Saigon: Imprimerie de l'Union, 1947), 7.

¹³³ "Trước khi lập chánh-phủ ..." *Saigon Mới* n. 15, 3 Jan 1947.

concluded. The entire state project was doomed by "a compromise in principle between the desire to have the French representative not abandon any essential prerogative of French authority and, no less important, for the President of the Republic to exercise real power."¹³⁴ The two aims were inimical. Léon Pignon saw instead that France held little hope of maintaining its influence if it did not challenge the DRV on its own terms. Pignon advocated seeking allies within the Vietnamese revolution who might be willing to adopt a more moderate form of Vietnamese nationalism that could accommodate the French presence, and exploit their dissatisfaction with the DRV leadership. Doing so would require negotiating with the former emperor Bảo Đại, exiled DRV officials, and those still within the DRV who were dissatisfied with its direction.

That November, the Republic of Cochinchina had effectively died with its president in his bedroom. It would seem opportune for Nguyễn Bình, the DRV military commander in the south, to take the initiative to shore up his authority and attack the floundering Republic and its French sponsors. Yet at that moment Nguyễn Bình was clinging to life in a makeshift field hospital, and with him Hanoi's hope of controlling the revolution in Cochinchina. He too had been attacked by his own allies.

The death of Nguyễn Văn Thinh, and the apparent consignment of Nguyễn Bình to the same fate, would mark the beginning of the Vietnamese counterrevolution and amplify the ongoing Vietnamese civil war.

¹³⁴ Léon Pignon to the High Commissioner of France for Indochina, letter n. 139/CP-Cab, 12 January 1947, 11, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

CHAPTER THREE
REVOLUTION & REVOLT - 1945-1946

* * *

Dr. Nguyễn Văn Hưởng arrived on foot at a large house in the eastern Mekong Delta. Earlier that year he had declined to join President Nguyễn Văn Thinh's cabinet. For some months, the doctor had put his medical skills in service of the DRV's Southern Administrative Committee. He had been summoned to this house before, now converted into an infirmary for the DRV's all-important military Zone 7 that encompassed Saigon. Inside he found his patient: Zone 7 commander Nguyễn Bình. He was still alive, but seriously wounded. It was Dr. Hưởng's duty to see that he recovered.¹

Hours earlier, Nguyễn Bình had arrived in the village of Binh Hoà, just fifty kilometers from Saigon. He waited at the village pagoda. Here he was to meet the disgruntled subordinates of two Bình Xuyên commanders. Like Cochinchina's other armed politico-religious groups, the Bình Xuyên had affiliated with the Việt Minh front and the DRV state after the August Revolution. But they remained effectively separate forces led by their own sub-national leaders. The Bình Xuyên's leadership was a loose coalition of colonial-era brigands turned revolutionaries. Nguyễn Bình had been lured to the meeting to plot the capture of two commanders who had repeatedly defied his authority.²

¹ Trần Kim Trúc, *Tôi Giết Nguyễn Bình* (Saigon: Đồng Nai, 1972), 1-10. While the writer of this memoir was a Bình Xuyên member there is no evidence he was a witness. It is likely that his account is based on second- or third-hand knowledge of this event.

² Kevin Li, "Partisan to Sovereign: The Making of the Bình Xuyên in Southern Vietnam, 1945-1948," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11 no.3-4 (2016), 149-151.

Before the meeting began, the sound of gunfire erupted nearby. It seemed their position was under attack by French forces or the Cochinchinese Republican Guard. Nguyễn Bình stepped out and watched his soldiers run to their defensive positions. An unfamiliar face moved with purpose towards the pagoda. Having lost vision in one eye during a fight between communist and non-communist partisans on the prison island Poulo Condore, Nguyễn Bình likely was unsure of his suspicion at first. But as the soldier came within ten meters of the pagoda, Nguyễn Bình was confident that he did not know this soldier. He drew his pistol and several shots rang out. The imposter broke off without even leveling his weapon. He fled into the woods.³

Nguyễn Bình lurched forward, holding a jammed pistol. The gun had failed to fire at this critical moment. The shots had come from behind him, issued from two revolvers wielded by a 26-year-old Cao Đài soldier named Thanh Tuyền. Nguyễn Bình's leg and his left arm had been struck by this second, unseen gunman. Thanh Tuyền had made full use of his two pistols. He was able to wound commander's personal security detail and disappear into the woods, where he stayed hidden for the next eight days.⁴

Word quickly spread among Nguyễn Bình's troops that two "race traitors" sent by France had launched a brazen attempt on their commander's life. In truth, the assassins were Cao Đài soldiers and fellow members of the DRV's Việt Minh front. And they were not alone. The ambush had been fabricated to disguise the assassination attempt. From within the ranks of senior southern leaders, this plot had emerged among those resentful of Nguyễn Bình's authoritarianism and the DRV's disregard for the interests of southerners.⁵

³ For a summary of the assassination attempt, see: Trần Quang Vinh, "Compte-Rendu," 23 November 1946, 379, HCI, ANOM.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid; Trần Kim Trú, *Tôi Giết Nguyễn Bình*, 1-10.

The assassination attempt would not take Nguyễn Bình's life. Dr. Nguyễn Văn Hưởng saw to his full recovery. Yet like the death of Nguyễn Văn Thinh, it would signal the impending failure of another Vietnamese state project in Cochinchina. The DRV revolution would soon begin to fall apart, giving way to an ever wider Vietnamese civil war. By the end of 1946, non-communist political leaders in northern Tonkin had fled into exile, attacked by Võ Nguyên Giáp's armed forces and purged from the government. To the south, disaffected elements of the DRV state attempted a coup to overthrow Nguyễn Bình. They simultaneously begun negotiating with France to ensure the interests of Cochinchinese, which they believed the DRV government in Hanoi had disregarded in its negotiations with Paris.

The fracture within the DRV government was born from the long simmering civil war between Vietnam's rival state aspirants, but also the fractiousness of the Vietnamese colonial state and society. As seen in chapter three, the contest for the character and control of the post-colonial Vietnamese state began in the late 1920s and 1930s. Although one of the central cleavages was between the Stalinist ICP and those opposed to it – primarily the Vietnam Nationalist Party – there were a multitude of divisions in Vietnamese society. Schisms within the syncretic Cao Đài religion would begin as matters of religion and personal politics. The revolution, however, would increasingly subsume all those divisions and array their partisans on opposing sides of Vietnam's civil war.

This chapter will chart events from the beginning of the Japanese occupation of Indochina to the breakdown of the DRV's revolutionary coalition in south and north. It examines the diverse politico-religious and state forces that were empowered during the occupation, including the Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo religions, the Japanese sponsored Empire of Vietnam, and the return of exiled nationalist parties following Tokyo's surrender. For a time these forces coalesced in the DRV's

ambitious bricolage state. From inception, however, intense factional infighting occurred over control of the state's regional and national machinery.

The Origin of the Cochinchina's Revolution

Vietnam's revolution began in March 1945, six months before the Việt Minh seized control of the state and recast it as the DRV. March was the month that the Japanese Imperial Army and Vietnamese revolutionaries overthrew the Vichy French administration that Tokyo had permitted to retain administrative control over Indochina. Five years earlier, Japan had invaded the French colonies as part of its imperial thrust into Southeast Asia. Several weeks prior to the invasion, France had fallen into the Nazi empire's westward expansion, bringing to power a new French government, based in the southern city of Vichy, that was led by Marshal Philippe Pétain and subordinate to Berlin. In France's tropical empire, Vichy instructed its administrators to cooperate with their new Axis allies in Tokyo. Despite pledging to deliver "Asia to the Asians" and overturn European colonialism, Japan tolerated continued French rule as long as it enabled the Imperial Army to maintain the prosecution of its war against Allied China.

Japanese forces did, however, empathize with Vietnamese revolutionaries. Since Phan Bội Châu traveled to Tokyo at the turn of the century, Vietnamese had maintained links to Japan. The exiled Nguyễn Dynasty Prince Cường Để remained in Japan. A great many Vietnamese held out hope that he would return to Vietnam and reinvigorate the Vietnamese empire into an independent state. Partisans of Cường Để ranged from intellectuals like Ngô Đình Diệm to the million and more adherents of the Cao Đài. Though Japan never did allow the return of Cường Để, it did permit (and to a degree protect) these Vietnamese revolutionaries as they began to mobilize more openly against French rule in the early 1940s. Japanese officials, however, were

frustrated by what they saw as the fractiousness of the Vietnamese political community, even among its more coherent institutions like the Cao Đài.

Although French officials feared the Cao Đài religion was an anti-colonial movement masquerading as a syncretic faith, the Cao Đài leadership was fundamentally elite-driven and hierarchical. Founded more than a decade before World War II, by the time Japan arrived in Indochina the Cao Đài had broken into competing oratories. The break began in 1933-1934, following the successive deaths of the religion's founder and its first leader, Ngô Văn Chiêu and Lê Văn Trung. Many of the early followers were colonial administrators or landowners. Like other religions in the 1930s, the Cao Đài leadership were conflicted over debates about the material character of their sect. Some felt that the religion should be a spiritual endeavor concerned with understanding the Cao Đài oratories. Others felt their religion should be more worldly, involved in material matters of daily life, economics, and even politics. The largest of the material Cao Đài sects was located in Tây Ninh, north of Saigon near the Cambodian border. By 1932 it contained 128 different oratories (parishes).⁶ French officials complained that the Cao Đài sought to use "religious liberty" as exemption from all taxation and administrative control. The religions thus became a rival sovereignty threatening France's own. Even worse, the Tây Ninh sect was found to have contacts with Trotskyists in Saigon.⁷

In August of that year, two wealthy Cao Đài practitioners named Nguyễn Văn Ca and Trần Quang Đạo broke away from the Tây Ninh sect to form their own oratory. They were joined

⁶ "Notice sur la propaganda anti-française dans milieu religieux de la Cochinchine," Envoi n. 6432/S, 5 April 1943, 65545, Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine [hereafter GGI-F], ANOM.

⁷ Rivoal (Gouverneur générale de la Cochichine) to GGI, letter n. 1537, 9 October 1936, IIA.45/183(4), Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine [hereafter GGI-V], TTLT2.



Figure 16: Leaders of the various sects within Cao Dai: (L-R) Nguyễn Văn Ca (Mỹ Tho), Nguyễn Ngọc Trương (Bến Tre), Phạm Công Tắc (Tây Ninh), Cao Triều Phát (Bắc Liêu), Nguyễn Phan Long (Saigon), and Lê Kim Ty (Gia Định).

by the landowner and Constitutionalist politician Cao Triều Phát, who helped them form an oratory in the deltaic province Bạc Liêu. The next year, Nguyễn Ngọc Trương also left Tây Ninh to form a new Cao Đài sect that attempted to capture the loyalty of Cochinchina's other Cao Đài believers. The Tây Ninh branch leader Phạm Công Tắc censured Nguyễn Ngọc Trương in absentia. A tribunal branded him as a French agent, citing his cooperation with French authorities to grow his rival sect.⁸ By the 1940s, the Cao Đài had succumbed to Vietnam's broader trend of elite factionalism. While the Tây Ninh oratory retained the bulk of the more than a million Cao Đài in Cochinchina, some ten other Cao Đài sects had emerged across the delta.

Japanese officials in Saigon sought to unify the Cao Đài and cultivate them as local auxiliaries and elites through whom to work. The Cao Đài had already tried to unify itself after the initial 1934 schism. Nguyễn Phan Long, the Constitutionalist politician and future first Prime Minister of the State of Vietnam, had organized a conference in 1937 with this very aim. So too had Cao Triều Phát, who would go on to lead the DRV's Cao Đài front organization after 1947. Japanese officials reprised these efforts, sponsoring yet another Saigon-based committee (*Liên hò*

⁸ R.B. Smith, *Pre-Communist Indochina* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 122.



Figure 17: The Cao Đài military leadership two years later, in 1947. (L-R) Nguyễn Thành Phương, Nguyễn Văn Thành, Trịnh Minh Thế. Nguyễn Văn Thành holds his Japanese Type 98 shin guntō sword and leather shin guards.

Đại hội) to unify the religion's factions.⁹ The initiative failed again, but the Japanese did successfully cultivate contacts with the Tây Ninh sect. Under Japanese protection, the Cao Đài began to militarize. The Cao Đài official Trần Quang Vinh was able to fulfill the religion's longtime ambition to form its own armed auxiliary force. These Cao Đài militiamen would later assist the Imperial Army in deposing the Vichy French administration in March 1945.

The Japanese military also offered its protection to the leader of the recently formed Hoà Hảo Buddhist sect. The religion was led by Huỳnh Phú Sổ, the 24-year-old son of a former village notable. French authorities believed he had been a Cao Đài believer for several years before retreating inward and re-emerging as the spiritual leader of his own faith in 1939.¹⁰ At the time,

⁹ Note sur l'évolution de la politique indochinoise depuis le 9 mars 1945 en Indochine, Doc Phu Tam de My Tho et transmise par le chef de la securite militaire des FFEO, 5 Oct 1945, 33-3, 517/AP, ANF.

¹⁰ "Notice sur la propaganda anti-française dans milieu religieux de la Cochinchine," Envoi n. 6432/S, 5 April 1943, 65545, GGI-F, ANOM.

Buddhist pagodas required costly acts of patronage and contributions. Huỳnh Phú Sổ declared himself a Buddha reincarnate and amassed followers by preaching an ascetic form of Buddhism. He was helped in part by rumors that he could heal the sick. One Vietnamese functionary surmised that this was more due to his ability to procure quinine from Japanese troops than any divine power.¹¹

Even before the Japanese invasion, French official had noted that the Tây Ninh branch of the Cao Đài had issued numerous prophecies on the restoration of Prince Cường Để and the rise of Japan. Both the Tây Ninh Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ had foreordained that the liberation of Indochina would come soon after Japan defeated France. Fearing these intractable religious forces, the Vichy French administration imprisoned Huỳnh Phú Sổ at a mental hospital for a year in 1940. They exiled more dangerous figures to Madagascar, including the Cao Đài leader Phạm Công Tắc and the former pillar of Paris' radical political scene, Nguyễn Thế Truyền. But once they had installed themselves in Saigon, Japanese officials were able to secure the escape of Huỳnh Phú Sổ from imprisonment. However, they could do nothing for those already exiled in Africa.

Anti-Colonial Cooperation

Large though they were, the Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo's influence was concentrated in the Mekong Delta. Wartime Saigon was home to the same small group of professionals, politicians, businessmen, and journalists that had animated colonial politics in the 1930s. In the eyes of some, the Japanese invasion seemed a perfect opportunity to mobilize more directly against Vichy France.

¹¹ Note sur l'évolution de la politique indochinoise depuis le 9 mars 1945 en Indochine, Doc Phu Tam de My Tho et transmise par le chef de la securite militaire des FFEO, 5 Oct 1945, 33-3, 517/AP, ANF.

Dương Văn Giáo – the friend and collaborator of Nguyễn Thế Truyền in 1920s Paris and member of *les jeunes* along with Nguyễn Văn Thịnh in Saigon – joined with others to form the Unified Vietnamese Revolutionary Party [*Việt Nam Dân Thống nhất Cách mạng Đảng*]. He was joined by the engineer Phan Khắc Sửu (future Head of State of South Vietnam in 1964), Dr. Hồ Văn Nhứt (an opposition leader in Ngô Đình Diệm's South Vietnam), the journalists Trần Văn Ân (who worked closely with Dương Văn Giáo and Nguyễn Thế Truyền in 1920s France, and with Nguyễn Văn Sâm in 1930s Saigon), as well as some former Trotskyists.¹² In this sense, the party represented the transition of multiple streams of Vietnamese reformism into a more assertive revolutionary framework.

The French administration knew as much. They arrested the leaders the United Vietnamese Revolutionary Party in early 1941, just a few months after sentencing Saigon's Trotskyists to long prison terms for "subversive maneuvers." Trotskyists Tạ Thu Thâu, Trần Văn Thạch and their journalistic ally, Nguyễn Văn Sâm were all arrested. The remaining members of the party appealed to Japanese authorities for assistance. With the fragile entente between Japan and Vichy France was still in place, the Japanese military arranged for the escape Dương Văn Giáo and Nguyễn Văn Sâm from prison, while Trần Văn Ân managed to earn his release by the end of the year.

Trần Văn Ân remained in Saigon to organize Vietnamese legally and openly, under Japanese protection. He was joined by Trotskyists including Đạn Văn Ký, as well as the now-liberated Nguyễn Văn Sâm. Together, they led the southern branch of a new political party that had the favor of Japan: the National Restoration Society [*Việt Nam Phục Quốc Đồng Minh Hội*]. The

¹² "Le Mouvement Nationaliste en Cochinchine," 30 December 1942, 33, Fonds Privés - Jean Decoux, ANOM.

Restoration Society was nominally led by the still-exiled Prince Cường Để and grouped together older revolutionaries like Phan Bội Châu's longtime confidant Nguyễn Hải Thần. In Annam and Tonkin, notable political figures including Ngô Đình Diệm and Lê Toàn held leadership roles in the Restoration Society.¹³

The Saigon-based members of the Restoration Society collaborated closely with the Vietnamese employees of an import-export firm, Dainan Koosi, that acted as a Japanese front. This export firm served as both a source of economic patronage and official cover for Vietnamese revolutionaries that endowed them with immunity under the hybrid Japanese-French administration. Between the Imperial Army and a few notable firms like Dainan Koosi, Japan could maintain economic ties and conduits of intelligence outside Vichy French control. Those employed at Dainan Koosi ranged from ruffians like a young Huỳnh Văn Trí (Mười Trí) to the former militiaman like Vũ Tâm Anh, who also joined the Restoration Society.¹⁴

Indochina's urban spaces thus offered new opportunities for anti-colonial action. The Cao Đài had always maintained contacts with Cochinchina's urban spaces. Their elite adherents-cum-benefactors often spent time in Saigon or provincial capitals. They included characters like the famous rickshaw and taxi proprietor "Tư Mất", who had served five years in prison for his role in the 1913 Phan Xích Long insurrection. French security services moreover claimed that Tư Mất operated Cholon's illicit casinos, remitting funds to support the Cao Đài, until he died of burns

¹³ Pascal Bourdeaux, "Émergence et constitution de la communauté du Bouddhisme Hoà Hảo : Contribution à l'histoire sociale du delta du Mékong (1935-1955)," (PhD dissertation, École Pratique des Hautes Études, 2003), 199-208.

¹⁴ Sûreté Fédérales, "Les Partis nationalistes vietnamiens," 176, Haut Commissariat de France pour l'Indochine - Conseiller Diplomatique [hereafter HCI-CD], ANOM.

incurred during a lamp-lit Cao Đài ceremony.¹⁵ World War II was thus an opportunity to better connect these urban-rural networks and operate more openly.

The Japanese presence brought all these forces together closer than before. By prompting them to cooperate and affording them the protection, the urban-based Restoration Society members cemented political ties to the Cao Đài, Hoà Hảo, and key personalities that would go on to take leadership roles in the Bình Xuyên paramilitary organization after 1945. Indeed, the Dainan Koosi operative Lường Trọng Tương played a key role in arranging the escape of the Hoà Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ and went on to become one of the religion's leaders. The Cao Đài official Trần Quang Vinh, affiliated with the dominant Tây Ninh sect, worked in concert with the Restoration Society to organize their proto-revolutionary forces.¹⁶

The Restoration Society established cells in the deltaic provinces outside Saigon, encouraging members to form a common front with the Cao Đài, Hoà Hảo, and Trotskyist sympathizers. Their propaganda materials naturally called for the restoration of Cường Để as emperor, but also for a progressive social agenda. If empowered, the Restoration Society claimed it would remake deltaic society by suppressing land-holding monopolies and redistributing farmland to those who tilled it. More broadly, they called for the immediate formation of a general assembly of leaders of the different "nationalist" groups to unify the party and "prepare the wishes of the Indochinese." They envisioned this assembly would set the stage for an election after the

¹⁵ "La mort de Tu-Mat," *L'Echo Annamite* 28 December 1929; "L'attentat contre M. Nadaillat - Tu Mat accusé par Pham-Van-kim," *Le Colon Français* 16 May 1929; "Notice sur la propagande anti-française dans milieu religieux de la Cochinchine," Envoi n. 6432/S, 5 April 1943, 65545, GGI-F, ANOM.

¹⁶ Vu Ngu Chieu, "Political and Social Change in Viet-Nam between 1940 and 1946," (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1984), 144.

Vichy French had finally been overthrown.¹⁷

Their plans were foiled in part by the French police's increasing pressure on Japan to permit the arrest of Restoration Society leaders. Nguyễn Văn Sâm and Dương Văn Giáo were forced to abscond to Thailand to organize the overseas Vietnamese population, while Trần Văn Ân fled to Japanese-occupied Singapore. It remains an open question whether the Restoration Society could have united Cochinchina's various political factions. The Cao Đài struggled just to unite even its own various factions, much less broader political society. Japan's occupation did, however, allow urban intellectuals and activists to forge connections with rural elites and the colonial underworld of criminals-cum-revolutionaries that would influence events for the next 20 years. This period, moreover, had allowed for the construction of competing political organizations which aspired to become their own state projects.

Bảo Đại and the French State Project

Japan gave its greatest support to one state project in particular: the Empire of Vietnam. In early March 1945, the Imperial Army finally authorized the overthrow of the French colonial regime. With the collapse of the Vichy state in France, Tokyo could not trust the French administrators to prepare for the final defense of Indochina from Allied advances. Japan sought more direct administrative control by encouraging the creation of local 'independent' Indochinese states. Like the French, they turned to the local elites upon whom colonial rule had rested and through whom it was effected.

¹⁷ "Le Mouvement Nationaliste en Cochinchine," 30 December 1942, 33, Fonds Privés - Jean Decoux, ANOM.

They did not, however, turn to the monarch that they had long supported. Cường Để remained in Japan. Instead, Japanese officials sought stability and continuity. They approached the royal court at Huế and offered the Emperor Bảo Đại the chance to declare independence from the French protectorate in exchange for supporting the Japanese presence in Indochina. To the dismay of his longtime French patrons, he agreed. The modern monarch they had raised to fulfill their colonial project rejected their entire colonial enterprise.

More than anything, Bảo Đại may personify the bricolage of state making in Vietnam from the late colonial to the post. At the time Japan offered to sponsor a renewed Vietnamese empire, Bảo Đại was weary of a life that bordered on captivity. Since birth, his life had been shaped by the needs of two empires, Annamese and French. His father, Emperor Khải Định, and the French resident in Huế decided that he should be sent to France for a decade of schooling at the age of nine. He lived in the Paris home of Monsieur Jean-Eugène Charles, a former conservative monarchist governor general of Indochina. While M. Charles would choose to support the German-sponsored Vichy state during World War II, Bảo Đại rejected it.¹⁸ But a decade earlier, M. Charles praised the young monarch as an excellent student, cultured and ambitious yet very deliberate. M. Charles had tailored his education and life to produce, as he and then-Governor Général Pierre Pasquier agreed, "the first modern monarch of Annam."¹⁹ But while they would

¹⁸ Bảo Đại, *Le Dragon d'Annam* (Paris: Plon, 1980), 22. He notes that it was only later that he learned M. Charles was a monarchist and that he supported *l'Action Française* of Charles Maurras.

¹⁹ Lettre, 17 March 1931, M. Charles to Gouverneur General de l'Indochine (P. Pasquier), 35-F.41, Khâm Sứ Trung Kỳ [Résident Supérieur d'Annam, hereafter RSA], TTLT4.

attempt to instill a love of France within their subject, Pasquier cautioned M. Charles not "to make a republican of a young man who will become a sovereign by divine right."²⁰

In Pasquier's conception, French education could shape the young man into the perfect *collaborateur*. He lamented that since the imposition of the protectorate on Annam, the sovereigns of the Huế court were child emperors, dominated by their royal entourages. Recalling the acts of resistance by emperors Duy Tân, Hàm Nghi, and Thành Thái, Pasquier lamented that France had suffered "imbecilic kings, sick, degenerate, or physically diminished."²¹

This revisionist history thus made it forgivable for colonial administrators to have violated the 1884 Patrenotre Treaty and marginalized the royal court through direct French rule. Pasquier could tell himself that the court at Huế was a "victim, in this case, much less of the deliberate intentions of our policy and its undertakings, but of their own deficiency." France had failed miserably in its attempts to educate kings in Annam. Though Thanh Thái and Duy Tân had received French training, each turned against the French protectorate. Pasquier professed his intent to reform the situation, remaking the Annamese administration into a modern institution. He had earlier established the *l'École des hautes Études Franco-Vietnamienne* to train a cadre of administrators to replace the mandarinate. With a modern monarch educated in France sitting atop a new administrative state, Pasquier believed he could restore the authority of the royal government while retaining indirect French controls.²²

²⁰ Pasquier, "Note au sujet de l'éducation en France du Prince Vinh Thuy," 22 February 1922, 29-F.41, RSA, TTLT4. Bảo Đại cites this memorandum in his memoir, likely indicating that M. Charles provided him with a copy of Pasquier's 1922 instructions for his education.

²¹ Gouverneur General de l'Indochine (P. Pasquier) to Ministre des Colonies, Paris (P. Reunaud), Letter n. 390/A, 30 April 1931, 35 (F.41), Khâm Sứ Trung Kỳ/RSA, TTLT4.

²² Ibid.

Bảo Đại's return to Annam in 1932 after a decade of French schooling was equally motivated by the weakness of the administration. Two years earlier, the Vietnam Nationalist Party had launched the Yên Bái uprising in northern Tonkin. Not long after, peasant revolts erupted in Annam. French officials attempted their first 'Bảo Đại solution'. They ferried the young emperor back to Indochina and sent him on tours of the countryside, hoping that he could pacify the public and prevent further uprisings. During the countryside tours, the emperor recalled feeling that he was toured about as "more or less a vassal of France."²³

Early in his tenure Bảo Đại attempted to reform the protectorate and reinvigorate the court. He re-staffed his imperial cabinet with notable reformers like Ngô Đình Diệm and Phạm Quỳnh. They succeeded in establishing more primary schools and abolishing outmoded institutions like the royal harem and the *lay* [prostration before the king]. Their larger effort to restore the empire's sovereignty and reintegrate Tonkin into their empire's jurisdiction had failed, leading to the resignation of Ngô Đình Diệm.

It had not taken long for Bảo Đại to realize that he was without power to apply his French education and modernize the kingdom. French official like Albert Sarraut had promised that the protectorate would be respected. Bảo Đại now understood that these were lies. Like his predecessors, he became what he called a "sovereign in exile" in his own country.²⁴ His powers were limited to largely ceremonial acts, including the awarding of pardons. His office wielded that power liberally to counterbalance the state's repression of rural unrest and gain the public's sympathy. One such royal pardon was granted in 1934 to a man convicted of communist "plotting" who had been freed from prison but not the stigma of his conviction. Bảo Đại pardoned this

²³ Bảo Đại, *Le Dragon d'Annam*, 52.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

particular man, now a thirty-three-year-old law student in Hanoi, named Võ Nguyên Giáp.²⁵ This pardoned communist organizer would do much a decade later to defeat Bảo Đại's non-communist state project.

These ceremonial powers only reinforced Bảo Đại's feeling that he was no more than an ornament of the French colonial project. The once inquisitive young emperor retreated inward, filling his time with sports and hobbies, included hunting, sailing, and aviation – activities that kept him away from Huế and outside the immediate reach of various French resident superiors and governor generals. Away from the imperial capital, he could avoid playing the ornamental role in their colonial project. Bảo Đại found his best armor was to cultivate a reputation as a feckless *chơi bời* [playboy]. To be sure, Bảo Đại did not mind playing that role. It proved enjoyable and effective all the same. When one of his appointed ministers was dismissed by the French *résident* for his "excess of initiative," Bảo Đại counseled him: "In my position I've learned to be blind, deaf, and dumb. You ought to imitate me."²⁶ Yet for his more assertive compatriots, the passivity of the emperor's defense was a moral demerit that they could not forgive.

Decoux was thus disappointed when he attempted the second 'Bảo Đại solution' during the Vichy France era (1940-1944) under Marshal Philippe Pétain. The emperor refused to play the role of pliant, traditional monarch and nationalist icon that Decoux needed as he encouraged Vietnam's youth to exalt *Maréchal, nous voilà!* [Marshal, here we are!]. Bảo Đại ensured he was not there. The emperor continually slipped away. When Decoux assigned a French pilot to ferry the emperor about, Bảo Đại managed to escape his watch, flying his small plane off into the highlands on his own. Decoux further lamented that the emperor never showed any desire to meet him.

²⁵ Service de la Sûreté au Tonkin, Note n. 11564/S, 3 September 1937, 377, HCl-SPCE, ANOM.

²⁶ "L'Annam sans Empereur," *France Illustration*, n. 89, 14 June 1947.

These affronts caused Decoux to lose face in front of the Japanese ambassador in Dalat, who saw the contempt that Bảo Đại had for the French administration. When confronted about his behavior by the French resident superior in Annam, Bảo Đại explained that he was always wearing his hunting clothes when Decoux visited. Of course it would be improper to call upon him, attired in such a vulgar manner, he explained, likely to no one's belief.²⁷

Careful of the boundaries imposed upon him, Bảo Đại saw that he needed to protect himself and the wounded pride of these Frenchmen. To compensate for his absence, he awarded Decoux the title of *Prince de la Cour d'Annam avec la mention spéciale de Protecteur de l'Empire*.²⁸ Decoux eagerly sent a telegram back to the Vichy capital to announce his new title, only for Bảo Đại to skip the ceremony and delegate the presentation to a subordinate.²⁹ In late 1944, Decoux was still bitterly complaining that he was ignorant of Bảo Đại's whereabouts and his activities.³⁰

The Empire of Vietnam

The March coup did away with Decoux and the French administrative elite. Japanese officials offered the emperor the chance to declare Vietnam's independence and the eventual unification of the three *kỳ* into the Vietnamese empire. The offer was conditional of course, allowing Japan to retain many of the same levers of control to support their war effort. Masayuki

²⁷ Letter (Decoux to the Résident Supérieur en Annam), 2526-D/Cab, 25 May 1943, 26, Fonds Privés - Jean Decoux, ANOM.

²⁸ Letter, no. 99-SS, 3 June 1943, Résident supérieur en Annam to Decoux (Gouv general de l'Indochine), 26 Fonds Privés (Decoux), ANOM; David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 361.

²⁹ Telegram, No. 1572/SSD, 23 Julliet 1943, HAUSSAIRE to COLONIES VICHY, 26, Fonds Privés - Jean Decoux, ANOM.

³⁰ Telegram no. 860/SSD, HAUSSAIRE à RESUPER ANNAM, 1 June 1944, 26, Fonds Privés - Jean Decoux, ANOM.

Yokoyama, Minister of Economic Affairs of the Japanese mission in Indochina, acted as the primary conduit to Huế.

At their March meeting, Yokoyama found Bảo Đại reserved and quiet. It was his chief of cabinet, Phạm Quỳnh, who seemed enthusiastic and relaxed. Over time, Yokoyama had grown to know the secretary and developed a deep sympathy for his intellect and predicament. Phạm Quỳnh had confided to him his frustration. He had been disappointed that France would not treat the Vietnamese people "as a friend and not as inferiors." He knew that he was ill-thought by many Vietnamese nationalists. But he felt he was a patriot. He used what little means he could – "the limit of his powers and his possibilities" – to improve the lot of all Vietnamese despite their colonial status. If his accomplishments seemed meager, he felt they were nonetheless significant given that he could only "negotiate with France through reasoning and persuasion, which demands much time, tact, and patience."³¹ Phạm Quỳnh relayed that he was glad to be done with that era, and to move closer toward the independence of his country.

Shortly after meeting Yokoyama in March 1945, Bảo Đại and Phạm Quỳnh convened the imperial cabinet. Throughout the 1930s, they and others had entreated France to honor their treaties and allow the Vietnamese imperial state to regain administrative control of Tonkin, and eventually pave the way for some form of constitutional monarchy. Colonial authorities had rejected each request. But now, in 1945, they asked no longer. The imperial cabinet unanimously approved a proclamation abrogating the 1884 Patrenotre Treaty *in toto* and declaring the independence of "Việt Nam." In fifteen minutes the proclamation was drawn up and signed. They

³¹ "Memoires personnels écrits en réponse au questionnaire des Autorités françaises de Hué, sur les événements survenus en Indochines en mars 1945, par Marc Masayuki Yokoyama," 226, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

celebrated that evening by roasting the wild bull that Bảo Đại had shot on hunting trip interrupted by the coup.³² Vietnam was not yet unified nor independent, the Japanese reminded their counterparts. Unification would come in due time, and comprehensive independence would only come at the end of the war.³³

Bảo Đại declared that he would seek out those of "talent and virtue" [*tài đức*] to lead this new state. Though the emperor had initially pledged to govern himself, he now insisted that his former minister Ngô Đình Diệm was the man most capable of realizing a grand national coalition. He twice asked Ngô Đình Diệm to take up the offer, but was twice turned down. Bảo Đại asked Yokoyama to convey the invitation yet again. Yokoyama's sources informed him that the Ngô Đình Diệm had asked the Japanese emissaries if he would be able to immediately integrate all three *kỳ*, including the urban concessions of Hanoi, Saigon, and Haiphong, into the sovereignty of the court. When told that it would be some months before he could do so, Ngô Đình Diệm declined the offer, believing that it fell short of independence.³⁴

Principled as he was, the former minister also mistrusted Bảo Đại as someone who had been too willing to let the French manipulate him. As partisan of the Restoration Society, Ngô Đình Diệm had instead supported the return of Cường Để. On that much, Bảo Đại agreed. Immediately after the March coup, the emperor lobbied Yokoyama to bring his long-exiled relative back to Vietnam. It was both an act of respect for his resistance to French rule and an attempt to

³² Phạm Khắc Hoè, *Từ Triều Đình Huế đến Chiến khu Việt Bắc* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Hà Nội, 1983), 15-16.

³³ Vũ Ngữ Chiêu, "The Other Side of the 1945 Vietnamese Revolution: The Empire of Viet-Nam (March-August 1945)," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 45, n.2 (February 1986), 296.

³⁴ "Memoires personnels écrits en réponse au questionnaire des Autorités françaises de Hué, sur les événements survenus en Indochines en mars 1945, par Marc Masayuki Yokoyama," 226, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

unify Vietnam's various political parties. Privately, Yokoyama and other officials decided that they would not do so immediately. They feared upsetting the political status quo or undermining Bảo Đại's authority. Only in August did they consider it possible to authorize Cường Để's return. The prince was on his way from his home in Sendai to the Tokyo airport when atomic bombs fell on Japan. It ended the war and Cường Để's hope of returning to Vietnam.³⁵

The emperor turned instead to the respected scholar Trần Trọng Kim for leadership of the new state. They did away with the old imperial name *Đại Nam* and declared the Empire of Vietnam [*Đề Quốc Việt Nam*], using the term made famous by the Vietnam Nationalist Party to express the reinvigorated national spirit of the country's elite.³⁶ His cabinet drew on an array of Vietnamese educated professionals. Some were moderate, apolitical figures like the lawyer Vũ Văn Hiến and the engineer and scholar Hoàng Xuân Hãn, but others like Hồ Ta Khánh were more radical, having spent time in Marseille in the early 1930s, where he rubbed shoulders with members of the French Communist Party, the Indochinese Communist Party, and the Vietnam Nationalist Party. His minister of justice was Trịnh Đình Thảo, the lawyer who had joined with Nguyễn Văn Thinh to form the Indochinese Democratic Party and who defended Saigon's Trotskyists from colonial prosecution. The appointed *khâm sai* [imperial commissioner] for Cochinchina was the Saigon-based anti-colonial activist Nguyễn Văn Sâm. When the Empire of Vietnam fell later that summer, the cabinet members would end scatter across the spectrum of the country's civil war. Some joined the DRV and the Việt Minh, while some eventually sided with the non-communist State of Vietnam, and others still remained outside politics all together.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Trần Trọng Kim, *Một cơn Gió Bụi - Hồi ký của Lê Thần Trần Trọng Kim* (Saigon: NXB Vĩnh Sơn, 1969), 26.

The Empire of Vietnam won praise from prominent Vietnamese voices. Bảo Đại's declaration that he would rule according to philosopher Mencius' adage "The People Above All" [Dân Vi Quý] proved popular.³⁷ It was the same motto employed by anti-colonial activist Phan Văn Trường in his journal, *La Cloche Fêlée*. The former mandarin Đình Gia Trinh – who would go on to serve the DRV as a legal advisor and prominent academic after 1954 – praised Bảo Đại's choice as indicating that the Empire of Vietnam was the country's first popular form of government³⁸ The state began youth mobilization programs, educational reform using Romanized Vietnamese texts, and relief efforts meant to address the devastating famine that gripped Tonkin in the spring of 1945.³⁹

Each of these initiatives was limited by the circumscribed authority Japan had granted to the Empire of Vietnam. The cabinet members, Bảo Đại included, encountered this time and again. When the government obtained 20,000 tons of rice and paid dearly to send it by rail to Tonkin for victims of the famine – enough for more than 200,000 meals – the shipment was seized by Japanese soldiers and taken for military use without payment.⁴⁰

At the grassroots of the state, much remained the same after the coup as the administration tried to address the famine. The top layer of French authority was now gone and Vietnamese bureaucrats were promoted in their place. But the average French functionary, who had always worked alongside Vietnamese bureaucrats, were retained in service to keep the wheels of

³⁷ "Đạo dụ số 1 của Đức Bảo-Đại Hoàng-Đế," *Thanh Nghị* 5 May 1945.

³⁸ Đình Gia Trinh, "Hiệu 'Dân Vi Quý' như thế nào?" *Thanh-Nghị* 7 July 1945.

³⁹ Vũ Ngữ Chiêu, "The Other Side of the 1945 Vietnamese Revolution," 307-312.

⁴⁰ MP Bouffanais (Charge du Consulat General de France a Kunming) to M. Meyrier (Ambassadeur de France a Nanking), n.232, 22 May 1946, 22, *Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine* [hereafter INDO], MAE.

administration moving. In Tonkin's Thái Bình province, the first three months after the coup saw 265 thefts, 16 murders, and 5 cases of cannibalism prosecuted Empire of Vietnam officials. Despite the famine, mass political participation grew. In April, Vietnamese protesters launched a spontaneous demonstration against the retention of those low-level French bureaucrats, shouting "long live Vietnam" and "long live Japan." The Empire of Vietnam's top official in Tonkin, Phan Kế Toại, noted that there was at once a real sentiment of gratitude toward Japan and a strengthened national consciousness.⁴¹

In Saigon, the end of French rule likewise generated mass political participation. Professor Hồ Văn Ngà took leadership of a newly formed the Vietnam Independence Party [*Việt Nam Độc Lập Đảng*]. It was no coincidence that this former student activist in 1930s Paris had used the same name for his party as the Nguyễn Thế Truyền-founded Vietnam Independence Party. Hồ Văn Ngà was able to largely harness the forces of the former Restoration Society into a more overtly nationalist organization. Other Vietnam Independence Party leaders included Trần Văn Ân and Cao Đài militia leaders like Trần Quang Vinh. Following the coup, Nguyễn Văn Thành (pictured holding the sword in figure 17) helped them organize a rally of some 50,000 marchers in Saigon. In speeches accompanying the demonstration, Hồ Văn Ngà and Trần Quang Vinh praised Japan for their assistance, and the inclusion of the Cao Đài militia in the coup's execution. They also declared that they were "Vietnamese" [*dân tộc Việt Nam*], and heralded Vietnam's unification as a single, independent nation in the Empire of Vietnam.⁴² Later that summer, Hồ Văn Ngà would take a formal leadership post in the government as the deputy to imperial commissioner Nguyễn

⁴¹ Empire du Vietnam, Delegation imperiale au Tonkin, Province de Thai-Binh, "Rapport dur la situation generale de la Province de Thai-Binh pour la période du 15 Mai au 15 Juin 1945," 126, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

⁴² "Bài Diễn-Văn của ông Hồ-Văn-Ngà," *Tân Việt Nam*, n. 6 26 April 1945.

Văn Sâm.⁴³

Rivals in Southern China

This revolution was watched from China by the leaders of rival Vietnamese state projects. Members of the Indochinese Communist Party and the Vietnam Nationalist Party had spent the last several years positioning themselves in southern China to seize the opportunity created by Japan's invasion of Indochina. Each envisioned replacing the Empire of Vietnam with their own revolutionary state.

The possibility of a broad Vietnamese revolutionary front was opened with the Second United Front in China (1936-1941) and the anti-fascist entente it brokered between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party of China. In the late 1930s Kuomintang officials encouraged Vietnam Nationalist Party leaders Vũ Hồng Khanh and Nguyễn Hải Thần (the longtime associate of Phan Bội Châu) who had resided in southern China since 1930, to form Vietnamese front organizations with their Vietnamese communist counterparts. In Nanjing, Nguyễn Hải Thần joined with communists like Hoàng Văn Hoan, thus mirroring the Chinese united front. The group took the name Vietnam Independence League [*Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội*] known simply as the Việt Minh. Before long, however, the Việt Minh front ceased activity due to the mutual mistrust and antipathy of its members.⁴⁴ When Hồ Chí Minh returned from a long stint in the Soviet Union toward the end of the decade, he revived the front as the ideal vehicle for the united-front tactics that he long favored.⁴⁵

⁴³ Vũ Ngũ Chiêu, "The Other Side of the 1945 Vietnamese Revolution," 312.

⁴⁴ Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years: 1919-1941* (London: Hurst & Compnay, 2002), 212-213.

⁴⁵ Christopher Goscha, *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), 207.

Others remained suspicious of united front tactics. Within the ICP, some communist leaders insisted that they continue to seek a class-based revolution. Nationalist revolutionaries, meanwhile, mistrusted the ICP members who had been their rivals for the better part of a decade. Rather than invigorate the Việt Minh, Nguyễn Hải Thần sought to form a new front organization, in league with the Kuomintang and more closely controlled by himself and the Vietnam Nationalist Party. The Vietnam Revolution League [*Việt Nam Cách mệnh Đồng minh Hội* or *Đồng minh Hội*] brought together members of the Restoration Society, Vietnam Nationalist Party, and the Đại Việt. This latter group was a recently formed party drawn from Tonkinese intellectuals that coalesced during the late 1930s in Hanoi. The Revolution League effectively excluded the Việt Minh and the ICP. But the effect was to marginalize the Revolution League and Nationalist Party from developments in Vietnam, where the ICP was able to use the Việt Minh front to expand its influence. With the official collapse of the united front in China, the ICP only found more reason to shift their activity across the border in northern Vietnam. By the end of the summer of 1945, the Việt Minh had established themselves as the primary internal threat to the Empire of Vietnam. The nationalist parties would thus find themselves at a distinct disadvantage trying to compete with a Việt Minh front that was already postured to operate within Vietnam.

The exiled nationalist parties continued to operate in southern China, not having to worry about Kuomintang repression as did the ICP. In early 1945 they channeled their efforts into contacting the Allied powers before the upcoming San Francisco Conference. Forty-six nations, all signatories of the United Nations Declaration, gathered that April in San Francisco to establish the United Nations Charter. They would discuss issues of central importance to the colonized world, including the mandate and trusteeship system that had been instituted after the World War I. Vietnamese nationalists understandably wanted their voice heard on this matter. Nguyễn Hải

Thần's Revolution League sent a memorandum to the San Francisco Conference translated into Chinese, English, and French that decried the abuses of French colonialism. French officials also noted that by mid-1945 the Vietnam Nationalist Party had sent appeals to the US Embassy in Chongqing that appealed specifically to the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, and China. They pledged to fight the Axis powers and in return asked that these great powers reject French sovereignty claims over Vietnam.⁴⁶ In April, the Vietnam Nationalist Party also held a conference in Chongqing to publicize these views to the foreign consuls stationed there.⁴⁷

The Việt Minh undertook its own diplomatic campaign. In the face of uncertainty, ICP leaders of the Việt Minh demonstrated a willingness to compromise Vietnam's sovereignty, much in the way that Constitutionalists and other moderate political parties had. In a communique transmitted to the Free French officials in China, they proposed a five-point plan for colonial reform, including a 5-10 year period of trusteeship similar to the Philippines. Speaking in terms of "Indochina" at large, the Việt Minh accepted the return of a French governor general and French economic concessions. In response, French official Jean Sainteny found all points agreeable, but stipulated that an election would be held after five years (1950) to determine the form of Indochina's independence and its participation in the French Union.⁴⁸ French officials were wary that this front organization really spoke for both the communist and non-communist Vietnamese organizations,

⁴⁶ "Note: Dong Minh Hoi," undated (1945), 19, EA 174QO, MAE.

⁴⁷ "Extrait d'une note de M. Pignon," 29 June 1945, 293, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM; Présidence du Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Française, Comité de l'Indochine, Paris 8 Sept 1945, Compte rendu des nouvelles reçues dans la semaine du 31 Août au 8 Septembre 1945, 4, Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine, MAE.

⁴⁸ Propositions adressées par le Viet Minh au Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Française, July 1945, 16, EA 174QO, MAE.; Telegram, Délégation Générale du Gouvernement de la République française pour l'Indochine to VML [Ligue du Viet Minh] Headquarters in Tonkin, 16, EA 174QO, MAE.

as the Việt Minh claimed. One such colonial expert, Pierre Laurin, dismissed the claims of a Việt Minh emissary given that ICP and Vietnam Nationalist Party had long been rivals.⁴⁹

Instead, French officials sought to divide and engage. Officials at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs had learned of the Revolution League and Vietnam Nationalist Party's initiatives. Given that the memorandum translated into English was of high quality, they discounted these acts as surely the work of the US Office of Strategic Services.⁵⁰ But they were aware that these old revolutionary parties and their leaders were committed to overthrowing both French colonial rule and the Nguyễn Dynasty in favor of a Kuomintang-inspired republic. They believed that much was clear in the contrast between the respective Revolution League and Nationalist Party proposals (calling on the Allies to oust France) and the Việt Minh/ICP telegram to Sainteny (accepting trusteeship). One of Free France's leading experts on Indochina, Léon Pignon, thus asked Paris to consider using the French Communist Party to engage with the ICP, which he noted would have immediate benefits. But he conceded this would greatly harm France's future chances of working with the nationalist parties who were "calling with all their heart on America."⁵¹ This perception would persist. Until the outbreak of Franco-Vietnamese hostilities in December 1946, French officials would see the ICP as the more amenable party to Paris' interests.

August Revolution - Hanoi

Only on August 1, 1945 did Japanese officials agree to remit administrative control of

⁴⁹ "Sur un entretien avec Pham Viet Tu, Kunming, Pierre Laurin 23 June 1944. [rep of French Republic] 19, 174QON, MAE.

⁵⁰ Ministère des Affaires Etrangères to Ministre des Colonies, letter n.991/AS, 27 June 1945, 4, Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine, MAE.

⁵¹ Letter, L. Pignon (Administrateur en Chef des Colonies) to M. L'Inspecteur des Colonies, 12 May 1945, 239, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

Cochinchina to the Empire of Vietnam. Trần Trọng Kim appointed Nguyễn Văn Sâm as the imperial delegate and sent him south to see to the unification of Vietnam. Unity was fleeting however. Within a week, Trần Trọng Kim's cabinet was locked in debate over how to approach the coming end of the war and Việt Minh front in the countryside. A series of resignations followed and Trần Trọng Kim received Bảo Đại's permission to form a new cabinet. Those plans were thrown into doubt after news arrived of the atomic bombs and the victory of the Allies.

One of those victors was General Charles De Gaulle. Months earlier he and his Free French government had declared their intent to return to Indochina. Though De Gaulle claimed that he wanted to transform the empire into the French Union and award the colonies autonomy, the Vietnamese had heard similar promises from the lips of colonial administrators since the 1920s. Instead, Trần Trọng Kim and the imperial aides gathered with Bảo Đại to cable their own declaration to De Gaulle. Calling himself the "Chief of State," Bảo Đại warned France that Vietnam could no longer endure colonial domination. He cautioned De Gaulle to realize that France could only preserve some measure of influence in Indochina if it recognized their independence and returned to the region as an ally and an equal. If De Gaulle insisted on acting the part of colonial overlord, Bảo Đại warned they would fight. "We would be able to understand each other so easily and to become friends if you would stop hoping to become our masters again," he concluded. At the same time, Bảo Đại cabled a message to President Harry Truman, Chiang Kai-shek, Josef Stalin, and Prime Minister Clement Attlee asking that they prevent the return of French colonialism and support Vietnam's right to independence.⁵²

⁵² Présidence du Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Française, Comité de l'Indochine, Paris 15 Sept 1945, Compte rendu des nouvelles reçues dans la semaine du 8 Septembre au 15 Septembre 1945, 4, EA 174QO, MAE.

For French colonial officials, the messages were acts of revolt and grave disrespect. More so, they scared them. Already by early 1945, French officials feared most that America would occupy Indochina following the war. The French Mission in southern China noted that Japan was the temporary occupier, but America would be the perpetual victor in peace. If Washington took an interest in Indochina, they feared that it would end France's role there forever. Bảo Đại's appeal to America therefore touched a nerve.⁵³

Immediately upon his release from Japanese internment, Governor General Decoux reported to Paris that if the "royal fiction" was to be maintained in Indochina following the war, then the traitorous Bảo Đại would have to abdicate. His last act would be to name his nine-year-old son Bảo Long as emperor and assign an approved regent. Sensing no hypocrisy, Decoux noted that France should find a ruling formula which took care to lessen the mark of French tutelage.⁵⁴ Decoux's considerations were already out of touch with events underway. A broader contest for state power was underway between Vietnam's various state aspirants, including Bảo Đại. None envisioned a return to pre-1945 colonial rule.

The early days of August augured poorly for a unified postcolonial Vietnamese state. Trần Trọng Kim's cabinet crumbled amid disagreements over how to address not only the heavy burdens of administration but the need to widen the government. Any formula would have to integrate political elements hostile to their government, the Việt Minh forces. In the prior months, the Việt Minh had harassed the Empire of Vietnam's functionaries and even undermined its famine

⁵³ Mission Coloniale Francaise en Extreme-Orient, "Rapport de M. l'Inspecteur des Colonies de Raymond, Annex no. 3" 18 May 1945, 4, EA 174QO, MAE; H. Laurentie sur la politique à suivre en Annam et en Indochine, 'Note au sujet de la politique intérieure à suivre en Annam et en Indochine,' sent to d'Argenlieu, 29 Aug 1945, 4, EA 174QO, MAE.

⁵⁴ Schema des directives de l'Amiral Decoux pour une Mission eventuelle à Saigon (25 Août 1945), Folder 2, Papiers d'agents - Jean Decoux n. 214, MAE.

relief efforts by inciting peasants to attack public rice stocks or discredit relief associations sponsored by the Empire of Vietnam.⁵⁵

In Hanoi, political parties and associations began holding a series of public demonstrations in mid-August. Members of the urban, intellectual Đại Việt party paraded in the streets on August 13th to demand the consolidation of Vietnam's independence. Việt Minh activists began arriving in the city in greater numbers at the same time. The imperial delegate for Tonkin, Phan Kế Toại, met with Việt Minh representatives to propose a coalition government, only to be rebuffed. Minister of Economy Hồ Tá Khanh traveled to the central province Quảng Ngãi after receiving news that Việt Minh elements had begun attacking the Empire of Vietnam's militia and Japanese forces. On his return to Huế, Việt Minh commanders arrested Hồ Tá Khanh.⁵⁶

For those on the ground, the *mélange* of political parties was difficult to navigate and understand. One Hanoi resident named Nguyễn Ngọc Mẫn appealed to the Việt Minh in a letter on August 15th to join forces with the Empire of Vietnam. He could sense that the Việt Minh revolution was underway. But he didn't envision it as diametrically opposed to the traditional empire. To propose a way forward, he composed a treatise on how to meld a new conception of Vietnamese nationalism with "preserving the independence of the Empire" through a "*Đại Nam* national republic." In response, the Việt Minh apparatchik noted in red pen "Incorrect with V[iệt] M[inh] ideology."⁵⁷

Nguyễn Ngọc Mẫn had twice tried to send the plan to Phan Kế Toại so that the government could publicize it and present its contents to Bảo Đại himself. Nguyễn Ngọc Mẫn

⁵⁵ Vũ Ngữ Chiêu, "Empire of Vietnam," 308.

⁵⁶ 357.

⁵⁷ Letter, Nguyễn Ngọc Mẫn to Đại-biểu Việt-Minh Quốc-dân Cách-mệnh Bắc-Bộ, 15 August 1945, 69, Gouvernement du Fait, ANOM.

expected that Bảo Đại's endorsement of this national republic would galvanize the country, "bringing traffic to a stop on the streets" and shock his conservative imperial secretary, Phạm Quỳnh, into resigning. This letter was his attempt to have the Việt Minh leaders in Hanoi ask Phan Kế Toại if he had received the program, and remind him to deliver it to the emperor and implement its provisions. Though historians of this era have erroneously argued otherwise, a conception of the empire and the emperor remained important to Vietnamese like Nguyễn Ngọc Mẫn.⁵⁸

Two days after Nguyễn Ngọc Mẫn wrote his letter, on 17 August, new spread of a massive demonstration. It was organized by the Empire of Vietnam's General Association of Government Employees and to be held in front of Hanoi's opera house. Rumors circulated that the Việt Minh would make its first public appearance. Upwards of twenty-thousand gathered for the raising of the imperial flag and anthem. But before the second speaker could begin, armed Việt Minh units seized the rostrum and raised their own flags. The Việt Minh speakers derided the Trần Trọng Kim's cabinet as powerless, and implored the crowd to defend their independence by "exterminating the Fascists and their vile pack of dogs" in reference to the Japanese and the Empire of Vietnam.⁵⁹ Hours later, the newly appointed imperial commissioner for Tonkin Nguyễn Xuân Chử tried again to form a power-sharing agreement with the Việt Minh leaders in Hanoi. Like his predecessor, he too was rebuffed. Events on the 17th prepared those on the 19th. Revolutionary

⁵⁸ Approaching the Vietnamese revolution with a teleological framework imparted by national DRV histories, historian David Marr misread this Vietnamese language letter to argue that common citizens were appealing to Bảo Đại to abdicate, arriving at the exact opposite meaning of its author's text. Such false interpretations of primary sources point to the larger problem in relying on secondary 'Orthodox' works, as noted in the introduction. David Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 444.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 385-388; Nguyễn Huy Tường, *Tác phẩm văn học được tặng giải thưởng Hồ Chí Minh* (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Văn Học, 2006), 430.

enthusiasm spread and people in the streets sang patriotic songs already familiar to them, not knowing much about the Việt Minh or their official songs.⁶⁰ The Việt Minh and their ICP leadership arrested key rivals, including Nguyễn Xuân Chử, and seized government buildings.

Local members of the Đại Việt and Vietnam Nationalist Party in Hanoi gathered on the 19th following the Việt Minh coup to consider their options. Most agreed to accept the status quo and await further developments. Some Nationalist Party members called for a countercoup to dislodge the Việt Minh's communist leadership. But finding little support, these more racial elements withdrew from Hanoi to prepare their resistance.⁶¹

At the same time, the General Association of Students met at the Hanoi University to debate the Việt Minh takeover. The association's president, Phan Thanh Hoà, disagreed with the Việt Minh insurrection and saw it merely as the elevation of the Stalinist ICP. He proposed they oppose this coup in the making. One witness recalled the meeting as "a brouhaha of contradictions between partisans and adversaries of the Việt Minh."⁶² The former Trotskyist intellectual Hồ Hữu Tường interceded at the meeting. He reminded the students that the Việt Minh forces were taking control of the countryside. And how could they appeal to the international community to respect Vietnam's sovereignty and independence if they were mired in a civil war? In an attempt to avert a conflict between Vietnam's competing parties and states, Hồ Hữu Tường and two other Hanoi intellectuals drafted a telegram to Bảo Đại that implored him to abdicate the throne in pursuit of national unity.⁶³ A copy of the telegram was sent to Huế and the imperial commissioner in Saigon.

⁶⁰ Hồ Hữu Tường, *Le Défi Vietnamien*, (Unpublished memoir, Paris, 1969), 263.

⁶¹ Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 400.

⁶² Hồ Hữu Tường, *Le Défi Vietnamien*, 265.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 264-265.

August Revolution - Saigon

In Saigon, Empire of Vietnam officials pursued a more aggressive agenda than their counterparts in Annam and Tonkin. This was largely thanks the heterogeneous political environment in the south and the connections forged among its different politico-religious elements in Saigon during World War II. On August 14, they organized the United National Front [*Mặt trận Quốc gia Thống nhất*]. It grouped together the Vietnam Independence Party (of Hồ Văn Ngà and Trần Văn Ân), Hoà Hảo Buddhist leader, Cao Đài officials, and Saigon's Trotskyists, including Tạ Thu Thâu and Trần Văn Thạch. Several other unions and groups adhered, the most important of which was Dr. Phạm Ngọc Thạch's large Vanguard Youth organization. The United National Front was long in the making. It revived lines of Vietnamese anti-colonial activism that dated back to activist networks in 1920s-1930s Paris. Hồ Văn Ngà, Lê Bá Cang, Trần Văn Thạch, and Tạ Thu Thâu, among others, had worked together to organize the AGEI and took over leadership of the original Vietnam Independence Party after Nguyễn Thế Truyền returned to Indochina in 1928.

Imperial commissioner Nguyễn Văn Sâm arrived in Saigon several days on August 14 to take leadership of the United National Front. Imprisoned by French authorities before escaping to Siam with Japan's assistance to organize cells of the Restoration Society, Nguyễn Văn Sâm had a long history of both political activism on the Colonial Council and more radical activities as a leading anti-colonial journalist. During this time, he worked with Saigon's Trotskyist circles and collaborated in the publication of journals with them. He also worked closely with Trần Văn Ân and Hồ Văn Ngà, both before the war and later as they organized the Restoration Society.

On August 21, the United National Front organized a massive demonstration in Saigon that drew upwards of 200,000 marchers. This demonstration drew on the same lines of

organization that they had used to organize Hồ Văn Ngà and the Vietnam Independence Party's March demonstration.⁶⁴ The Front's leaders announced that they were opposed the return of colonialism, would maintain order, and eliminate reactionaries. One speech in particular contained ominous hints. Dr. Phạm Ngọc Thạch, leader of the Vanguard Youth and a covert member of the ICP, denounced France; but also reserved part of his critique for moderate nationalists.⁶⁵ Though the Front's demonstration was impressive, news from throughout the country made it clear that the Việt Minh held the initiative elsewhere. The Hoà Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ insisted that they needed to contact the Việt Minh.

Some members initially doubted that the self-proclaimed Việt Minh representative, Trần Văn Giàu, was genuine. He had been a leading Stalinist activist in 1930s Paris and in Indochina. But he has also asked to join Hồ Văn Ngà's Vietnam Independence Party in 1943, pledging to their leadership that he had renounced communism.⁶⁶ In this case, it seemed Trần Văn Giàu's intent was to infiltrate one of Saigon's most important non-communist political groups. Two years later, any mystery about Trần Văn Giàu's affiliation did not last long.

The day after the demonstration, Phạm Ngọc Thạch announced the Vanguard Youth no longer recognized the United National Front. Its loyalties now lay with the Việt Minh. Phạm Ngọc Thạch's closeness to Trần Văn Giàu soon became apparent, as did both men's membership in the ICP. When the Japanese Governor Minoda arrived at his office after the demonstration, he was greeted by armed members of the Vanguard Youth who informed him that the Việt Minh was

⁶⁴ "Trên 200 ngàn người tham-dự Cuộc Biểu-tình," *Sài Gòn* 27 August 1945.

⁶⁵ HCI, Affaires Politiques, Note, unnumbered, December 1947, 174, *Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine*, MAE.

⁶⁶ Viet-Dau [Trần Văn Ân], *Những Mặt trận Lịch sử, 1934-1947* [Historic Fronts], translated tract in Sureté fédérale en Cochinchine, memorandum n. 9380-S, 23 July 1947, 4201, 10H, SHD.

taking power and that they had arrested the imperial commissioner, Nguyễn Văn Sâm.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, news spread that Emperor Bảo Đại had authorized the Việt Minh to form a new government. Whether under duress or not, the next day Nguyễn Văn Sâm cabled the provincial capitals in Cochinchina and ordered them to permit a series of Việt Minh demonstrations that were happening imminently.⁶⁸

The next day, Bảo Đại abdicated his throne in a ceremony orchestrated by the Việt Minh and Nguyễn Văn Sâm formally resigned his post. Japanese officials had offered to suppress the Việt Minh revolution, but the emperor declined.⁶⁹ Bảo Đại seemed genuine when he declared to an audience in Huế that he preferred to be a citizen of a free state rather than emperor of one colonized. In Saigon, the way was cleared for Trần Văn Giàu, Phạm Ngọc Thạch, and the Stalinist Nguyễn Văn Tạo to meet with Japanese officials and broker a deal to obtain Japanese weapons for the Việt Minh forces.⁷⁰

At the same time, the members of the United National Front met at the Nguyễn Văn Hảo Theatre at 30 Rue Gallieni. They elected to adhere to the Việt Minh front for the sake of national unity, in time for a planned demonstration on 28 August. They may have been persuaded by the Việt Minh's arguments that it was best positioned, not only nationally, but internationally to greet the Allies. In Hanoi and Saigon, signs in English, Chinese, and Russian proclaimed the end of colonialism and called on the victorious Allies to assist them. Phạm Ngọc Thạch gave an address

⁶⁷ "Extrait de l'interrogatoire du Consul MINODA," undated, 174, Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine, MAE.

⁶⁸ Nguyễn Văn Sâm, telegram n. 696, 24 August 1945, IIB 57/364(1), GGI-V TTTLT2.

⁶⁹ Note n. 2551, 24 August 1946, G. d'Argenlieu to President du Gouv, Pres Comite Interministeriel, Ministre de la France d'Outre Mer, 45, 174QO, MAE.

⁷⁰ "Les relations du Front Viet-Minh avec les Japonais en Indochine de 1940 a 1947," n. CP 1, June 1947, 4620, EA 174QO, MAE.

broadcast on the radio in which he appealed to the United States and Russia, the latter he called their "great sister republic," to support Vietnam's independence. But both Washington and Moscow remained mute. While the Stalinists had initially deployed placards in Russian calling for Soviet support, they slowly faded away when it became clear that no assistance was coming.⁷¹

Though disappointed, the Việt Minh continued to argue that its credentials best suited it to liaison with the coming Allied occupation. They distributed tracts which made the point explicit: the Việt Minh "had fought with the Allies," and "it is the friend of Russia," while also being "the brother of China," (another witness recalled the Việt Minh arguing "We are like lips and teeth with China" [*"đôi với Tàu như răng với môi"*]) and noting that the newest government of British Prime Minister Attlee was leftist and thus a possible ally for the Việt Minh. As for Washington, the Việt Minh announced that they planned to offer the United States economic concessions to avoid the potential for America to cooperate with France.⁷²

The Việt Minh thus reasoned that they were well positioned to negotiate for control of the post-colonial state and keep a French re-colonization at bay. Among the National United Front, only two former members were named to the Việt Minh's newly formed Southern Administrative Committee. Only one member of the influential Vietnam Independence Party was selected, the engineer Ngô Tân Nhơn.

Now unchallenged as the head of the Southern Administrative Committee, Trần Văn Giàu cited the necessity of "maintaining order" on the arrival of Allied forces as the basis for his August 28 command to dissolve all groups not under Việt Minh authority.⁷³ Violence had already flared

⁷¹ Rapport d'ensemble sur le Parti Viet-Minh, Decembre 1945, Box 33, Folder 5, 517/AP, ANF.

⁷² This phrase is more often associated with Sino-Korea relations. Nguyễn Kỳ-Nam, *Hồi-ký 1925-1964, Tập II 1945-1954* (Saigon: Giáp-Thìn, 1964), 51.

⁷³ Telegram no. 717, August, 29 1945, IIB 57/364(1), GGI-V, TTLT2.

between Khmer and Vietnamese living with the western Mekong delta. The Khmer Krom, the large number of ethnic Khmer living in what was now Vietnam, sought retribution on Vietnamese migrants into the deltaic areas that had historically been part of the Khmer Empire before the eighteenth century. Local grievances and ethnic animosity led to atrocities by both groups.⁷⁴ In early September, the Việt Minh Administrative Committee was thus thrust into multiple crises. One in particular jeopardized diplomatic cooperation between Hanoi and Phnom Penh. Son Thai Xuan, a Khmer Krom village elder in Trà Vinh province, was killed in the communal violence. He was also the grandfather of Son Ngọc Thành, the Cambodian prime minister.⁷⁵

Much of the violence, however, resulted from the contest for control over the state's coercive power and the terms of its exercise. In response to Trần Văn Giàu's consolidation of power and marginalization of rivals, the Hoà Hảo tried to retake control of the deltaic city Cần Thơ, igniting a battle with Việt Minh cadres that led to the execution the Hoà Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ's brother and the son of his military chief Trần Văn Soái. Back in Saigon, after failing to capture Huỳnh Phú Sổ, Trần Văn Giàu and the Southern Administrative Committee ordered the arrest of all Hoà Hảo leaders and the dissolution of its affiliate organizations. In early September, Trần Văn Giàu denounced the Hoà Hảo forces in the Saigon press as traitors, reasoning that if they were seeking to occupy parts of the Mekong Delta, next they would take Saigon, and then seek control over all of Vietnam.⁷⁶ This only sparked even wider violence between the two. Only the impending arrival of British occupying troops forced Huỳnh Phú Sổ Trần Văn Giàu to reach

⁷⁴ Shawn McHale, " Ethnicity, Violence, and Khmer-Vietnamese Relations: The Significance of the Lower Mekong Delta, 1757–1954," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 72, n. 2 (May 2013): 367-390.

⁷⁵ Telegram no. 787-NC, September 11, 1945, President Comité du Peuple Nambo à Chef province TRAVINH; Telegram no. 807/NG, undated [between 11-13 Sept] both in IIB 57/364(1), GGI-V, TTLT2.

⁷⁶ "Kẻ phân bội: Huỳnh-Phú-Sổ tức Hoà-Hảo," *Sài Gòn* 12 September 1945.

a tentative rapprochement.⁷⁷ For a time, the Việt Minh maintained a fragile alliance with the armed forces of the Hoà Hảo and Cao Đài and more than a million of their followers in the delta.

Over the next two months, the ICP-led Việt Minh executed scores of those rival state aspirants. The leaders of the defunct United National Front, specifically those who were Trotskyists or members of the Vietnam Independence Party, were assassinated or executed by the Việt Minh. Victims included Hồ Văn Ngà (Vietnam Independence Party), Lê Bá Cang (Vietnam Independence Party), and nearly all influential Trotskyist leaders, including Tạ Thu Thâu, Phan Văn Hùm, Trần Văn Thạch, Phan Văn Chanh, and Huỳnh Văn Phương. The Việt Minh also targeted the Cao Đài military leader Trần Quang Vinh and placed him under arrest.

These enemies of the Việt Minh were sentenced in a series of summary revolutionary 'trials'. In one trial, Trần Văn Giàu personally sentenced the Constitutionalist Bùi Quang Chiêu and his nephew Dương Văn Giáo to death along with 23 Indian chettyars and numerous "pro-français" Vietnamese. To the north, it was the Vietnam Nationalist Party that became the primary target of Việt Minh violence. Việt Minh cadres arrested Nguyễn Thế Nghiệp and Nguyễn Ngọc Sơn, two longtime party leaders who had organized nationalist forces in southern China throughout the 1930s. They were soon executed. Vũ Văn Ân, a political opponent of the Stalinists in 1930s Hanoi municipal elections and later a member of the Restoration Society that worked with Ngô Đình Diệm, also disappeared while in Việt Minh captivity.⁷⁸

These trials built on a preexisting Việt Minh campaign to eliminate potential opponents in advance of the August Revolution. Captured documents revealed that arrests had already begun

⁷⁷ Telegram no. 784-NC, September 11, 1945, Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Nam Bộ gọi cho các Ủy Ban Nhân Dân HAU GIANG, IIB 57/364(1), GGI-V, TTLT2.

⁷⁸ Surete federales, Note n. 1616-SG, 21 March 1946, 158, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM; Service de la Surete Subdivision 1 [Cochinchina], BR n. 134/A, 18 March 1946, 378, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

in early August. In two provincial jails, the Việt Minh recorded the affiliations of its prisoners: 18 percent were classified as Vietnam Nationalist Party, 19 percent as Đại Việt, 14 percent as Trotskyist, 14 percent as Revolutionary League, and 18 percent as pro-French. Archival records do not reveal an accurate account of the nationalist parties' counterattacks on the Việt Minh.⁷⁹

To be sure, the ICP leadership had neither a monopoly on violence nor its misuse. Retributive violence was widespread after August 1945. The phrase *mò tôm* ["groping for shrimp"] entered the lexicon as a euphemism to describe the many bodies floating face-down in urban canals and the deltas' braided channels. The lifeless corpses appeared not unlike fisherman grasping for shrimp in the silted streambed. But it was the ICP and the Việt Minh that successfully targeted its rivals for leadership. After all, the party leadership routinely denounced the Trotskyists and Nationalist Party as traitors to be exterminated. In written works in the early 1940s, Hồ Chí Minh glorified Stalin's Great Purge, approvingly quoting from the show trials, while denouncing Trotskyists writ large.⁸⁰ In cases where local cadre carried out actions on their own without any central direction, their actions were nevertheless in keeping with the ICP doctrine they had been exposed to for more than a decade.

⁷⁹ Chef de la Surete, remplissant les fonctions de Directeur de la prison (CHINE), in Viet Ty Cong An Backan, "Translation 'Liste Nominative des Deportees pour 'Motif Politique' actuellement detenus à la Prison de la province de Backan'," 19 May 1946, 21, EA 174QO, MAE

⁸⁰ PC Line [Hồ Chí Minh], "Lettre de Chine: L'activité des Trotskystes en Chine," *Notre Voix* 11 August 1939; PC Line, "Lettre de Chine: Sur le Trotskysme," *Notre Voix* 23 June 1940; Authors sympathetic to Hồ Chí Minh and the Việt Minh often insist that the public statements of Việt Minh leaders were solely meant for external audiences. In her excellent study of Hồ Chí Minh's early life, Sophie Quinn Judge oddly writes of Hồ Chí Minh's endorsement of Stalin's show trials: "what he actually thought about these trials remains a mystery." Given that ICP leaders both denounced Trotskyists and Nationalist Party members as traitors to be eliminated, and that the party then carried out the sentence, the mystery remains why some scholars refuse to let Vietnamese actors speak for themselves. Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, 233.

The violent denunciations and executions were a symptom of the sovereign struggle. Here in practice, as Carl Schmitt argued, the ability to determine friend and foe came to define political life and sovereign power.⁸¹ For Trần Văn Giàu, some of those targeted had literally been his friends in the political scenes of Paris and southern Cochinchina. Trần Văn Giàu was honest in admitting that his distinction between friend and foe fluctuated based on how those relationships served the interests of his state project. "In making revolution," he reflected, "one must dare to believe but also know to suspect." Managing Cochinchina's political scene and its numerous political factions required a degree of detachment that Trần Văn Giàu seemed to have attained with ease. His 28 August order to disband all non-Việt Minh forces was, above all, an attempt to harness the troops from non-Việt Minh forces while eliminating potential rival state leaders of the Vietnam Independence Party or United National Front. "Perhaps these leaders could be temporary friends or enduring friends, perhaps they could be close friends or distant friends, but their troops certainly were our close and enduring friends," he concluded.⁸² It was those temporary friends that received the brunt of the Việt Minh's attacks in 1945. Only the impending arrival of British occupation forces in late September would halt this Vietnamese civil war for a time.

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam

One of the friends that the Việt Minh state sought to cultivate was former Emperor Bảo Đại. Ultimately, however, he would prove to be one of those temporary and distant friends. Hồ Chí Minh had not been in Hanoi during the August Revolution. He remained hidden north of the

⁸¹ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 33-34, 34n14.

⁸² Trần Văn Giàu, *Hồi ký 1940-1945* (Tập chí Thời đại Mới, n. 11, 2011), 290-291.

city, and out of direct communication until after the uprising. But already he was thinking of how to use Vietnam's Nguyễn Dynasty and its young emperor to rally the public behind the DRV state he proclaimed in early September. In the past, he had skillfully used popular fronts to build broader coalitions, dating back to the 1920s in southern China. he saw utility in the monarchy as a national institution in a fractured land. Likely he saw in the young emperor a symbol that could be harnessed by the DRV.

They were not the only ones vying for the young emperor's support. Despite the seething betrayal felt by French administrators towards Bảo Đại, the French needed to retain control over the monarch and his political capital. On 28 August, French forces parachuted Captain Castella, a former assistant to the emperor, and five other soldiers into the fields outside Huế.⁸³ Their mission was to contact Bảo Đại, Phạm Quỳnh, and Ngô Đình Khôi, the brother of Ngô Đình Diệm, to assure their safety and begin organizing a provisional government aligned with the Free French. Within hours of landing, Việt Minh forces led by the future general Đặng Văn Việt had captured all six soldiers and killed four.⁸⁴ Days later, the Việt Minh forces and ICP cadres in Huế staged trials for Phạm Quỳnh and Ngô Đình Khôi. Twenty years after enjoying several Parisian nights in Hồ Chí Minh's company talking politics into the late-night hours, Phạm Quỳnh was now sentenced to death in the name of the state helmed by his former friend. Ngô Đình Khôi would suffer the same fate.

The day of the August Revolution, Bảo Đại had found himself alone. All the Empire of Vietnam ministers and officials had disappeared. He asked his private secretary Phạm Khắc Hoè,

⁸³ Prince Michel de Bourbon-Parme was among the five other soldiers.

⁸⁴ "Note a l'attention de m. le Directeur General des etudes et recherches," 20 September 1945, 1207, INDO-NF, ANOM; Đặng Minh Phương, "Trở lại chuyện Phạm Quỳnh," *Văn Nghệ* 6 May 2017, <http://tuanbaovannghetphcm.vn/tro-lai-chuyen-phan-quynh/> (accessed December 5, 2017).

who had developed contacts with the Việt Minh, to arrange a meeting with the group's leaders. Phạm Khắc Hoè reported that no senior Việt Minh officials were yet in the Huế area.⁸⁵ He soon received the telegram from Hồ Hữu Tường that counseled abdication. Yet, the initial abdication was made without his consent, according to version of events Bảo Đại gave in 1946. It was Phạm Khắc Hoè and his chief of cabinet Phạm Quỳnh, "the one carrying the jar of glue and the other the paper", who had posted an initial announcement of his resignation.⁸⁶ Soon after Bảo Đại gave a public address to a large crowd of Huế residents to announce his support for a new democratic government. He announced that he did not want anyone to use his title to incite conflict among the people. He was simply proud to "be a free citizen in an independent country." The ceremony proved deeply moving to Huế's public, such that ICP cadres told Phạm Khắc Hoè to keep the emperor out of sight to avoid provoking the "backwards emotions of the masses."⁸⁷

When Hồ Chí Minh learned of the abdication, he was upset with the ICP cadres who had encouraged Phạm Khắc Hoè to initiate the abdication. For those communists, the Vietnamese monarchy was a feudal institution, in direct conflict with Soviet modernity, that needed to be destroyed. In Hanoi, rumors circulated of Hồ Chí Minh's displeasure that these lower ranking ICP members had arranged for Bảo Đại's abdication and potentially compromised his plans for a national front.⁸⁸ Hồ Chí Minh likely thought he stood a better chance of obtaining domestic support and international recognition with the emperor by his side.

⁸⁵ Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 440.

⁸⁶ A French consulate official conducted an informal interview on several occasions with Bảo Đại during his exile, contained in "Activités de Bao-Dai à Kunming," MP Bouffanais (Charge du Consulat General de France a Kunming) to M. Meyrier (Ambassadeur de France a Nanking), n.232, 22 May 1946, 22, *Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine*, MAE.

⁸⁷ Nguyễn Kỳ Nam, *Hồi-ký*, 215. Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 449.

⁸⁸ Devillers, *Histoire du Việt Nam*, 143n5.

Effecting some form of unity was all the more important with the arrival of Allied occupation forces in September 1945. In the south, the British occupation assisted the French forces in their own coup d'état, pushing the Việt Minh out of the cities. In the north, the Chinese Kuomintang occupation troops offered their support for an independent Vietnamese state free from French controls, but one that was not communist. Vietnam was thus already divided. In the south, a Việt Minh insurgency fought the British-French occupation, and in the north the DRV remained in power under the watch of the Kuomintang. The Chinese forces, led by General Lu Han, brought with them their ideological allies: members of the exiled Vietnam Nationalist Party and Revolution League, thus injecting yet another powerful rival for state power into the revolution. The threat of a Chinese-backed coup that would install the Vietnam Nationalist Party lingered throughout the occupation.

To show unity and portray the government as a broader coalition of social forces, Hồ Chí Minh named Bảo Đại as an advisor to the newly formed DRV government. Việt Minh publications portrayed the emperor as a popular figure who had sacrificed his noble [*cao quý*] position to unite with the people of Vietnam.⁸⁹ Hồ Chí Minh and Bảo Đại toured Hanoi together. They presided over ceremonies that rallied public support for the Việt Minh forces in Cochinchina and collected food and monetary support for the fledgling state.

⁸⁹ "Đoàn kết kay chia rẽ," *Độc Lập* 5 December 1945.



Figure 18: At right, Bảo Đại (1) and Hồ Chí Minh (2) tour Hanoi together and, left, receive food donations for the war effort in Cochinchina.

Those gestures did little to quell the inter-party competition in Hanoi and prevent China's suspicions of the DRV leadership. General Lu Han had no illusion about the new president of the DRV, knowing already that Hồ Chí Minh was "incontestably" a communist with extensive training in Moscow. Hồ Chí Minh was aware of that Lu Han could authorize a coup at a moment's notice and dispatch the ICP from power, inserting nationalists Vũ Hồng Khanh and Nguyễn Hải Thần into executive roles. One factor staying Lu Han's hand was his contempt for his non-communist Vietnamese counterparts, who he described as "violent and crude" to French diplomats [*brutal et mal élevé*].⁹⁰ In the face of Chinese pressure, the ICP publicly dissolved itself, though it continued to operate clandestinely. The nationalist parties were permitted to operate newspapers and critique the Việt Minh governing coalition, though they remained subject to the DRV's prior press review and censorship.

⁹⁰ Interview with Lu Han contained in MP Bouffanais (Charge du Consulat General de France a Kunming) to M. Meyrier (Ambassadeur de France a Nanking), n. 74, 26 March 1947, 99, HCI-CD, ANOM.

Civil War in the North

Throughout the fall of 1945, the Vietnam Nationalist Party's official organ, *Việt Nam*, engaged in a war of words, denouncing the ICP and the Việt Minh coalition as dictatorial and guilty of using terrorism. *Việt Nam* noted that the Việt Minh which had imported the Chinese term *hanjian* [traitor to the Chinese Han race], a term used to denounce Japanese collaborators during World War II. The Việt Minh translated *hanjian* into Vietnamese as *Việt gian* [traitor to the Việt race] and wielded it liberally. *Việt Nam* noted that people who had committed no crimes were being summarily arrested and shot based on these denunciations alone. They saved some of their harshest criticism for Trần Huy Liệu, a former member of the Nationalist Party who had joined the ICP during the internecine battles of the 1930s. Trần Huy Liệu had recently written in the Việt Minh's main newspaper that "The only choice is to support the Việt Minh government, if not then one is a race traitor [*Việt gian*]." ⁹¹ The effect was to politicize daily life, *Việt Nam* charged:

He who protests the Việt Minh government? *Việt gian*. He who speaks up and challenges a Việt Minh chairman? *Việt gian*. He who is wealthy and has property? *Việt gian*. Well only a *Việt gian* until he donates all his money to the Việt Minh. He who has a feud with a revolutionary mandarin? *Việt gian*. He who has a beautiful wife? *Việt gian*.⁹²

Mutual distrust persisted. The attacks continued even after Hồ Chí Minh signed a series of provisional accords from November. These agreements were supposed to guide the creation of a unified government and integrate the various Việt Minh, Nationalist Party, and Revolution League armed forces into a single national army. All this was to be done in concert with a national election in January 1946 that would allow all sides to compete for seats in the DRV National Assembly. All

⁹¹ "Thế nào là Việt Gian," *Việt Nam* 8 December 1945.

⁹² *Ibid.*

the while, Kuomintang officials acted as brokers, enforcing the fragile truce that saw the Nationalist Party and Revolution League obtain provisional representation in the DRV government.⁹³

For many in the Nationalist Party and Revolution League, the January election only served to confirm their suspicions. The Việt Minh, they charged, was exploiting their visibility and control of the government to hastily rig the election. In interviews with voters, Nationalist Party affiliated journals outlined the limited knowledge that voters had of the candidates and the tactics used by the Việt Minh. Upon approaching a voting booth in Hanoi, one journalist reported that the list of candidates had two sections, one of which was written in smaller black type. At the top of the list were several names in a larger blue font, including Hồ Chí Minh and other Việt Minh members. As the journalist approached the voting booth, the Việt Minh soldiers guarding it advised him to vote for the names in blue, who were true patriots. Inside, the voting staff was filling out voting cards for the numerous illiterate arrivals. Another woman arrived and asked that the staff fill out her ballot, "Please put down the names of those I need to vote for, I don't have the time for politics, and I know nothing of it." The staff were happy to oblige, according to the correspondent.⁹⁴ Bảo Đại and his wife Nam Phương were elected to the National Assembly in the elections. But Bảo Đại scoffed at the results. "Election? It was a joke," he told an acquaintance in early 1946.⁹⁵

Through the first weeks of 1946, the Vietnam Nationalist Party and Revolution League increasingly called into question whether Hồ Chí Minh and his communist allies were qualified to

⁹³ David Marr, *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution 1945-1946* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 417.

⁹⁴ Translation, "Les Elections Generales - Ce Qui A Ete Vu et Etendu," *Việt Nam*, 8 Jan 1946, in HCL- Conseiller Diplomatique, Bordereau n. 919/CD, "Etude: Le Viet-Minh est-il communiste?", 19 March 1946, 174, *Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine*, MAE.

⁹⁵ MP Bouffanais (Charge du Consulat General de France a Kunming) to M. Meyrier (Ambassadeur de France a Nanking), n.232, 22 May 1946, 22, *Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine*, MAE.

lead the state. Demonstrations and ceremonies of the Vietnam Nationalist party featured their party symbols, but did not feature the DRV flag. In early February, the nationalist journal *Sensible* [*Thiết thực*] organized a rally in central Hanoi that led to the front of Bảo Đại's residence. The crowd carried banners reading "Support President Vĩnh Thụy [Bảo Đại's birth name]" and "The Fatherland is in Danger." When DRV security forces attempted to disperse the crowd by force, the demonstrators fought back. Chinese troops intervened to quell the fights and allow the demonstration to continue. Under Chinese protection, several organizers of the rally including Phan Văn Bình entered the residence. The protesters delivered an appeal to Bảo Đại to lead a new government in place of Hồ Chí Minh.⁹⁶

Midst this intraparty fighting, General Lu Han applied pressure on communist and non-communist leaders to broker an accord with France that would set the terms for some Franco-Vietnamese accommodation. Once again, in the face of Chinese pressure, Hồ Chí Minh had formed a revolutionary "unity" cabinet that Vietnam Nationalist Party members Vũ Hồng Khanh and Nhất Linh into top ministerial positions. Phan Văn Bình would serve as Nhất Linh's secretary. This front allowed the DRV to negotiate a preliminary agreement with France on a bipartisan basis. In March 1946 Hồ Chí Minh and Vũ Hồng Khanh signed an accord with Jean Sainteny, agreeing that Vietnam would join De Gaulle's French Union as a "free state." The accord stipulated that the integration of Cochinchina into the DRV would be decided by a forthcoming referendum. Meanwhile, thousands of French forces would be allowed back into Tonkin and only withdraw after five years. The DRV government proclaimed that this accord was the prudent path.

⁹⁶ Surete federales, "Rapport Mensuel de la direction de la police et de la surete federales - Fevrier 1946," n. 1334/SG, 9 March 1946, 50, EA, MAE; Directeur des Services de Securite du HCI, Note n. 1885-C/SG-I, 27 March 1952, 65 HCI-SPCE, ANOM; Marr, *Vietnam*, 419.

Cooperation with France, the DRV claimed, would save Vietnam from a bloody war that the nation could not win in its weakened state.⁹⁷

For the nationalist parties, the accord marked the beginning of the end. Internally divided, the Vietnam Nationalist Party fractured during the accords, with Nhất Linh opposing any accommodation with France and advocating armed resistance if need be. Vũ Hồng Khanh relented and chose to sign the accord, likely under threat from General Lu Han. The March accord thus fractured the Nationalist Party into two factions. More ominously, the agreement set a definitive timeline for the withdrawal of the Chinese troops, and thereby the protection that had allowed the nationalist parties to assert their rival state project without facing retribution from Việt Minh forces under the command of Võ Nguyên Giáp.⁹⁸

That spring, the coalition government and its pastiche of competing interests showed severe signs of strain. In the course of a late-March trip to meet Chiang Kai-shek, Bảo Đại decided to remain in exile in China. As General Lu Han's forces began withdrawing from Vietnam in the spring of 1946, the civil war reignited when the Việt Minh forces attacked the Vietnam Nationalist Party and Revolution League's paramilitary forces. Commander of the Việt Minh forces, Võ Nguyên Giáp, helmed the campaign along with the ICP's chief of security Trần Đăng Ninh.⁹⁹ Prior to launching his definitive assault against the nationalist armies, Võ Nguyên Giáp pre-notified the French forces now stationed in Tonkin of the attack and received the commanding officer's

⁹⁷ Goscha, *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam*, 218-219.

⁹⁸ Etat-major interarmees et des forces terrestres, 2eme Bureau, "Les partis politiques au Vietnam Juillet 1951- Auot 1952," 29 December 1952, 282, 10H, SHD; Goscha, *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam*, 219.

⁹⁹ Christopher Goscha, *Un État né de la guerre 1945-1954* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), 252.

assurance that they would not intervene.¹⁰⁰(Lu Han came to suspect that Võ Nguyên Giáp was a French agent, perhaps in part due to his knowledge of this event, and was surprised to see him attack the French in December¹⁰¹) Having received that assurance, Võ Nguyên Giáp's forces moved to eliminate the nationalist parties and push their remnants into southern China. Midst the killing one Việt Minh soldier called for an end to this bloody civil war and the need to prepare for foreign invasion. In a public letter, he reflected:

We had suffered ... so we became confused and immersed in a cycle of sin. What sorrow! My own hands have shot dead three dear fellow brothers, because someone told me they were not in true revolutionary parties. I kept trusting that they were *Việt-gian*, reactionaries we had a duty to eradicate. ... **Vietnamese must stop killing Vietnamese over politics.**¹⁰²

By the fall of 1946, Vũ Hồng Khanh, Nhất Linh, Nguyễn Hải Thần and other leaders of the nationalist parties had re-taken their positions in exile in China. The skilled remnants of their military forces were integrated into Kuomintang army units in Yunnan, where they served until 1949, when the Chinese Civil War end with the collapse of Chiang Kai-shek's forces.

The DRV justified the violence as necessary to thwart the nationalist parties' threat to the state and their accord with France. At the National Assembly, Võ Nguyên Giáp laid out the case for his military attack. In his version, greeted with much applause, the action was warranted after the nationalist parties in key locations had arrested DRV officials and in

¹⁰⁰ François Guillemot, "Au coeur de la fracture vietnamienne: l'élimination de l'opposition nationaliste et anticolonialiste dans le Nord du Vietnam (1945-1946)," in *Naissance d'un État-Parti - Le Việt Nam depuis 1945*, eds Christopher Goscha and Benôit de Tréglodé (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2004), 194.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Lu Han, in MP Bouffanais (Charge du Consulat General de France a Kunming) to M. Meyrier (Ambassadeur de France a Nanking), n. 74, 26 March 1947, 99, HCI-CD, ANOM.

¹⁰² Bolded in original, "Bức huyet thư của một vị quốc quan gửi cho thanh niên và đồng bào toàn quốc," *Sao Trắng* n. 25, June 2, 1946; For examples of earlier violence between Vietnam Nationalist Party & Việt Minh see "Cần phải đã đảo chính sách khủng bố" *Việt Nam* no. 2, November 17, 1945.

some cases executed them. Xuân Thủy, the ICP member and editor of the Việt Minh's official newspaper, next delivered a speech that hailed Franco-Vietnamese cooperation as the best pathway to Vietnam's independence – something that the assertive and reckless nationalist parties put at risk.¹⁰³

Vietnamese were realizing that despite the imagined promise of the post-colonial state, it was not destined to be more just or free than its colonial predecessor. "Better prison than death," one nationalist newspaper published by exiled nationalists in southern China declared in its title. The author noted that many of those murdered by the DRV had been harassed and jailed by the colonial state, but also freed through the legal system. Under the DRV and Việt Minh, these men were killed without a measure of justice. Midst that summer's violence, these writers felt that the colonial regime of race-based violence was giving way to a more violent era of political violence.¹⁰⁴

The Southern Revolution Breaks Apart

The March 1946 accord facilitated the Việt Minh's control over the DRV state in the north, but initiated the state's fracture in the south. While trumpeting the viability of Franco-Vietnamese cooperation in Tonkin, the accord had recognized the status quo of French control following the French effort to recolonize Cochinchina in late September 1945. For the various groups fighting under the Việt Minh coalition in Cochinchina, the accord was therefore an abandonment. It was

¹⁰³ Assemblée Nationale du Viet Nam, séance du 31 Octobre 1946 - Séance de nuit, 45, 174QO, MAE.

¹⁰⁴ *Tiếng Gọi* quoted in "Revue de la Presse," 21 June 1946, F 7-41, Phủ Thủ Nam Việt, VNAII.

also a sign that Cochinchina's affairs could be dictated by DRV officials in a centralized Hanoi-based state, without consultation of Cochinchinese officials.

The DRV recalled Trần Văn Giàu after he had failed to unify the Việt Minh coalition in southern Vietnam. Instead, a Tonkinese militant and former member of the Vietnam Nationalist Party named Nguyễn Bình would take effective leadership of the revolution in the south. Nguyễn Bình balanced the maintenance of a strong military capability with his desire to suppress the competing state projects that dominated Cochinchinese politics, including the armed forces of the Cao Đài under Trần Quang Vinh, the Hoà Hảo Buddhists under Huỳnh Phú Sổ, the band of former pirates known as the Bình Xuyên, as well as factions of the Đại Việt and Vietnam Nationalist Party. But the DRV's mandate to subsume the resistance and Nguyễn Bình's domineering leadership strained their fragile state from the start. One of Nguyễn Bình's former friends and Nationalist party members, Nguyễn Hòa Hiệp, defected to the newly formed Republic of Cochinchina in the spring of 1946 after the unpopular March accord.

Dissatisfaction with the DRV's centralization of authority on diplomatic and domestic affairs led to the formation of a rival front organization in April 1946 known as the National United Front [*Mặt trận Quốc gia Liên hiệp*]. The National United Front in effect resurrected and reunited the diverse forces that had animated the similarly named United National Front in August 1945. It brought together leaders of the Cao Đài, Hoà Hảo, southern members of the Vietnam Nationalist Party, Bình Xuyên, and Việt Minh. Among the leaders was Vũ Tâm Anh, a former leader within Dr. Phạm Ngọc Thạch's Vanguard Youth, and Trần Quang Vinh, the Cao Đài military

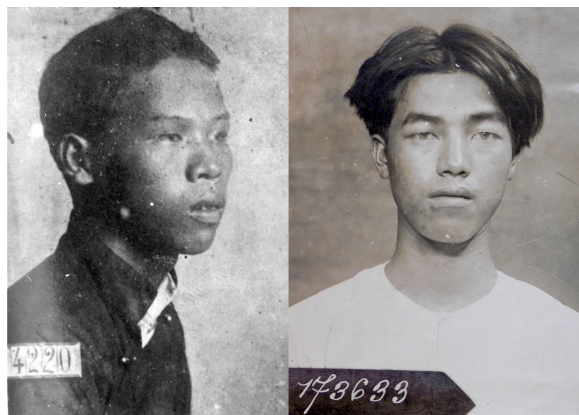


Figure 19: Nguyễn Bình (left) and Nguyễn Hoà Hiệp (right) a decade before the August 1945 Revolution, when both were members of the Vietnam Nationalist Party and imprisoned by the colonial state.

commander and former Vietnam Independence Party member. Vũ Tâm Anh and Trần Quang Vinh had both been kept in the same Việt Minh prison after the August Revolution, along with Hồ Văn Ngà, but only they were able to later escape.¹⁰⁵

Nguyễn Văn Sâm and Trần Văn Ân were also affiliated with this new front as representatives of the Hoà Hảo's political grouping, the Social Democratic Vietnam Party [*Việt Nam Dân chủ Xã hội Đảng*], which came to play an outsized role in the group. The party, known simply as 'Dân Xã', subsumed the former members of the Vietnam Nationalist Party. It included other notable personalities like Lâm Ngọc Đường, a former student in Paris who had taken control of Cochinchina's security forces during the Empire of Vietnam period.¹⁰⁶

Nguyễn Bình reluctantly approved the new group as necessary to quell and coalesce these competing forces via a mechanism controlled by the DRV. The impending creation of the Republic of Cochinchina and Nguyễn Hoà Hiệp's defection both threatened the unity of the

¹⁰⁵ Trần Quang Vinh, *Hồi Ký Trần Quang Vinh và lịch sử Quân đội Cao Đài* (Washington: Thánh thất Vùng Hoa Thịnh Đốn, 1996), 13-25.

¹⁰⁶ SESAG, BR 13626 and attached "Fiche sur Lam Ngoc Duong," 3 June 1947, 4201, 10H, SHD.

revolutionary forces. But the more pressing issue was the unresolved conflict between the DRV and the southern organizations. "Our members forgot the Resistance and focused on their hate and private grudges," Nguyễn Bình wrote in the summer of 1946, "Not wanting to give the French the weapons to take advantage of us, I presented a motion to form the National United Front."¹⁰⁷

The first meeting of the National United Front took place in Bà Quẹo, not far outside Saigon yet outside the reach of French forces. This small hamlet was also the headquarters of the Bình Xuyên commander Mười Trí [Huỳnh Văn Trí]. At their first reunion, the Hoà Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ decried the March accord and the DRV leadership's apparent disregard for the southern revolutionaries. Mười Trí proposed dissolving the Việt Minh People's Committees formed by Trần Văn Giàu, which he accused of "causing terrorism." Despite those grievances, the Front remained outwardly steadfast in its opposition to the Republic of Cochinchina government of Nguyễn Văn Thỉnh and maintained that it was committed to the DRV state.¹⁰⁸

Absent from the meeting was Nguyễn Văn Sâm. Together with Phạm Ngọc Thạch, the journalist Nguyễn Đình Nhơn, and Dr. Nguyễn Văn Tùng, he traveled to Dalat. Together they formed the Cochinchinese delegation to a conference between representatives of DRV and France that was prescribed by the March accords. Dr. Nguyễn Văn Tùng, a friend of Nguyễn Văn Thỉnh who declined to join the Republic of Cochinchina, drove the group to Dalat in his personal automobile. Meeting with other delegates, including Võ Nguyên Giáp and the soon-to-be exiled nationalist Minister of Foreign Affairs Nhất Linh, Nguyễn Văn Sâm and Dr. Nguyễn Văn Tùng

¹⁰⁷ Excerpt in Viet-Dau [Trần Văn Ân], *Những Mặt trận Lịch sử, 1934-1947* [Historic Fronts], translated tract in Surete fédérale en Cochinchine, memorandum n. 9380-S, 23 July 1947, 4201, 10H, SHD.

¹⁰⁸ Li, "Partisan to Sovereign," 148-149; Vũ Tâm Anh, "Project de Creation d'une Zone neutre," n. 1.105-bis, 16 June 1948, 66, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.



Figure 20: Nguyễn Văn Sâm, (left) his mugshot from his 1940 arrest and (right) in 1947.

outlined a plan to form a separate Cochinchinese government. This new provisional government would supersede the Republic of Cochinchina, and be led by those Cochinchinese who had thus far remained neutral. This, they hoped, would limit French influence and maintain the neutrality of Cochinchina before the referendum on unification. The idea was likely anathema to all sides. Neither the DRV delegates who sought a centralized, sovereign state nor the French who were insistent on the continued existence of a pentagonal Indochinese territory could abide that. Foreknowledge of this proposal may have been what prompted the French security forces to arrest Nguyễn Văn Sâm and the other southern delegates, expelling them back to Cochinchina two days after their arrival at Dalat's Hôtel du Parc.¹⁰⁹

Key members of the National United Front thereafter sought to do what they could not accomplish at the Dalat Conference. Two weeks after their expulsion, the conference ended with little to show but an agreement stipulating that French would be used in primary and secondary education in the DRV. With no progress on the Cochinchina issue, and the refusal of the DRV

¹⁰⁹ Louis Liverset (Chef de la Surete Federale du Sud-Annam), BR n. 5, 22 April 1946, 914, Phòng Quốc Trưởng Quốc Gia Việt Nam, TTLT4.

delegates to consider his plan for a separate, southern provisional government, Nguyễn Văn Sâm galvanized certain members of the National United Front into action. By the early summer, the Front had begun distributing tracts in Saigon that denounced the Republic but also the "dictatorial character of the Việt Minh."¹¹⁰

On May 17, less than a week after the Dalat Conference ended, a group of Front members including Nguyễn Văn Sâm traveled into Saigon for talks with Jean Cédile and French military officials. They proposed their concept of a provisional, non-Việt Minh government. French officials were in no mood to listen. At that moment, they were preoccupied with the establishment of the Republic of Cochinchina and rolling back the DRV's claims to the south. Rebuffed, the Front thus turned their attention to the June 6th inauguration of Nguyễn Văn Thinh's cabinet. On the days surrounding the ceremonies, members of the National United Front distributed tracts throughout Saigon denouncing Dr. Thinh's government as "separatist" and a "puppet government," calling instead on all Vietnamese patriots to unite. This much was the same as the DRV's official propaganda.

But these tracts distinguished that the National United Front sought a "political unification" of Vietnam only. They warned that the "administrative unification" of Vietnam was, by contrast, a "dangerous utopic dream which the National United Front opposes."¹¹¹ The irony of course was that the National United Front had come to endorse essentially the same framework as the "puppets" they derided in the Republic of Cochinchina who also called for a Vietnamese political space governed by a decentralized federal state. In negotiations with the French Colonel Jean

¹¹⁰ Translated copy of tract "Le Front National Unifié," and "Mặt trận Quốc gia Liên hiệp bố cáo số 2," both in 4201, 10H, SHD.

¹¹¹ Direction de la Police et de la Surete Federale, "Note: Le 'Front National Unifie et les Milieux Politiques Chinois'," undated (1946), 4311, 10H, SHD.

Nemo, Nguyễn Văn Sâm and his colleague Trần Kim claimed that they were not opposed to the principle of the provisional Republic of Cochinchina, but rather to many of the characters who held leadership positions in the Republic. They proposed instead a Cochinchinese government that was led by elected Cochinchinese leaders who were free from Hanoi's influence.¹¹² News of these transgressions undoubtedly reached Nguyễn Bình. By the end of June, it was thus clear to the DRV's southern leaders that the restive forces within the front, present since the August revolution, would remain a threat to their central authority.

On July 13, Nguyễn Bình unilaterally ordered the disbandment of the National United Front. The weeks that followed saw Nguyễn Bình continue to target enemies of the revolution in Cochinchina.¹¹³ The DRV forces killed several members of Nguyễn Văn Thinh's government and sentenced more to death in absentia. But the DRV now also focused on eliminating members of the National United Front. Nguyễn Bình pushed to increase his command over the Bình Xuyên. He charged two of Mùrì Trĩ's lieutenants with "disloyalty" in September, by which point his relationship with second-most important Bình Xuyên leader Bảy Viễn had begun to show strain. Not long after, the Cao Đài military commander Trình Minh Thế claimed he obtained documents from Nguyễn Bình's headquarters. The documents revealed that Nguyễn Bình had condemned to death the leader of the Tây Ninh branch of the Cao Đài, Phạm Công Tắc.¹¹⁴ If the March accords and Dalat conference had initiated a divide between the southern politico-religious groups and the DRV, Nguyễn Bình's actions were hastening it at the local level.

¹¹² 2eme Bureau, "Analyse de l'entrevue du 18 Octobre," 603, 10H, SHD.

¹¹³ See entry "Nguyễn Văn Sâm" on pg. 56 in Direction de la Sûreté Fédérales, "Index des noms cités dans la note sur les Parties Nationalistes Vietnamiens du 24 janvier 1949," ANOM, HCI-CD, 176.

¹¹⁴ Li, "Partisan to Sovereign," 148-149; "Compte-Rendu" authored by Trần Quang Vinh, 23 November 1946, 379, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

In response, key members of now defunct National United Front resolved to eliminate Nguyễn Bình. The Cao Đài military leader Trần Quang Vinh organized the plot with Trình Minh Thế and the Bình Xuyên commander Mùrì Trí's second-in-command Nguyễn Văn Sáu. Trình Minh Thế took charge of the planning, placing two *hommes de confiance* in Mùrì Trí's battalion under the command of Nguyễn Văn Sáu. Did Mùrì Trí know of the plot? It seems highly likely given the involvement of his second-in-command. Trần Quang Vinh trusted Mùrì Trí, having known him for years following the latter's conversion to Cao Đài and his time working at Japanese shipyards in Saigon during World War II.¹¹⁵ One of Mùrì Trí's close collaborators, a lawyer named Trần Kim who had defended Mùrì Trí and Bảy Viễn after their 1936 arrest for robbery, hinted to the assassination in his negotiations with French officials.¹¹⁶ Trần Kim had made clear that they wanted to avoid the error of Nguyễn Hoà Hiệp, who had rallied to the fledgling Republic of Cochinchina and compromised himself. The nationalist forces would negotiate directly with France only, and only after having thrown off the yoke of Hanoi's authoritarianism, symbolized by Nguyễn Bình. But this would only happen in November, Trần Kim specified.¹¹⁷

In early November, Nguyễn Văn Sáu manufactured a reason to liaise at the pagoda in Bình Hoà. That proximity allowed the two Cao Đài soldiers to infiltrate and pose as part of Nguyễn Bình's unit. But Nguyễn Bình escaped with his life and Dr. Nguyễn Văn Hưởng saw to his recovery. Nguyễn Bình likely suspected the Bình Xuyên of planning the attack. With no shortage of enemies, unmasking the plot proved difficult. Rumors spread that the DRV leadership had itself organized

¹¹⁵ Translation of a Việt Minh history of the Cao Đài army, 'Les Caodaistes de Tayninh,' 2 June 1949, 361, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

¹¹⁶ "Audacieux gangsters," La Dépêche d'Indochine, 30 Oct 1936; "Phiên chót tào Đại-hình Saigon," *Diễn Tin* 30 Oct 1936.

¹¹⁷ 2eme Bureau, "Reunion du lundi 28 October 1946 entre Monsieur Kim et le lieutenant Colonel Nemo," 603, 10H, SHD.

the assassination, dissatisfied with his ability to corral the southern forces or his ideological ambiguity. Newspapers carried stories claiming that the Stalinist ICP ["*Đệ-Tam-Quốc Tế*"] had grown frustrated with Nguyễn Bình, who had not yet joined the party, and had tried to kill him.¹¹⁸

Towards the Bảo Đại Solution

By November 1946, both of Cochinchina's rival state projects were critically wounded. The Republic of Cochinchina had lost its president while its remaining elites had broken with French policy and openly endorsed the unification of Vietnam. The DRV showed similar signs of strain. To the south, key members of the Việt Minh's southern coalition had revolted against the heavy hand of Nguyễn Bình and Hanoi's subordination of the Cochinchinese interests to a national, centralized DRV government. To the north, the outbreak of a civil war between the troops of the nationalist parties and the Võ Nguyên Giáp's forces had ended the coalition government and sent Nhất Linh, Vũ Hồng Khanh, Nguyễn Hải Thần and former emperor Bảo Đại into exile in China. In both cases, the conflicts arose from standing rivalries that originated within late colonial society.

From this point, those cleavages would become apparent as the exiled nationalist parties threw their support behind an alternative, non-communist state project represented by Bảo Đại. As the southern politico-religious groups fractured as well, the breaks would come along lines of disagreement that dated back years, foreshadowing to a degree those that would remain loyal to the DRV. However, the majority of the politico-religious groups and non-communist parties soon chose to support the emerging "Bảo Đại solution" that would give rise to the non-communist, French-sponsored State of Vietnam.

¹¹⁸ SESAG, BR n. 11476, 30 Nov 1946, Valeur: B/1, 127, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM; "Việt-Minh quyết diệt-trừ Ng-Bình?" *Cộng-hoà* n. 1, 2 February 1947.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE BAO DAI SOLUTION

* * *

French and DRV forces had begun fighting in Hanoi in December 1946, marking the traditional start of the First Indochina War. By early 1947, French troops were able to retake Hanoi and push the DRV state out of Tonkin and Annam's major urban centers and their environs. Colonial administrators would thereafter seek to transpose their colonial conflict on Vietnam's existing civil war, allying with the parties and groups that had opposed the ICP and the DRV in the prior year.

The occupation presented all Vietnamese with a choice to accommodate or oppose the new status quo. As in other occupied societies, most Vietnamese chose a form of accommodation. Just as many Vietnamese, communist and non-communist alike, saw the Japanese occupation of Indochina as an "opportunity" so too the French occupation presented a moment of new, if constrained, possibilities.¹ Two decades earlier, Phan Châu Trinh saw an opportunity to reform the country's monarchic social and political structures through the French colonial project, while attaining the means to ultimately escape it. Accommodating France was necessary to overcome the despotic imperial state and the mandarin state for him and others. Vietnamese who had come of age admiring Phan Châu Trinh faced the same dilemma in 1947.²

¹ Jan T. Gross, "Themes for a Social History of War Experience and Collaboration," in *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and its Aftermath*, eds. István Deák, Jan T. Gross, Tony Judt (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 15-36.

² David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 347.

The French invasion and breakdown of Franco-DRV negotiations presented the space for an alternative non-communist and decentralized political space. Though a central actor in its emergence, France did not fill this new political space. Rather, what emerged in that void was the pre-existing conflict, begun in the late-colonial era, between rival Vietnamese organizations and personalities vying for control over the fate of the post-colonial state. This chapter will trace the process that eventually led to the final emergence of the French-sponsored, non-communist State of Vietnam in 1949. That state project began three years earlier as domestic opponents of the DRV began to unite, rallying behind the non-partisan person of Bảo Đại. Empowered by supporters to re-open negotiations with France, Bảo Đại spent the next two years negotiating to obtain a unified and autonomous Vietnamese state. Not unlike Phan Châu Trinh plan to use the French to overcome the Nguyễn Dynasty, the coalition of Vietnamese supporting this "Bảo Đại solution" reasoned that they could overcome the authoritarian, communist-led DRV state by accommodating the French presence and at once negotiating the terms for Vietnam's independence.

French officials sought to harness this opposition to the DRV state for their own ends. While Vietnamese saw their Bảo Đại solution as a path toward independence, colonial authorities saw the solution as a means to prolong French control over Indochina. In 1932, they had brought Bảo Đại back from France to neutralize popular support for nationalist uprisings at Yên Bái in 1930 and communist revolts at Nghệ Tĩnh in 1931. Fifteen years on, French officials thought that Bảo Đại could once again provide a solution to compensate for the weakness of the colonial state. If French diplomats could coax the former emperor and advisor to the DRV out from his self-imposed exile in China, they believed they could use him to rally the support away from the DRV and into a state project more amenable to French influence. The price of their Vietnamese

partner's cooperation, however, was the promise that within the French Union they would finally regain their sovereignty and self-rule.

This chapter begins in December 1946, as the State of Vietnam first began to take shape, to trace the emergence of a bricolage state that would bring together the remnants of all of Vietnam's recent state projects. Most directly, it harnessed fragments of the DRV state in Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina that had broken away during the internecine fighting of 1945-1947. Foremost among these were the northern, nationalist anti-colonial political parties which had operated themselves as de facto state projects before 1945. By mid 1947, the northern parties established a united front organization with the southern politico-religious organizations that were quickly falling out of the DRV's orbit. At year's end the front would co-opt the fledgling Republic of Cochinchina and remaining monarchist elements in Annam. It was this pastiche of personalities and parties that coalescence under the nominal leadership of the Bảo Đại.

Emperor in Exile

Bảo Đại's path to exile began with his arrival in Hanoi in October 1945. While Hồ Chí Minh saw the former emperor as a symbol capable of unifying the DRV state, much of the ICP saw the emperor as a feudal relic to be dispatched. These cadres were moreover suspicious of Bảo Đại's popularity, something that was in large part the DRV's own making. Despite his absence and aloofness as emperor, his reappearance in the Empire of Vietnam had and August abdication were viewed as great sacrifices. This act earned him a reservoir of goodwill, only embellished by association with Hồ Chí Minh and the August Revolution. In response, just a month into his tenure as supreme advisor to the revolutionary government, certain DRV officials arranged for the

emperor to be ferried away from Hanoi, down to the coastal city of Sầm Sơn in northern Annam.³ For the first time, Bảo Đại was without servants or colonial minders, however, his family remained in Huế under the protection of local DRV forces. He was equally without money, left to sell off possessions and rely on small loans. It was also during this time that he met Ms. Bùi Mộng Điệp, who became his mistress for the next thirty years.⁴

The DRV leadership continued to struggle to control the former emperor's image. By the end of 1945, Bảo Đại was allowed back to Hanoi. But as seen in the previous chapter, his person became even more controversial. In February 1946, elements of the Vietnam Nationalist Party and Revolution League staged a demonstration that called on the former emperor to assume leadership of the DRV. That the Chinese troops occupying Tonkin allowed the demonstration, likely only increased Hồ Chí Minh and the ICP's anxiety that the Kuomintang may endorse a nationalist coup against the current DRV leadership. And so just days after the signing of the March 1946 Franco-Vietnamese accords, the DRV leadership ordered Bảo Đại to lead a friendship delegation to China and convey their thanks to Marshall Chiang Kai-shek. The mission served a dual purpose, separating Bảo Đại from the opposition nationalist parties and maintaining friendly relations with the Kuomintang government at a time when Chinese support for the DRV

³ Note n. 2551, G. d'Argenlieu to President du Gouv, Pres Comite Interministeriel, Ministre de la France d'Outre Mer, 24 August 1946, 45, 174QO, MAE; SESAG, BR n. 1484, valeur B/1, 21 August 1947, 603, 10H, SHD.

⁴ They lived at the former Hanoi Mayor's residence, 51 Trần Hưng Đạo. Mai Phương, "Mộng Điệp và ký ức về cựu hoàng Bảo Đại," *Pháp Luật* 2 July 2011, <http://plo.vn/van-hoa/mong-diep-va-ky-uc-ve-cuu-hoang-bao-dai-118970.html> (accessed March 23, 2018); MP Bouffanais (Charge du Consulat General de France a Kunming) to M. Meyrier (Ambassadeur de France a Nanking), n.232, 22 May 1946, 22, Indochine, MAE.

was still needed to counterbalance France.⁵

The trip failed to achieve either objective. When Bảo Đại greeted Chiang Kai-Shek, he was met with an accusation rather than a welcome. The Kuomintang leader revealed that Bảo Đại's was not the only DRV delegation in China. At that moment, there was also a group of DRV officials surreptitiously traveling to the Soviet Embassy in China. "Evidently it's Moscow that commands and who knows all in Hanoi now," Chiang Kai-shek told Bảo Đại. Moscow was not commanding events in Hanoi. But it was the ICP and its Stalinist leadership that began to increase their control of the DRV in the spring and summer of 1946. The DRV did continue to make overtures to the all victors of World War II, including the Soviet Union. Only in November 1946 did a DRV representative in Paris establish formal contact with the city's Soviet Embassy, according to French intelligence.⁶ Yet to the dismay of internationalist communists in the ICP, Moscow would remain aloof and uninterested in events in Indochina for several years more, choosing instead to focus on Europe.⁷

Chiang Kai-shek and Kuomintang officials looked warily on as the ICP increased its control of the DRV that spring. They sought their own contingency. China too saw utility in having a Bảo Đại solution. Kuomintang officials arranged for the emperor to vacation in an estate near the southwestern city of Chongqing. He was assigned a corps of guards on the premise that they

⁵ Surete federales, "Rapport Mensuel de la direction de la police et de la surete federales - Fevrier 1946," n. 1334/SG, 9 March 1946, 50, EA, MAE; Directeur des Services de Securite du HCI, Note n. 1885-C/SG-I, 27 March 1952, 65 HCI-SPCE, ANOM; Marr, Vietnam, 419.

⁶ M. Bogmolov received a representative of the DRV at which "des contacts étroits ont été décidés entre Soviétiques et Indochinois." M. Michailov, directeur de l'Information Sovietique is charged with a "service d'information en liaison avec la République du Viet Nam." DEC (Documentation Exterieur et contre-espionnage), Présidence du Gouvernement Provisoire, BR n. 1930/236, Valeur A/1, 23 November 1946, 174, Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine, MAE.

⁷ Christopher Goscha, *Un État né de la guerre 1945-1954* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), 383-385.

would protect him from any French attempts on his life. When he showed no interest in the city's nightlife, they then attempted to ply him with women. He quickly understood that the Kuomintang intended to make him "their Cường Để," he told a contact months later, referencing the exiled emperor Japan had used to win the support of Vietnamese during World War II. There were even promises of a potential "royal restoration" that Bảo Đại rebuffed.⁸ At the same time that Võ Nguyên Giáp was expelling the nationalist troops from Tonkin, Bảo Đại chose instead to settle in Hong Kong that July.⁹

Exile came as a relief, all but for the continued confined residence of his family in Annam. He seemed not to care about his strained relationship with France. Instead he traveled to Hong Kong on his own, spending many afternoons at the cinema learning English through film. The lone strain was his finances. When he attempted to withdraw money from his account via the Hong Kong branch of the Bank of France, he was refused. Only with the intervention of the American Consulate did he obtain 1,000 pounds sterling.¹⁰ French followed after to interrogate Bảo Đại on his critical statements of France in August 1945. When one interviewer asked if he still believed in Franco-Vietnamese collaboration, Bảo Đại let escape "a muffled laugh, fleeting and sneering" and then lectured the questioner. The French colonial project had failed, he said, because it only allowed "unilateral" collaboration. Taken aback by his assertive stance, the French press attacked the emperor as ungrateful and disloyal.¹¹ For the time being, Bảo Đại happily renounced all politics.

⁸ MP Bouffanais charge du consulat general de France à Kunming, Letter 7 May 1946, 45, EA 174QO, MAE.

⁹ MP Bouffanais (Charge du Consulat General de France a Kunming) to M. Meyrier (Ambassadeur de France a Nanking), n.232, 22 May 1946, 22, Indochine, MAE.

¹⁰ SESAG, BR n. 1484, valeur B/1, 21 August 1947, 603, 10H, SHD.

¹¹ *Samedi Soir* 13 April 1946; Wang Kunney Citoyen Chinois ..." *France Dimanche* [Paris], 12 January 1947.

The Countrywide Front

Nearby in southern China, the former minister of foreign affairs in the DRV, Nhất Linh, was now also in exile. With him were other members of the Vietnam Nationalist Party and the Revolution League's Nguyễn Hải Thần. While Nguyễn Hải Thần was the former DRV Vice President, he was also the longtime associate of Phan Bội Châu who has tussled with the ICP since their early battles in southern China during the 1920s-1930s.

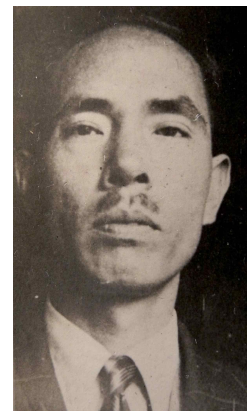


Figure 21: Nhất Linh circa 1946.

Nhất Linh too had a much longer story. He was already famous, not just as a leader of the Vietnam Nationalist Party, but as a literary writer and leading intellectual in colonial Vietnam.¹² On December 25, just a week after war had erupted in Hanoi, Nhất Linh called a press conference at a small hotel in Nanking across from the Kuomintang Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There he announced the preliminary formation of the Countrywide National Union Front [Mặt trận Quốc gia Thống nhất Toàn quốc] known simply as the Countrywide Front.¹³

In his statement to the press, Nhất Linh declared that he had fled the DRV because he disagreed with the March accords with France, which were taken without consulting either the government or the people. Moreover, he believed that Hồ Chí Minh was too beholden to communist internationalism. Importantly, Nhất Linh argued, this would make it impossible for the DRV to win the support of either Chiang Kai-shek, Harry Truman, and the international community. To move forward, Nhất Linh made four proposals, all of which were largely similar

¹² Martina Thucchi Nguyen, "The Self-Reliant Literary Group (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn): Colonial Modernism in Vietnam, 1932-1941," (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2012).

¹³ "Extrait du journal Kuo Min Jin Pao de Hongkong du 28 December 1946," 133, EA 174QO, MAE.

to those earlier discussed by French and DRV negotiators: 1. China and the United States would mediate a new round of negotiations between Vietnam and France; 2. Vietnam would be a free state within the French Union and Indochinese Union, with its own diplomatic service; 3. Vietnam would possess representation in any future Indochinese Federal Assembly that was proportional to its population; 4. France could maintain military bases in Indochina for five years, after which the Vietnamese government would ensure the protection of French economic and cultural influence.

At the same time in Canton, Nguyễn Hải Thần separately declared that the Revolution League was ready to made common cause with the rank and file of the Việt Minh to defeat the French forces.¹⁴ Chinese authorities in turn warned him to go to Hong Kong. Otherwise he must cease statements that would make the Chinese a target of both French and DRV animosity. Kuomintang officials were more concerned with protecting the large overseas Chinese population in Indochina than supporting Vietnamese revolutionaries.¹⁵

Both announcements were premature. The Countrywide Front existed in name and imagination only. In the first weeks of 1947, Nhất Linh and Nguyễn Hải Thần obtained the support of several influential Vietnamese organizations. Beyond the Vietnam Nationalist Party and Revolution League, the Countrywide Front claimed support from the Tây Ninh branch of the Cao Đài and the Dân Xã party led by Nguyễn Văn Sâm and affiliated with the Hoà Hảo. Interestingly,

¹⁴ Ibid.; Ministre de la Defense Nationale, Etat Major de la Defense, 2eme Bureau BR n. 52-DN/Z, undated [late December], 133, EA 174QO, MAE.

¹⁵ Telegram, Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Provincial Government of Guangdong, "Nguyen Hai Than, who in Guangzhou expressed returning to Vietnam by military means, should be warned," 5 April 1947, 020-011002-0083-0037x, AH. My thanks to Nu-Anh Tran who provided these documents and to Li-fan Lee who translated them.

the Front described the Dân Xã as an amalgamation of the Hoà Hảo and the Vietnam Independence Party, whose leaders were executed by the Việt Minh after the August Revolution.¹⁶

In February 1947, the Countrywide Front made its second debut, replete with a charter and program of action that seemed to bear the mark of Nhất Linh. The Front once again criticized the communist leadership within the Việt Minh of committing "terrorism" [*khủng bố*]. They pledged to fight for independence, the unity of Vietnam, and "reinforce a republican order, building a genuine democratic system in which any citizen has the right to intellectual freedom, the right to prosper, and the right to live free, without fearing repression or terrorism from anyone." The front also committed to uphold the principles of the United Nations, undoubtedly in an attempt to obtain international support.¹⁷ Finally, the Countrywide Front made a half-hearted appeal to the Việt Minh, asking them to abandon their terrorist tactics and pledging that they too could join the front and defend their fatherland together.

Once again, the Countrywide Front's founders argued that the clear communist character of the DRV prevented it from gaining allies in the region, both among newly independent states like Indonesia, but also abroad with the major Western powers and China. This much was true, and Nhất Linh knew it. As the former minister of foreign affairs, he was aware that Hồ Chí Minh had personally contacted Indonesian Prime Minister Sutan Sjahrir to propose the formation of an Asian anti-colonial front. Yet Sjahrir ignored the appeal, noting that Hồ Chí Minh and much of

¹⁶ "Mặt trận Quốc-gia Thống Nhất Toàn Quốc: tuyên-ngôn," *Mặt Trận Toàn Quốc* n. 1, 12 June 1947.

¹⁷ "1. Tranh thủ lấy tự do độc-lập, 2. Thông nhứt Nam-Bắc, 3. Cùng cố chánh thể cộng hoà, xây dựng một chế-đề dân chủ chân chính, trong đó công dân nào cũng có quyền mở mang trí tuệ theo sự lựa chọn của mình, có quyền được ấm no, có quyền được sống tự do, không sợ sự đè nén khủng bố của bất cứ ai, 4 Góp sức vào công cuộc xây đắp nền hòa bình lâu dài của thế giới theo hiến chương Liên-Hiệp-Quốc," Ibid.

the DRV leadership were communists, an association that would only taint Indonesia's national revolution.¹⁸ The Countrywide Front also tried to use its nationalist credentials to lobby the United States directly. Through January and February 1947, members appealed to the American Consulates and even through American Evangelical missions in southern China. Like the Vietnam Nationalist Party's earlier overtures, or those of Bảo Đại and the Việt Minh, these too went without much notice in Washington.¹⁹

The outbreak of war in Tonkin and the announcement of the Countrywide Front set off a race to contact Bảo Đại in Hong Kong. Both sides in Vietnam's civil war assessed that he was a non-partisan symbol of national unity and thus a powerful tool in the international and domestic realms. Already, the DRV had sent emissaries to try and win back the support of Bảo Đại, who still retained his position as special advisor to the government. They had also asked his wife Nam Phương, still held in Huế, to serve as a deputy in the National Assembly, which she refused.²⁰ More successful was a delegation from the Countrywide Front comprised of Nhất Linh, Nguyễn Hải Thần, and others. Arriving in March 1947, the delegates briefed their program to the former emperor. He agreed to resume negotiations with France for Vietnamese independence.²¹ Soon after, on March 29, the Countrywide Front formally declared itself in favor of a new governing coalition led by Bảo Đại and opposed to the leadership of Hồ Chí Minh.²² The DRV, however,

¹⁸ Hanna Papanek, "Note on Soedjatmoko's Recollections of a Historical Moment: Sjahrir's Reaction to Ho Chi Minh's 1945 Call for a Free Peoples Federation," *Indonesia* 46 (April 1990): 141-144.

¹⁹ Commandant Supérieur TFEO, BCR n. 854/1000, 25 Feb 1947, 127, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

²⁰ SESAG, BR n. 1484, valeur B/1, 21 August 1947, 603, 10H, SHD; "L'Annam sans Empereur," *France Illustration*, n. 89, 14 June 1947.

²¹ "Để mà hiểu Mặt Trận Toàn Quốc," 4 June 1947, IIB571 272(2), GGI-V, TTLT2.

²² HCI de France pour l'Indochine, Conseiller Politiques, Rapport n. 1.668/CP/1, 2 June 1947, 127, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

was not ready to give up on winning back their advisor or the southern revolutionary forces that the Countrywide Front claimed.

The Final Fracture

Since the summer of 1946, the ICP sought to out-manuever the growing opposition to its Việt Minh front. ICP leaders announced a new organization known as the Liên Việt or Vietnam National Alliance [Hội Liên hiệp Quốc dân Việt Nam]. Spearheaded by the ICP General Secretary Trường Chinh, the Liên Việt was designed to force the northern nationalist parties and the southern politico-religious organizations to accept the Việt Minh's control of the revolution and take part in it, or suffer repression.²³ The Liên Việt failed to rally the nationalist parties before fighting began in early summer. Without better options, the ICP reanimated the Vietnam Nationalist Party and Revolution Association by empowering two of their respective disaffected members, Chu Bá Phụng and Bồ Xuân Luật. Both men were named to ministerial posts in the new government to preserve the appearance of a united front and rally members of the opposition back to the DRV. The plan brought little success. Recalling the violent struggles of the 1930s, the Revolution League members attempted to assassinate their breakaway member. But what they failed to do, the DRV did. When Chu Bá Phụng attempted to flee the DRV in 1947, he was caught and sent a prison camp where he died in March 1947.²⁴

²³ Marr, *Vietnam 1946*, 486.

²⁴ See entry for "Bộ trưởng Chu Bá Phụng," *Bộ Công Thương Việt Nam*, <http://www.moit.gov.vn/> (accessed 4 April 2018); Tuong Huu Vu, "Late Leviathans: State Formation, Nationalism and Postcolonial Transformation in Pacific Asia," (University of California-Berkeley, PhD dissertation, 2004), 135; David Marr, *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945-1946)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013) 412.



Figure 22: Cao Triều Phát sits at center of a meeting of the Twelve United Cao Đài Oratories [Hội Thánh Duy Nhất Cao Đài Mười Hai Phái Thống Nhất] in 1952 in Bạc Liêu.

In the south, the Liên Việt managed to hold together longer. The southern executive committee for the Liên Việt included Mười Trí of the paramilitary Bình Xuyên and the Hoà Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ. It failed to rally anyone from the powerful Tây Ninh branch of the Cao Đài. Relying on decades old divisions within the Cao Đài, the DRV made Cao Triều Phát the centerpiece of a group of dissident Cao Đài oratories that remained loyal to their revolution. While their motives were multifaceted, these Cao Đài parishes had rejected Phạm Công Tắc and Tây Ninh oratory as legitimate religious authorities since the 1934 succession crisis fractured the Cao Đài community. However, even Cao Triều Phát did not greet this overt politicization of his religion and complained that the religious committees formed after 1945 to support national independence should remain above partisan party politics.²⁵ Nevertheless, Cao Triều Phát was elevated to the Liên Việt executive committee. Even more important, Huỳnh Phú Sổ was named as a "special

²⁵ Letter, Cao Triều Phát to Đức Linh-mục Nguyễn Bá Sang, 26 April 1947, 152, PUBHCNM, TTLT3.

commissioner" to the supreme DRV institution in Cochinchina, the DRV Southern Administrative Committee.²⁶

But by early 1947, it became increasingly clear that the Tây Ninh Cao Đài and its abundant followers were unlikely to return to the Việt Minh front. Their military commander Trần Quang Vinh reached a preliminary accord with French authorities to neutralize his Cao Đài troops and cooperate with the Republic of Cochinchina. "Let us play the role of traitor," Trần Quang Vinh told his colleague Nguyễn Văn Sâm in early in 1947. This allowed him the space to continue secret negotiating with the Countrywide Front and the French on behalf of the Hoà Hảo, without openly breaking with the DRV.²⁷ Shortly after the Countrywide Front's press conference in Nanking, Nguyễn Văn Sâm and Huỳnh Phú Sổ met with a French military interlocutor in Cochinchina. They expressed their support for some form of Bảo Đại solution to avoid a civil war, and relayed that the solution must originate in the south. They emphasized that they were opposed to a restoration of the monarchy. A constitutional monarchy was necessary for now, they argued, only to effect the union of the three Vietnamese *ky*.²⁸

This mutual mistrust brought the Mekong Delta to the brink of all-out civil war in March. The Hoà Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ led a desperate effort to repair the fractures in the southern revolution. Though the Countrywide Front already claiming that the Dân Xã and Hoà Hảo had joined their coalition, Huỳnh Phú Sổ was not yet ready to fully break with the Việt Minh and

²⁶ "Nguyễn-van - To truyện don du 'Viet-Nam Dan-chu Xa-hoi Dang'," n. 283/VDK, 18 June 1947, 138, UBHCNB, TTLT3; HCI, Affaires Politiques, "Notice sur le 'Hoi Lien Hiep Quoc Dan Viet Nam' ou 'Lien Viet' (Bloc National Populaire Vietnamien)," n. 290/CP-1, 16 February 1949, 180, EA 174QO, MAE.

²⁷ SESAG, BR n. 12894, 29 March 1947, 603, 10H, SHD.

²⁸ HCI Bureau Federal de Documentation, "Note au sujet des réactions provoquées par l'éventualité d'une restauration monarchique," n. 169/D6, 3 March 1947, 139, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

plunge the delta into a deeper cycle of violence. Possibly he wanted the majority of the southern Việt Minh front to join the Countrywide Front. Or he may simply have wanted to ensure that France had awarded Vietnam unity and independence before Hoà Hảo supported the negotiations to be led by Bảo Đại. For their part, the southern DRV officials remained just as suspicious of the Hoà Hảo as they had in August 1945.

Huỳnh Phú Sổ's actions in the spring of 1947 reveal that whatever his motives, he tried to prevent a civil war in the Mekong Delta. In late February and early March, Huỳnh Phú Sổ traveled with Mười Trí to Tây Ninh to meet the Cao Đài leader Phạm Công Tắc. Mười Trí had been a founder of the National United Front, and thereafter become a close confidant to the Hoà Hảo



Figure 23: Huỳnh Phú Sổ and Mười Trí.

prophet. The two men traveled light, avoiding main thoroughfares to reach Tây Ninh. In a letter, Huỳnh Phú Sổ described avoiding two ambushes laid by local Việt Minh soldiers that were tasked to prevent the meeting.

Upon reaching Tây Ninh, the prophet appealed to Phạm Công Tắc to prevent him from conducting any further negotiations with France or to recognize the Republic of Cochinchina. Huỳnh Phú Sổ emphasizing that like the Cao Đài, the Hoà Hảo soldiers had also been drawn into fighting with the Việt Minh troops. Indeed it was actually the Hoà Hảo who were "the number one victim" of the DRV's persecution. Nonetheless, the prophet stated that his hope remained avoiding an unrestrained civil war in Cochinchina. He hoped their meeting could help prevent

that. "I realized that within the Việt Minh there are bad people, but aren't there also good ones too?" Huỳnh Phú Sổ asked the Cao Đài leader.²⁹

Phạm Công Tắc did not waiver. He maintained that the Tây Ninh branch of the Cao Đài would continue to negotiate with France. Drawing a parallel to Indonesia, the Cao Đài leader likened himself to Prime Minister Sutan Sjahrir and the ongoing revolution in the former Dutch East Indies. Sjahrir had engaged in negotiations with the Dutch on several occasions, acting on behalf of the revolutionary state to find a resolution to the conflict. All the while President Sukarno adopted a more hardline attitude as the uncompromising nationalist, in Phạm Công Tắc's telling. Both roles were necessary to obtain independence, he averred. He believed now was the time to negotiate, and it was his role to take up the talks.³⁰ Huỳnh Phú Sổ and Mười Trí left the meeting without reaching an accord.

The Hoà Hảo prophet returned to Long Xuyên province in the Mekong Delta. There he found that the civil war he hoped to prevent was already underway. Local Hoà Hảo troops and spiritual leaders were engaged in a tense standoff with the encroaching administrative personnel of the DRV state. On April 9, local DRV officials in Long Xuyên informed the Southern Administrative Committee of a full-scale conflict between their troops and those of the Hoà Hảo and the Dân Xã. Thousands of soldiers and administrators had been killed by the Dân Xã in Long Xuyên province in just a matter of days in early April, according to the DRV officials' internal reports. The Dân Xã had launched a "coup" and organized demonstrations calling for the downfall of the DRV.

²⁹ Letter, So 87 /ĐB, UBHCNB, Uy Vien Dac Biet, 22-March-1947, Huynh Phu So to Pham-Ngoc-Thuan, 145, PUBHCNB, TTLT3.

³⁰ Huỳnh Văn Trí [Mười Trí], "Công cuộc di TAYNINH: Phục Trình các điều nghe thấy trong cuộc hành trình," 9 March 1947, 152, PUBHCNB, TTLT3.

Most concerning to the DRV authorities likely was not just the demonstrations, but the emerging link between the southern revolutionaries and the exiled northern nationalist parties in southern China. The Hoà Hảo were not just chanting "down with the Hồ Chí Minh government." They also were demanding the establishment of a government led by Nguyễn Hải Thần, leader of the Countrywide Front. It was after this that the Việt Minh troops attacked. "Much blood flowed," the DRV official noted in his concluding cable to headquarters, "Send help." On April 15, officials further notified the DRV Southern Administrative Committee that Huỳnh Phú Sổ had returned to Long Xuyên on April 8. The coup had broken out April 9, they noted.³¹

A few kilometers south in Cần Thơ, members of the Dân Xã continued their demonstrations. They quickly escalated as Dân Xã forces arrested DRV functionaries and confiscated state vehicles. When confronted by DRV troops, the demonstrations chanted "down with Hồ Chí Minh." The DRV troops retorted with gunfire. The demonstrators were cut down, achieving a "bloody result," according to their reports back to the Southern Administrative Committee.³²

For his part, Huỳnh Phú Sổ wrote to Mười Trí on April 13, describing the utter deterioration of the situation. Once again "terrorism" was being spread by the DRV, he lamented. Huỳnh Phú Sổ had tried in vain to defuse the situation at Cần Thơ. When he and his guards attempted to go negotiate with the local DRV authorities, they were fired upon. Four of their men were killed, while they reluctantly returned fire and killed a dozen of their attackers. "One face negotiates, one face terrorizes unrelentingly," he lamented. But according to his account, the

³¹ April 13, no number, TAM TU to NOI VU, 155, Phong Uy Ban Hanh Chinh Nam Bo, TTLT3; 15 April, no number, NGUYEN KIM NHA to CAS Nam Bo, 155, PUBHCNB, TTLT3.

³² 17 April, no time, so 34/KB HO TUE to THUONG VU nho CAS chuyen gia, 155, PUBHCNB, TTLT3.

fighting was worse still in Long Xuyên. There the Hoà Hảo had discovered a mass grave with 200 bodies. In his final plea, the Hoà Hảo prophet asked for more ammunition to help stave off the attacks.³³

A few days later, on April 17, DRV authorities in Cần Thơ contacted the Southern Administrative Committee. They asked what their attitude was towards the "special commissioner," referring to Huỳnh Phú Sổ. At the same time, the provincial committee for Long Xuyên also cabled the senior DRV official Ung Văn Khiêm to provide an update and seek guidance. Ung Văn Khiêm was a product of the late colonial era's contentious politics: a longtime member of the Indochinese Communist Party, a former denizen of southern China's Vietnamese revolutionary community in the late 1920s, and a veteran of the colonial prison system.³⁴ In 1947 he was both a member of the DRV National Assembly and commissioner of the Interior Office within the DRV's Southern Administrative Committee. The cable he received on the 17th read:

We have captured Huỳnh Phú Sổ - STOP - imprisoned at military bureau - STOP - Interior Office inform if must bring back to Southern [administrative committee] or provincial authorities judge on the spot - STOP - evidence of treason is already clear - STOP - please answer immediately - STOP.³⁵

The wording of Ung Văn Khiêm's exact response is lost. But the committee's actions make clear that he endorsed the "on the spot" trial and execution proposed by provincial authorities. Those local DRV authorities killed Huỳnh Phú Sổ and concealed the body. Mười Trí was also

³³ Letter, Huỳnh Phú Sổ to Anh Mười [Huỳnh Văn Trí/Mười Trí] and Anh Tư [Lâm Văn Đức / Tư Ty] Đ/13/4, 432, PUBHCNB, TTLT3.

³⁴ "Ung Văn Khiêm - vị Bộ trưởng kiên trung, nhân hậu," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vietnam, http://www.mofahcm.gov.vn/mofa/bng_vietnam/nr150424095703/ns150803112110 (accessed March 3, 2018).

³⁵ 17 April, no time, no number, 'Uy Ban Hanh Chanh Longxuyen' to 'Uy Vien Noi Vu', 155, PUBHCNB, TTLT3.

arrested and eventually sent far to the western delta, away from the Hoà Hảo strongholds. A week later, the Southern Administrative Committee announced the conviction of Huỳnh Phú Sổ for treason. The DRV had not only killed the one religious leader working to heal the divisions in the southern revolution, but also galvanized broader opposition to their authority in Cochinchina.

News of the prophet's execution only exacerbated the fighting between the Hoà Hảo and DRV forces. The Dân Xã called for open revolt against the DRV and Việt Minh. In the Dân Xã's propaganda materials, the party began to cast the southern civil war as one between an authoritarian communist party and nationalist revolutionary forces. Before April was out, the Dân Xã distributed a series of tracts and pamphlets that enumerated a list of executions and crimes committed since the August Revolution, laying blame for all on the ICP. Soon thereafter, Nguyễn Văn Sâm published an article in the Saigon press announcing the Dân Xã's adherence to the Countrywide Front and their support for Bảo Đại to re-open negotiations with France. Other disaffected revolutionaries who had joined the 1946 National Union Front suppressed by Nguyễn Bình in 1946 also denounced the DRV as a communist dictatorship and Hồ Chí Minh as a Stalinist.³⁶ By the summer of 1947, both the Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo had now both withdrawn from the Việt Minh front and rallied to the Countrywide Front.

France's Bảo Đại Solution

France had not given up on their former modern monarch. In the spring of 1946, at the same time that Saigon's Gaullist colonial lobby pushed for a separate Cochinchinese state, another colonial lobby emerged. This conservative faction differed from the Saigon colonial lobby, who

³⁶ HCI, Service de la Sûreté, Note n. 1035/CFR, 29 April 1947, 4201, 10H, SHD; "Extrait du Journal de Saigon du 24 Juillet 1947," in n. 2898/1000/B.3/0, "Notice technique de contre ingérence politique Cochinchine," 4 August 1947, 102, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

were imperial Republicans and Gaullist supporters. The conservative Annam-based colonial lobby was led by Monsignor Antonin-Fernand Drapier and a Monsieur Tillard.³⁷ Together they tried to convince High Commissioner D'Argenlieu that a restoration of the monarchy was the only means to preserve French influence in Indochina and overturn the DRV state.

Like Bảo Đại's former guardian M. Charles, M. Tillard was also a conservative monarchist and Vichy sympathizer. As the head of the French education system in Annam before 1940, he seized upon the German invasion of France to reissue textbooks that minimized the events of the "revolution," re-writing the French Revolution out of history. In his official capacity, he inserted articles into numerous Hué newspapers that welcomed Hitler's victories, championed Marshall Pétain's Vichy *révolution nationale*, and assailed Charles de Gaulle as a puppet of Great Britain. Like Monsignor Drapier, he was also deeply Catholic.³⁸ To what degree their appeals influenced D'Argenlieu's thinking in mid-1946 is not clear, but by summer's end he had come to see the need to revive the monarchy.

In August, D'Argenlieu provided an assessment of the situation to French Minister of Overseas Affairs Marius Moutet. Describing the exiled emperor as a "card," D'Argenlieu reasoned that it was not yet clear if France could play it to their advantage. But he held out the possibility that the day would soon arrive that they may need that card. At the time, the DRV remained in power and locked in negotiations with Paris. Were the government to fall from power, France could rally support from monarchists in Tonkin and Annam by reanimating the Vietnamese monarchy, according to D'Argenlieu. The only question was which monarch. D'Argenlieu and his

³⁷ Letter, Mgr Drapier to D'Argenlieu, 13 April 1946, 33-40, 517/AP, ANF.

³⁸ Letter, n. 1893, Commission Interministérielle d'Enquête de l'Indochine (Paris) to Secrétaire d'Etat à la Présidence du Conseil chargé des Affaires d'Outre-Mer, 28 October 1947, 8, EA 174QO, MAE.

aides noted that Bảo Đại's popularity lagged before 1945 on account of his complete disinterest in public affairs. They moreover remained suspicious of the former emperor's willingness to return. D'Argenlieu left the question for another day, but remarked that if not Bảo Đại, a regency with his oldest son Bảo Long could be established instead.³⁹

When war broke out between the DRV and France in December 1946, the opportunity to seek out a reanimated colonial solution for Indochina appeared. M. Tillard's star rose once again. General Henri Le Bris led the French occupation of Huế with M. Tillard acting as his chief of cabinet. Together, he and Monsignor Drapier continued to advocate a monarchic restoration. They pushed for a regency with the Catholic Empress Nam Phương serving as regent to her son Bảo Long. Nam Phương, however, rejected the idea out of hand.⁴⁰ It would be a full year before M. Tillard's past caught up with him. Gaullists advisors to D'Argenlieu saw that Tillard was expelled to France and stripped of his pension.⁴¹

In early 1947, D'Argenlieu likely had more practical matters on his mind. He and his advisors had long since concluded that direct rule over Indochina was impossible. It was more than a matter of the revolution and a spreading nationalist fervor. French rule, they admitted, had always been direct. Even in Cochinchina, the veneer of French power rested upon the indigenous bureaucracy of *đốc phủ sứ* [district chiefs] and their subordinates to effect the practice of

³⁹ Note n. 2551, 24 August 1946, G. d'Argenlieu to President du Gouv, Pres Comite Interministeriel, Ministre de la France d'Outre Mer, 45, 174QO, MAE; "Note d'A. Torel administrateur de 1ere classe des services civile d'Indochine à Loc Ninh," 31 Aug 1945, 33-2, 517/AP, ANF.

⁴⁰ "Nam Phương," in Christopher Goscha, *Historical Dictionary of the Indochina War 1945-1954: An International and Interdisciplinary Approach* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011).

⁴¹ Letter 23 April 1947, Pascal Martini (Inspecteur des PTT à Hue) to Le Ministre de la France d'Outre-Mer, 8, EA 174QO, MAE.

administration.⁴² They paused only on the question of how best to effect indirect rule.

D'Argenlieu's colonial expert, Léon Pignon, argued for a strategy that used the domestic opposition to the DRV. France could graft their colonial war onto the civil war underway, all while preserving French influence in Indochina. Bảo Đại was the key to both their conceptions. He was at once a traditional symbol of authority and a non-partisan symbol of the revolution and opposition to the DRV. In January 1947, just before he was recalled to France, D'Argenlieu recommended that French policy seek the restoration of the monarchy. His replacement as High Commissioner for Indochina, Émile Bollaert, began to pursue this strategy. And so not long after the Countrywide Front announced its formation, Bollaert dispatched his own emissaries to Hong Kong.

Colonial officials soon found that Bảo Đại was less the solution to their problems than a source of new ones. One of the French military's senior-most commanders in Tonkin, General Jean Crépin, discovered that by comparison to the DRV, the former emperor was "if not an immediate threat, at least a new source of difficulties."⁴³ Bollaert selected Jean Cousseau, a veteran Indochina hand, to meet Bảo Đại in Hong Kong and sound out his willingness to return. Cousseau was born in Tonkin and spoke fluent Vietnamese. Those experiences and skills made him an ideal colonial administrator but a terrible interlocutor. Imbued with a colonial mentality, he spoke to Bảo Đại in patronizing terms. It was France's protection and guidance that the emperor needed, he reasoned, betraying that his interest was in using Bảo Đại as the "card" that D'Argenlieu spoke of. There were promises of new powers and respect, to be sure, not unlike his return to Vietnam

⁴² "Note d'A. Torel administrateur de 1ere classe des services civile d'Indochine à Loc Ninh," 31 Aug 1945, 33-2, 517/AP, ANF.

⁴³ Jean Crépin, "Souvenirs d'Indochine," p. 5, 1 KT 443, SHD.

in 1932. All of this caused Bảo Đại to dismiss Cousseau. He was "sly, wily, and a liar," but a poor one at that, Bảo Đại reported back to the French showing the depth of his distrust, "because to lie convincingly one must be intelligent."⁴⁴

Bollaert's first pass had not worked, so he tried yet another. Three months later, he dispatched the colonial scholar Paul Mus to Hong Kong with the same mission. The former emperor was no more receptive. When told that France would support him with arms and money to fight the DRV forces, Bảo Đại retorted that if he had an army, it was the French army that he would attack upon return.⁴⁵ And like Hồ Chí Minh, who Mus also visited, Bảo Đại insisted that any accord recognize the unity and independence of the Vietnamese state. In other words, the former emperor was not willing to settle for any less than what the DRV had demanded in 1946.

Domestic Support for a Solution

The French colonial invasion in early 1947 and expulsion of the DRV state from Hanoi and Huế once again created a new political space, into which flowed the preexisting competitors and disaffected members of the DRV. French troops established local administrative committees in Tonkin and Annam led by Vietnamese. The members were drawn from the former elite administrative classes and opponents of the Việt Minh, like the former colonial administrator Trần Văn Lý in Huế. In Hanoi, the administrative committee was led Trương Đình Tri, the former DRV Minister of Health and a prominent member of the non-communist Đại Việt party.

⁴⁴ Pierre Reynaud (chargé de Mission Aupres du Haut Commissaire de France), Letter to Haut Commissaire, 10 Nov 1947, 103, Asie-Océanie - Indochine, MAE; Capitaine de Corvette Sicard, "Note a/s Commandant Reynaud," 23 December 1947, 103, Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine, MAE.

⁴⁵ Telegram n. 3891, Ministry of Foreign Affairs -Kuomintang, 31 March 1947, 020-011002-0081-0096a, AH; SESAG, BR n. 1484, valeur B/1, 21 August 1947, 603, 10H, SHD.

That spring some 600 intellectuals, artists, professionals, and former DRV supporters in Hanoi signed a petition denouncing this "absurd war." The petition criticized without naming the ICP as a "band of extremists" that had exploited the patriotism of the people for their benefit, using terrorism and totalitarian tactics. Signers included Trương Đình Tri, former DRV National Assemblyman, the Vietnam Nationalist Party spokesperson Trần Trung Dung, and the former Hanoi magistrate under the DRV Lê Đình Chân. Several famous painters including Lê Văn Đệ and Trần Quang Trân also signed. The petitioners called upon Bảo Đại to reappear. The motion's text implored the former emperor as "the sole man above the parties and political quarrels," to reopen the negotiations that had broken down between France and the DRV.⁴⁶

From early 1947 the consolidation of an opposition to the ICP and DRV leadership had emerged from north to south. In Saigon, the southern adherents to the Countrywide Front acted to expand their front and broaden its base. By June, southern Countrywide Front members had the permission of the French High Commissioner to engage in discussions with Nguyễn Thế Truyên. Exiled by French officials during World War II, he was only allowed to return to Indochina in 1947. During a meeting the Countrywide Front members held with Nguyễn Thế Truyên on the formation of an armed opposition to Nguyễn Bình, Saigon's French security forces reverted to their colonial reflexes. They raided the meeting and arrested Nguyễn Thế Truyên and hauled him to jail, no matter that he had a written statement from the High Commissioner.⁴⁷

The determination of French administrators to retain a colonial prerogative inhibited the formation of the Bảo Đại solution and a coherent French policy. The top political official in Indochina, Léon Pignon, concluded that if one word best described French policy it was "anarchy."

⁴⁶ "Manifest des intellectuels Tonkinois," 20 June 1947, 118, EA 174QO, MAE.

⁴⁷ "Note," 17 June 1947, 236, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

The colonial state remained divided into three separate administrative regions, further complicated by rivalries between civil and military officials. In one incident, Minister of Overseas Affairs Marius Moutet had given a speech in Saigon during his December 1946 visit. In his address, Moutet affirmed that France would protect an autonomous Cochinchinese state. Federal authorities printed text of the speech on tens of thousands of leaflets to be distributed in early 1947. Yet the head of French security in Tonkin deemed Moutet's words subversive. He was correct too. Flaunting the separatist speech would have aroused opposition at a time that support was building for Bảo Đại to lead negotiations for a unified Vietnamese state. The tracts were pulped, costing the military 50,000 piasters.⁴⁸ Conflict between metropolitan and Indochinese authorities would remain a constant theme in the coming years.

Moutet had championed separatism to reassure the increasingly nervous colonial lobby in Saigon. The death of Dr. Nguyễn Văn Thinh in November 1946 had mortally wounded the already lame Republic of Cochinchina. His successor was Councilman Lê Văn Hoạch, who was also a Cao Đài adherent. Though he seemed more amenable to colonial policy, he did what Nguyễn Văn Thinh had only hinted at: openly broke with the French conception of separatism. To the dismay of the colonial lobby, the president of the Republic of Cochinchina openly endorsed a decentralized "Vietnamese federation" and rejected "separatism."⁴⁹ Through the spring and summer of 1947, Lê Văn Hoạch held discussions with former Việt Minh members including Vũ Tâm Anh, who along with Nguyễn Văn Sâm, Huỳnh Phú Sổ, and Mười Trí was one of the founders of the National United Front that Nguyễn Bình disbanded in July 1946.

⁴⁸ "Note sur l'organisation de la propagande en Indochine" 1.105-CP/SD, 31 March 1947, 303, HCI-CONSPOL, ANOM.

⁴⁹ "Ôu le docteur Hoach parle," *Sud* 30 April 1947.

In the early summer, Lê Văn Hoạch sought to revive that defunct front. Along with Vũ Tâm Anh, they resurrected the National Union Front [Việt Nam Mặt trận Quốc gia Liên hiệp] as a vehicle to support Bảo Đại's negotiations and ensure that the interests of Cochinchinese were respected. The National United Front complemented the northern-based Countrywide Front, but also competed with it. Lê Văn Hoạch could now claim that his resurrected front also represented the Cao Đài, Hoà Hảo, and southern Catholics. It even integrated the Cochinchinese Popular Front. Veering sharply from Nguyễn Văn Thinh and Nguyễn Văn Xuân's respect for freedom of the press, Lê Văn Hoạch indefinitely suspended numerous Saigon journals in June 1947 to prepare for the announcement of the revived National Union Front.⁵⁰

That summer and fall, the National Union Front held several major demonstrations in Saigon. Their primary demand was for Bảo Đại to return and take charge of the country. Speeches by members like the Cao Đài military official Lê Kim Ty were sharper. He denounced the maneuverings of High Commissioner Bollaert who had given a much-publicized statement at the northern city of Hà Đông. The Commissioner had conceded the unification of a Vietnamese state, but notably refused to commit to the "independence" of that state, choosing instead to emphasize the preeminence of the French Union. Lê Kim Ty warned that the Front's demonstration also had "the goal of supporting the resistance which fights against colonialism." As former revolutionaries themselves, they did not conceive of the coming negotiations as a renunciation of their struggle

⁵⁰ Traduction de Document saisi a Vinh Loc le 21.6.1947, "Rapport, le chef de la Police de Gia-Dinh, Directeur des Services de Police du Nam-Bo," 4201, 10H, SHD.



Figure 24: In front of Saigon's city hall, a demonstration organized by the National United Front in support of Bảo Đại's resumption of negotiations with France.

against colonialism. Independence and a unified federal state remained their objectives, ones they diagnosed could be better achieved now through the Bảo Đại led negotiations.⁵¹

Lê Văn Hoạch was the figure that the colonial administration and lobby had favored to lead the Republic of Cochinchina. His speech, however, revealed once again that his plans were incongruent with French colonialism. He too praised the Vietnamese youths that had taken to the *maquis* leading "a heroic struggle for the defense of the ideal of liberty which we all love," as well as those that rejected the use of violence, like himself, and struggled on the political terrain. But he noted that the sacrifice of Vietnamese youths was being misused by the "Stalinist communists" leading the DRV. Stalinism was not just averse to the Confucian morals and Buddhist values of

⁵¹ Directeur de la Police et de la Surete Federales, note n. 11264/SG/1, 16 Sept 1947, 42, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

Vietnamese, he reasoned. The world was dividing into two blocs. The Stalinist bloc was not the one where Vietnam could prosper.⁵²

Despite their similar political goals, Lê Văn Hoạch and Nguyễn Văn Sâm did not like one another. They managed nevertheless to work somewhat amicably that summer. As a Cao Đài, Lê Văn Hoạch could better harness the financial and material support of the enormous Tây Ninh branch of the religion. Moreover, as president of the Republic of Cochinchina he provided the mechanism to conquer the colonial lobby from within and effect the unification of Vietnam. Together, the two fronts worked to organize a congress in Hong Kong that would set a national agenda for Franco-Vietnamese negotiations and formally endorse Bảo Đại.

For reasons of prestige and state power, the DRV leadership continued to reach out to Bảo Đại in the hope that they could recapture their own failed Bảo Đại solution and preserve their control of the post-colonial future. Concerned by the emergence of the Countrywide Front, the ICP authorized the reshuffling of the DRV's ministers to include a majority of non-communists. Winning back Bảo Đại was a key part of their plan to show domestic and international audiences that the DRV was not controlled by Stalinists alone.⁵³ Phạm Khắc Hòe, the emperor's former chief of cabinet in the Empire of Vietnam and now a supporter of the DRV state, wrote a pleading letter to Bảo Đại asking him to return and support their revolution. Domestically, editors of state newspapers still dismissed the idea that Bảo Đại would turn against the DRV. Even in September 1947, those official papers optimistically projected his return. This was believable at the time. Though the Countrywide Front was openly critical of the DRV leadership and supported the

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Tuong Vu, "'It's time for the Indochinese Revolution to show its true colours!': The radical turn of Vietnamese politics in 1948," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, n. 3 (October 2009), 528.

former emperor, Bảo Đại had said nothing publicly about his country's civil war. Internationally, Hồ Chí Minh continued to affirm to Western journalists that the former emperor remained a supreme counselor to the DRV state. Any negotiations he undertook with Paris, he clarified, would have to be authorized by his revolutionary state's leadership.⁵⁴



Figure 25: The 1947 Hong Kong conference, with Bảo Đại at center. Other notable attendees are: 1. Nguyễn Văn Tâm. 2. Nguyễn Phan Long. 3. Lưu Đức Trung. 4. Nam Phương. 5. Nguyễn Hải Thần. 6. Nguyễn Bảo Toàn. 7. Trần Quang Vinh. 8. Trần Văn Lý. 9. Lâm Ngọc Đường. 10. Trần Văn Tuyên. 11. Nhất Linh. 12. Phan Văn Giáo. 13. Nguyễn Tường Long. 14. Nguyễn Văn Sâm. 15. Lê Văn Hoạch.

Just days later, that narrative began to fall apart. Bảo Đại attended the Hong Kong conference organized by Countrywide Front leaders Nhất Linh, Nguyễn Hải Thần, and Nguyễn Văn Sâm and the southern National Union Front of Lê Văn Hoạch. The group was far from

⁵⁴ "Tra loi cau phong van cua ong Chu Nhim Bao Doc-Lap," 4 September 1947, 119, *Phông Quốc Hội, TTLT3*; "President Ho Chi Minh's replies to question submitted by Miss Ellie Maisse," *International News Service*, 17 September 1947.

monolithic, spanning from those that had helmed the early DRV state, former guerillas, and anti-monarchic intellectuals to conservative supporters of the monarchy and defenders of the Republic of Cochinchina. Nguyễn Tường Long (13) and other delegates had bitterly opposed a constitutional monarchy in 1939. As a student in France, Lâm Ngọc Đường (9) had been arrested protesting Bảo Đại's opening of the *Maison des Étudiants Indochinois* in 1930 and later joined Hồ Văn Ngà's Vietnam Independence Party, before taking up arms against the French re-occupation in 1945. Lê Văn Hoạch (15) and Nguyễn Văn Tâm (1) had been supporters of the Republic of Cochinchina and seemed prior to 1940 to be perfect colonial collaborators, while Nhất Linh (11) and Nguyễn Hải Thần (5) were nationalist revolutionaries and strongly opposed to the formation of the Republic of Cochinchina.

What bound all of them was their opposition to the Stalinist leadership of the DRV and the potential to attain independence through negotiations with France. The conference allowed Bảo Đại to reluctantly reenter politics, supported by a representative coalition of Vietnamese, and stake out the terms for an accord with France. For the first time publicly, Bảo Đại warned High Commissioner Bollaert, "Imperialism is dead. France must recognize this and be very sincere in negotiations." The delegates rejected the terms laid out by Bollaert in his speech at Hà Đông, where he admitted only autonomy for Vietnam and insisted that France would retain control of the state's foreign affairs and defense. Once again, the Vietnamese appealed to the international community for support. The congress sent cables to President Harry Truman, British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, Pakistan's Muhammad Ali Jinnah, India's Jawaharlal Nehru, and directly

to the United Nations Security Council. As in 1945, none of the world leaders responded to Bảo Đại's plea.⁵⁵

The second important outcome of the congress was Bảo Đại's endorsement of a plan to prepare the formation of a State of Vietnam through a provisional central government. In early September, the former minister of defense in the Republic of Cochinchina Nguyễn Văn Xuân reappeared on the political scene. He defeated Lê Văn Hoạch in a snap election at the Cochinchina Council. While Lê Văn Hoạch had been unwilling to move too openly against the colonial lobby and their members on the Council, Nguyễn Văn Xuân shocked them by formally changing the state's name to the *Provisional* Republic of Cochinchina. Nguyễn Văn Xuân also openly declared that he would now seek to unify the three Vietnamese *kỳ* into a federal state.

Nguyễn Văn Xuân was center-left republican and socialist who, like most others, was willing to endorse a constitutional monarchy but not a restoration. Bảo Đại quickly endorsed Nguyễn Văn Xuân's plan. Once the vehicle for continued French influence, Nguyễn Văn Xuân was trying to turn the Republic of Cochinchina into a vehicle to effect its gradual removal. He now had Bảo Đại's support to prepare the Cochinchinese state for unification with the rest of Vietnam, and possibly even to lead the forthcoming Central Provisional Government.⁵⁶

A weakness of the emerging Bảo Đại solution was its inability to express that fundamental quality of sovereignty that Trần Văn Giàu had seemed to relish – to clearly define its enemies and friends. While the constituent parties and fronts attacked the DRV leadership, they praised the revolutionaries for their sacrifice and patriotism. This made perfect sense. They hoped to win over

⁵⁵ Note, "Les delegues a Hongkong du Front National du Vietnam rejettent les propositions de M. Bollaert," 19 Septembre 1947, 118, EA 174QO, MAE.

⁵⁶ Trần Văn Ân *Đi Thăm cựu Thủ Tướng Nguyễn Văn Xuân* (Saigon: unpublished manuscript, 19 June 1974).

the revolutionary masses to their state project. Thus, Bảo Đại declared that he was neither for nor against the Việt Minh or other political parties.⁵⁷ In that vein, he rejected an offer of support from Chiang Kai-shek in 1947 that would have hardened the divisions driving Vietnam's civil war and internationalized it in the emerging Cold War.⁵⁸ While critical of France, he could never assign it to the category of enemy. This fundamental lack of clarity would bedevil the forthcoming State of Vietnam.

The ICP and DRV leadership saw the Hong Kong conference as a grave threat to their legitimacy. Within a month of closing proceedings, two of the Bảo Đại solution's most important leaders in Cochinchina and Tonkin were murdered. On October 9, the DRV's agents assassinated Trương Đình Tri, the head of the provisional Administrative Committee governing Tonkin and the former revolutionary minister who had signed the anti DRV petition in early 1947. The next day in Saigon, the DRV assassinated Nguyễn Văn Sâm as he stepped out of a car in Cholon.

As the driving force of the Countrywide Front, the death of Nguyễn Văn Sâm sapped much of its strength. The northern nationalist party heads Nhất Linh and Nguyễn Hải Thần had been uncomfortable with the emerging coalition behind Bảo Đại, seeing it as too willing to accommodate France. In their conception, the negotiations would yield independence, and only then would a state be formed. Simply put, cooperation would *only* follow independence. In the past, Nguyễn Văn Sâm had been able to convince Nhất Linh that some form cooperation was needed first.⁵⁹ The plans for a forthcoming Provisional Central Government explicitly put cooperation before independence. Upon reflection, this was concession too far for them. Whether Nguyễn Văn

⁵⁷ *L'Union Française* (Saigon), 5 July 1947.

⁵⁸ François Guillemot, *Dai Việt - indépendance et révolution au Viêt-Nam: l'échec de la troisième voie (1938-1955)* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2012), 424.

⁵⁹ SESAG, BR n. 15396, valeur B/2, 22 September 1947, 4201, 10H, SHD.

Sâm could have changed his mind is unknown. Nevertheless, by the end of 1947 Nhất Linh and Nguyễn Hải Thần withdrew from the Countrywide Front, leaving other Vietnam Nationalist Party members to continue supporting the Bảo Đại solution.⁶⁰

Negotiating Independence, Conceding Sovereignty

At the conclusion of the Hong Kong conference, Bảo Đại had declared he was willing to open genuine negotiations with France. To his dismay, two months passed without any word from Paris or Hanoi. Bảo Đại already distrusted Bollaert and felt that he was deliberately dismissive of the Vietnamese, sending minor colonial functionaries like Jean Cousseau to conduct negotiations. When Cousseau failed to win anything but Bảo Đại's mistrust, Bollaert sent a former military aid to the emperor in the 1930s, named Pierre Reynaud. Reynaud had left the military and now worked for the Paris municipal heating department. Bảo Đại appreciated seeing this acquaintance from a decade ago. Nonetheless, Bollaert's decision to send a municipal utility employee to begin negotiations with the former emperor of Vietnam revealed much. Would France have dispatched a utility employee to conduct diplomatic negotiations with England or Canada? No matter what Bollaert pledged, he continued to show that he thought Bảo Đại a colonial subject and Vietnam a colony.⁶¹

Only in November did Bollaert personally contact Bảo Đại. In a public declaration, Bollaert pledged that France would recognize an "independent" Vietnam. But the preliminary

⁶⁰ Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 186; Chen, *Vietnam and China*, 184.

⁶¹ "Note a/s Commandant Reynaud," 23 December 1947, 103, *Asie-Océanie -Indochine*, MAE; "Note pour M. Chauvel - a/s compte-rendu d'une visite de M. Do Hung," 10 January 1948, 103, *Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine*, MAE.

framework he proposed to Bảo Đại (known as the Hạ Long Bay Protocol) on 7 December severely restricted Vietnam's internal and external sovereignty. Bollaert insisted on the codification of a powerful French federal state, of the kind that Nguyễn Văn Xuân and the Republic of Cochinchina delegates had already rejected at the 1946 Dalat Conference. Beyond French control over diplomacy and defense affairs, Bollaert demanded that Vietnam's customs and taxes be integrated with Cambodia and Laos in an Indochinese system controlled by the French federal state. Bollaert also insisted on Vietnam's use of the Indochinese piastre and its oversight by a federal French bank. Moreover, the federal High Commissioner would control immigration, telegram and telephone infrastructure, and foreign trade. Finally, any French property confiscated since 1945 would be returned, and French citizens would be subject to a separate legal statute apart from the Vietnamese state.⁶²

But even these terms exceeded what Paris would allow. The sole concession made to Bảo Đại in this secret protocol was that France would grant the Vietnamese state its independence. Only then, Vietnam would freely adhere to the French Union. Minister of Foreign Affairs George Bidault concluded that Bollaert had overstepped his mandate. In allowing Vietnam to adhere to the French Union as a volitional act of an independent state, Bidault reasoned that Bollaert had signed away "total independence" to the emperor. France would only abide the secret Hạ Long Bay protocol if the future text was amended to specify that Vietnam must accept its place in the French Union prior to independence or, at the maximum, do so simultaneous to its reception. This was the "extreme limit of concessions possible" on the "notion of independence," Bidault

⁶² Telegram n. 50.988, Haussaire Indo Saigon to Cominindo Paris, 8 December 1947, 103, *Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine*, MAE.

instructed.⁶³

Back in Hong Kong, Bảo Đại had conceded too much for many of his supporters. Certainly far too much for those like Nhất Linh or his former imperial minister Ngô Đình Diệm. Bảo Đại had been considering Ngô Đình Diệm as a possible prime minister of the forthcoming Central Provisional Government or the subsequent State of Vietnam. But after learning the terms of the protocol, Ngô Đình Diệm harshly critiqued the concessions. He would only lead a state that controlled its diplomacy and defense. As a staunch nationalist, he too demanded that the highland territories – areas inhabited by ethnic minorities that had never formed part of the Nguyễn Dynasty empire, except as distant tributaries that affirmed their Sinitic worldview – be part of the new Vietnamese state. For Vietnamese nationalists, the postcolonial state was to be the fulfillment of Vietnam's own colonial project.⁶⁴

Convinced that he had reached the limits of what colonial authorities would concede, Bảo Đại arranged for his own state visit and negotiations with French metropolitan officials. In January he traveled to Geneva. He first met with Charles de Gaulle, who reported that Bảo Đại was "visibly bothered" in their talks. The emperor explained that the protocol was still unacceptable to his Vietnamese counselors. He wished to publicize its terms to the Vietnamese public and hold a referendum on whether to accept it. Only this way could he be assured that he had a mandate from the people. Bollaert, however, had already rejected this idea out of hand during negotiations of the secret protocol. The precedent of colonial policy being publicized and settled by a local

⁶³ Memorandum, Georges Bidault, 11 December 1947, 103, *Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine*, MAE.

⁶⁴ *Commandement en Chef en Indochine*, "Les Partis Nationalistes Vietnamiens année 1948," 643, 10H, SHD; Vietnamese journals also demanded that the upland areas be endowed to an independent state. HCL, "Revue de Presse Vietnamiennne Semaine du 12 au 19 Julliet 1948," n. 1112CP/SAT, 20 July 1948, 207, 10H, SHD.

plebiscite would be disastrous for French policy and prestige in African territories like Tunisia and Morocco, Bollaert said.

In Geneva, De Gaulle made no response to Bảo Đại's renewed proposal for an election. Several times too, Bảo Đại raised the example of India and Pakistan, which had obtained a liberal independence within Britain's Commonwealth. Sensing the specter of comparisons did not favor the French Union that he had christened some three years before, the general discouraged the thought immediately. "The French Union has an original character," De Gaulle retorted, "there can be no foreign comparison."⁶⁵ Disappointed, Bảo Đại traveled to Paris for talks with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

French officials saw the emperor's trip as part a crude negotiating strategy. Jean Cousseau reported that Bảo Đại was not only attempting to flagrantly circumvent colonial authorities, but also using his trip to make contact with the Sultan of Morocco. In his telling, the two monarchs were trying to increase their leverage over France, sharing details of their negotiations and seeking to 'bid up' French concessions to its former colonies. Cousseau's reporting to Paris explicitly invoked the stereotype of the 'oriental' as avaricious and dishonest.⁶⁶

During Bảo Đại's meetings with the Minister of Overseas Affairs Paul Coste-Floret and Minister of Foreign Affairs Georges Bidault, they too diminished the seriousness of the problem. They dismissed Bảo Đại's claim that any government lacking full domestic and foreign sovereignty would fail to rally the revolutionaries. Coste-Floret denied that any special accord was even necessary, insisting the terms of the forthcoming State of Vietnam were already well defined in the

⁶⁵ Telegram, De Gaulle to Bidault, Coste Floret, and Bollaert, 7 January 1947, 103, AO, MAE; Letter, [on Ryenaud discussion with Bảo Đại], 15 January 1947, 103, Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine, MAE.

⁶⁶ Letter, 31 January 1947, 103, Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine, MAE, ANOM.

charter for the French Union. In his final meeting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bảo Đại bluntly told his interlocutor that if the word "oriental" had a pejorative connotation, it was not he who embodied it. Rather, he retorted, it was the French negotiators who were greedy, coveting their colonial privilege and refusing to accord Vietnam a genuine independence.⁶⁷

The dejected emperor left his meetings with nothing to show but the persistent presence of the French security services. They traced his steps and catalogued his actions by the hour. Who he met, his telephone calls: each was recorded. On a February evening, just before Bảo Đại prepared to leave Europe, the security detail struggled to eavesdrop on his conversation. At 6:30 he received a Vietnamese visitor in his hotel room. Speaking in hushed voices, all that could be made out were Bảo Đại's final words: "All these types here, Bidault and his company, they're all frauds [*faux comme des jetons*]." ⁶⁸ Assuming that Paris would recognize the need to invest the Vietnamese state with more genuine sovereign powers, Bảo Đại found he was wrong again.

Nguyễn Văn Xuân and the Provisional Republic of Cochinchina

Nguyễn Văn Xuân took the lead in preparing the inclusion of Cochinchina into the forthcoming Central Provisional Government. He was the son of Nguyễn Văn Cửa, owner of Saigon's most famous printing company and producer of journals like *l'Écho Annamite* and much of the published material in Cochinchina. Like numerous others – including Phạm Ngọc Thạch, one of the senior-most ICP and DRV officials in Cochinchina – Nguyễn Văn Xuân had obtained

⁶⁷ Memorandum of conversation, 10 February 1948, Bảo Đại and le Directeur d'Asie [Jacques Baeyens], 103, Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine, MAE.

⁶⁸ Untitled document listing Bảo Đại's movements from 16H-18H30, 103, Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine, MAE.

French citizenship and studied in Algeria and France. He fought at the Battle of Verdun, earning the *Croix de Guerre*. He also served in Europe during World War II, managing to suffer both German and Japanese captivity. Following the 1945 coup, he refused to cooperate with Japan and instead joined his French wife, who had been incarcerated in the Hanoi Citadel by the Japanese.⁶⁹ He undoubtedly had an affinity for French culture and language, spending much of his life in the francophone world. He spoke Vietnamese well from a prepared text, but struggled to express himself extemporaneously. He found inspiration in French ideals, yet he too understood their inherent limits. He watched many officers pass by him in the French artillery, inferior in their performance and distinguished only in their race. According to the French security services, by the time he joined the Republic of Cochinchina government in 1946, that systemic racism had developed some sense of resentment within him.⁷⁰



Figure 26: Nguyễn Văn Xuân circa 1947.

In late 1947, Nguyễn Văn Xuân was intent on using the now Provisional Republic of Cochinchina to form nationalist government that could command respect from the public. He was better suited to the task than most assumed. His military service and willingness to challenge the French at the Dalat conference spoke in his favor for an elite audience. When the commander of the DRV's southern forces, Nguyễn Bình, sentenced the cabinet members of the Republic of

⁶⁹ "Nguyễn Văn Xuân," in Christopher Goscha, *Historical Dictionary of the Indochina War 1945-1954: An International and Interdisciplinary Approach* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011).

⁷⁰ Capitaine Bouvert (2ème Section), Note n. 1476/EMC/DN/2 , 23 May 1945, 20, EA 174QO, MAE.

Cochinchina to death in 1946, he specifically exempted Colonel Nguyễn Văn Xuân.⁷¹ Nguyễn Bình had many vices. Magnanimity was never one.

This reputation allowed him to recruit members of the Dân Xã and the National Union Front. In 1948, two close confidants of Nguyễn Văn Sâm, Trần Văn Ân and Lâm Ngọc Đường, joined the cabinet respectively as minister of information and chief of the National Intelligence Service. Both were revolutionaries with connections to radical nationalist politics in 1920s-1930s France and the Vietnam Independence Party in 1945. Prior to his death, there were even discussions underway for Nguyễn Văn Sâm to join the cabinet.⁷²

To support the formation of the Central Provisional Government, Nguyễn Văn Xuân sought to broker a peace with the Việt Minh resistance and rally its rank and file soldiers. He declared that the government would be an administrative body only. It would not participate in the war against the DRV. If anyone wanted to fight the Việt Minh, he told the press, they would have to join the French army.⁷³ Nguyễn Văn Xuân instead praised the Việt Minh in his inauguration speech:

My dear compatriots, you fight for a respectable cause, for the ideal of patriotism and national unity. Your determination, valor, tenacity, and your spirit of sacrifice inspires, commanding esteem and admiration. ... Through your resistance, you hope to bring about a government of fraternity and justice. But now, by a tragic fate, the children of the same country and race – and sometimes of the same parents, brothers of the same family – are locked in two opposing camps, facing a civil war causing rancor and inexplicable hatred.⁷⁴

⁷¹ SESAG n. 11.37, valeur B/2, 26 October 1946 on "Reunion du Mercredi 23 Octobre tenue par Nguyen Binh et les chefs V.M.," 603, 10H, SHD.

⁷² Li, "Partisan to Sovereign," 163.

⁷³ "Nouvelle Etape de la crise indochinoise," *Le Monde* 7 October 1948.

⁷⁴ Discours prononce par le president Nguyen Van Xuan a l'occasion de la prise du pouvoir de son gouvernement, 8 octobre 1947 (Bulletin d'Information No. 113 du 3 Novembre 1947), 1729, Phủ Thủ Tướng, TTLT3.

He pleaded instead with the Việt Minh to cease fighting. His concluding promise was that the upcoming negotiations between Bảo Đại and France would see the Việt Minh's goals realized and allow for national reconciliation.⁷⁵

Soon after taking office, President Nguyễn Văn Xuân tried to broker this rapprochement with the Southern Administrative Committee, or at least part of the resistance. In October he appealed directly to the DRV official Phạm Ngọc Thạch in a letter. He declared that he considered himself to be Vietnamese and reiterated the terms of his inauguration speech, calling for an end to the war and the potential of Franco-Vietnamese negotiations. Phạm Ngọc Thạch publicized his response in Saigon's journals, telling the president his words meant little. French authorities were increasingly their war effort and would remain reluctant to support an independent Vietnam. He moreover cast doubt on the president's ability and willingness to serve the Vietnamese people rather than French interests.⁷⁶

Nguyễn Văn Xuân and his advisors thereafter appealed directly to revolutionary elements dissatisfied with the DRV. Their plan envisioned the creation of a neutral zone in Cochinchina that would rally troops that were both anti-colonial and opposed to the DRV. Minister Trần Văn Ân and the intelligence chief Lâm Ngọc Đường focused on outreach to the Bình Xuyên paramilitary organization, while Nguyễn Thế Truyền, Phan Khắc Sửu, and some of Saigon's surviving Trotskyists tried to rally broader support domestically and among overseas Vietnamese in France. Although the Hoà Hảo and a majority of the Cao Đài fighters had rallied to the Bảo Đại solution, their territories were autonomous, partisan political and religious spaces. By contrast,

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Letter, Phạm Ngọc Thuan to Xuân, 11 November 1947, 137, PUBHCNB, TTLT3.

the Bình Xuyên and its leader Bảy Viễn had a reputation as non-partisan brigands turned revolutionaries. Moreover, Lâm Ngọc Đường was well positioned to rally the Bình Xuyên, having fought in the revolution with Bảy Viễn and the Bình Xuyên from early 1946.⁷⁷

With the begrudging concurrence of French military intelligence, negotiations proceeded through the early months of 1948 to rally the Bình Xuyên to a neutral zone in Cochinchina. But the anarchy of the French colonial state, diagnosed by Léon Pignon, would doom the project. Saigon's colonial lobby was fiercely opposed to Nguyễn Văn Xuân's plans to unify the Vietnamese state. Pointing to the president's overtures to the resistance, M. Bazin and others led a campaign in Paris to denounce him as a communist. French journals further used the label of "traitor" to describe Nguyễn Văn Xuân, who still held his commission in the French military.⁷⁸

In early 1948, the French civil security service turned against the plan for a neutral zone, raiding the offices Lâm Ngọc Đường's National Intelligence Service. They arrested many of its officers on charges of aiding and abetting the Bình Xuyên. Lâm Ngọc Đường took twenty of his officers and rejoined the Bình Xuyên in the *maquis*, but not before warning President Nguyễn Văn Xuân that he was too passive. In a final letter, he warned the president that he needed to stand up to the French or "risk being a puppet without being aware of it."⁷⁹ Minister of Information Trần Văn Ân also left his official post and fled to France.

There Trần Văn Ân found that the Vietnamese political community was likewise engaged in a civil war. The moderate position of the Central Provisional Government had limited support

⁷⁷ Commandement en Chef en Indochina, "Les partis nationalites Vietnamiens: année 1948," 643, 10H, SHD; Li, "Partisan to Sovereign," 162-165.

⁷⁸ HCI, "Revue de Presse Vietnamienne Semaine du 9 au 16 Août 1948," n. 1370CP/SAT, 17 August 1948, 307, 10H, SHD.

⁷⁹ Li, "Partisan to Sovereign," 166-167.

and sympathy among some 12,000 expatriate Vietnamese in France, many of whom were laborers mobilized for World War II. When Trần Văn Ân arrived in 1948, nearly 1600 of them were still living in camps near southern port of Marseille. Soon after Hồ Chí Minh signed the controversial March 1946 accords, Vietnamese Trotskyists and those supporting the Bảo Đại solution seized the advantage to critique the Stalinists and the DRV. The Trotskyists formed a Central Committee of Indochinese Workers and took control of organizing the largest camps, supplanting the Stalinist ICP members who had previously held sway. Through this committee, according to local officials in Marseille, the Trotskyists formed "a kind of Vietnamese state" replete with a council, a security force, public education, and their own journals. The French Police lamented that they effectively lacked sovereign control over the camps, unable to enter or police them.⁸⁰

After the French police arrested 33 Trotskyists in early 1948, the Stalinists attempted to reassert control over the largest camp, *Camp de Mazargues*. By the summer, the Stalinists had attacked and severely beaten several Trotskyists. The Trotskyists decided to counterattack and launched a raid on Stalinists at the camp, enlisting support from Trotskyists across France. In May, the Trotskyists began organizing a protest for the day of Hồ Chí Minh's birthday, but decided instead to physically confront the Stalinists once and for all. They made their assault with a handful of guns and crude objects, leaving five dead and nearly fifty wounded. Some of those Trotskyists implicated in the violence would soon go on to serve in the State of Vietnam's diplomatic representation in France. The French police meanwhile found that their relations with the Stalinist activists improved markedly, as they sought protection from further Trotskyist reprisals.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Cabinet du Préfet des Bouches du Rhone to Ministre de l'Intérieur Paris, Letter no. 201/CP, 21 May 1948, 148 W 188, Préfecture/Cabinet - 1946-1948, BDR; Letter no. 92, Lt. Colonel Maurice to Procureur General pres la Cour d'Appel Aix en Provence, 26 July 1946, 148 W 188, PC, BDR.

⁸¹ Ministère de l'Intérieur, Direction Générale de la Sureté Nationale Marseille, Letter no. 1.736/SP 16 May 1948, report "Bagarre au Camp Viet-Namien, Boulevard Michelet, à origine politique, 148

The Central Provisional Government

Midst the fighting in France and among his own services, Nguyễn Văn Xuân was preoccupied in Hong Kong. Bảo Đại held yet another congress of Vietnamese representatives from the three Vietnamese *hệ* to discuss the outcomes of his negotiations in Europe. Initial excitement gave way to perpetual disappointment as they learned that Minister Bidault would not exceed the terms offered by High Commissioner Bollaert. The delegates nevertheless voted narrowly (23 against 17) to move ahead with plans for the Central Provisional Government that spring. Ngô Đình Diệm and the Cao Đài politician-cum-journalist Nguyễn Phan Long led the failed opposition.

In June, Bảo Đại and Nguyễn Văn Xuân boarded a ship in the Hạ Long Bay for the ceremonial signing of an accord that largely reflected the same terms proposed in the December 7 secret protocol. The sole significant change reflected Bidault's dissent that Vietnam not be accord "total" independence. Vietnam accepted its adherence to the French Union as an "associated state" prior to its independence.⁸² The Hạ Long Bay accord was, however, only a framework. It would be up to the Provisional Central Government to negotiate the terms of specific agreements on cultural, diplomatic, military, economic, and technical matters between France and the future associated State of Vietnam.

W 188, PC, BDR; Prefecture de Police, "A.S. de Tran Thanh Thang," June 1957, 77W2808, 456170, PDP.

⁸² Letter n. 95/AS, Robert Jobez (Consul de France à Hongkong) à M. le Ministère des Affaires Étrangères - Direction d'Asie-Océanie) 7 April 1948; Telegram Cominindo Paris to Haussaire Indo Saigon, 10 April 1948, both in 103, Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine, MAE.



Figure 27: The crowd before the Hanoi opera house prior to Nguyễn Văn Xuân's speech in mid 1948. Three years earlier, it was the scene of the August Revolution.

In his official speech following the accord's signing, Nguyễn Văn Xuân tried to emphasize the progress that had been made to a skeptical domestic audience. In earlier statements, he rationalized the compromises that the government had made on its sovereignty in what he called "the atomic era." In this period of renewed great-power rivalry, Vietnam could not stand alone. "Absolute national sovereignty is the privilege of few peoples," he offered. But he assured the public that France was renouncing its right to direct and indirect rule within the French Union – Vietnam's internal sovereignty would belong to the Vietnamese alone he claimed. The government would also take responsibility for inaugurating the "new conditions" of Franco-Vietnamese collaboration, which he said must be based on "reciprocal" loyalty, confidence, and esteem.⁸³

Away from the Bollaert and other French officials, Nguyễn Văn Xuân adopted a bolder tone. At a public press conference, he began speaking of the forthcoming State of Vietnam as not

⁸³ Telegram n. 70.006, Haussaire Indo Saigon to Cominindo Paris, 5 June 1948, 103, *Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine*, MAE.

just an "associated" state in the French Union, but as an "allied" state – implying external sovereignty. He moreover pushed for broader diplomatic rights for this government, claiming that it would host foreign consuls reciprocate with its own credited diplomats abroad. To the great worry of the DRV, Nguyễn Văn Xuân indeed did begin dispatching representatives abroad to gain international recognition for his government from Asian states.⁸⁴ Nguyễn Văn Xuân also claimed that Vietnam would have rights equal to the British Commonwealth states. And most offensive to the colonial establishment, he announced to the Saigon press that France's role in the State of Vietnam would be analogous to that of the United States' advisory effort in the ongoing Greek Civil War (1946-1949).⁸⁵ Bold though it was to stake out these claims, they had by no means been won yet.

He was not the only one resolved to surpass the terms of the accord. Following the ceremony, Bảo Đại left Hong Kong and embarked for Europe to be with his family. During his layover in Bangkok, the French ambassador to Thailand called on him. The ambassador was surprised by Bảo Đại's candor as he dismissed the Bay of Hạ Long accord as "a simple satisfaction given to Monsieur Bollaert," of little real significance. The ambassador left their meeting and informed his superiors in Paris that the former emperor had a profound distrust of the colonial *fonctionnaires* and Bollaert's entourage who the emperor characterized as "rude" and "duplicitous."⁸⁶ Bảo Đại took his connecting flight to Geneva, and resolved to stay in Europe and renegotiate the

⁸⁴ High Commissioner for Indochina, Diplomatic Conseillor, Letter n. 5753/CD, December 24, 1948, E104A, EA - Sous-serie Famille Imperiale, MAE; Report, "Les Partis Nationalistes Vietnamiens, Année 1948," Commandement en Chef en Indochine, 922, Phủ Quốc Trưởng Quốc Gia Việt Nam, TTLT4.

⁸⁵ "Note pour le Ministre [Ministry of Overseas Affairs], 22 May 1948, 103, Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine, MAE.

⁸⁶ Telegram n. 151.152, Bangkok to Paris, 7 June 1948, 103, Asie-Océanie 1944-1955 - Indochine, MAE.

terms of Vietnam's independence directly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and President Bidault. Unlike his prior trip, Bảo Đại intended to stay indefinitely. Without his presence in Vietnam, there was no "solution" to be had. It was a familiar strategy for an emperor who had resisted the French plans between 1932-1945 by absconding into the highland forests to hunt rather than suffer the colonial pageantry in Huế. This strategy of inertia and absence would prove effective in winning a final accord the next year.⁸⁷ But it would be ill-suited to his years in power, where inertia and absence too often conveyed disinterest and complicity with French policy.

Colonial War Turns Cold

Before the signing of the accords, the DRV appealed in vain one last time to their "supreme counselor" Bảo Đại to preserve national unity. The DRV had already begun shifting away from its national front politics. The signing of the secret protocol in late 1947 signaled that negotiations between Hồ Chí Minh and France were increasingly unlikely. But it was Bảo Đại's final abandonment and the emergence of a rival state in the Central Provisional Government that signaled the end of any opportunity to negotiate an agreement that recognized the DRV as the sole legitimate post-colonial state. The ICP had publicly dissolved itself in late 1945 and sought to maintain the credible appearance of being a multiparty state. With the signing of the Hạ Long Bay protocol and accords, the ICP moved into the open and began to consolidate its control over the DRV state apparatus. Two months after the June Hạ Long Bay accords, the ICP General Secretary Trường Chinh announced at a party congress that, for the first time since 1941, the

⁸⁷ Daniel Varga noted, "Or voilà une nouvelle preuve que Bao Dai ne se laisse pas manipuler au gré des Français et qu'il faudra compter avec sa force ... d'inertie," in his article "Léon Pignon, l'homme-clé de la solution Bao Dai et de l'implication des États-Unis dans la Guerre d'Indochine," *Outre-Mers* 97, n.364-365 (2009), 295.

party would codify both national liberation and class struggle as the goals of the revolution. In addition, the ICP ordered the first land confiscations for those deemed *Việt gian* [race traitors].⁸⁸

Throughout 1948, the ICP moved back into the open. The party pressed members of the DRV to join the ICP, resulting in a 450% increase in party membership during 1948. The party's intellectuals also launched forceful attacks on the non-partisan elements of the DRV state, particular its judiciary. In response to judges releasing prisoners arrested by ICP cadres for political acts, the party's official organ launched attacks on the concepts of judicial independence and separation of powers, insisting that the court's role was to uphold the class struggle above all. The debate was a harbinger of the shifting character of the DRV state. By the next year, an increasing numbers of judges and bureaucrats would begin to flee the DRV state, choosing either to support the emerging State of Vietnam or at least live within its jurisdiction.⁸⁹

Once again, the ongoing civil war in China loomed large over politics in Indochina. The increasing influence of the ICP within the DRV state occurred simultaneous to the approaching resolution of the Chinese Civil War. With each week, Mao Zedong's communist forces moved closer to defeating the Kuomintang army and arriving on the Sino-Vietnamese border. Members of the Vietnam Nationalist Party, Revolution Society, and Đại Việt grew worried. Chinese assistance to the DRV would allow Trường Chinh and Hồ Chí Minh to actualize their declared plans for a Marxist state and imperil any chance of developing Vietnam into an independent, non-communist state. In addition, these political activists were of the first generation to cultivate a nationalist historical narrative that downplayed Sinitic influences in Vietnam's past and instead highlight resistance to the Chinese as a defining attribute of their national identity. The events of

⁸⁸ Vu, "The Radical Turn of Vietnamese Politics in 1948," 539-542.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

1948 therefore evoked a renewed threat. If in the past Chinese domination came through imperial tributary relations, now it was through international communism, they argued.

The members of those nationalist parties advanced that argument by linguistically linking the Chinese communists and the DRV's Việt Minh front. Prior to this point, opponents of the communists' disguised leadership of the Việt Minh had relied on the term "*Việt Minh Cộng sản*" [Việt Minh communists].⁹⁰ Now writers played upon the Chinese term *zhonggong* [中共], meaning "Chinese communist." The term was imported into the Vietnamese lexicon as *Trung Cộng* by Vietnamese revolutionaries in southern China who had learned it in the 1920s and 1930s – *Trung* meaning Chinese and *Cộng* communist. By the end of the 1930s, communist and non-communist Vietnamese alike used the term *Trung Cộng*.⁹¹

To more directly link the Chinese and Vietnamese communist parties, nationalist party writers tried to emphasize the connection between the *Trung Cộng* and the leadership of the Việt Minh front by reprising the term "Việt Cộng" or "Vietnamese communist." The term was not new. It already existed in Chinese [*yuegong*; 越共] and would have been familiar to those same expatriate Vietnamese in southern China who almost certainly used it during those years of rivalry between the ICP and non-communist nationalist parties.⁹² But it had yet to appear in written political discourse or daily vernacular in Vietnam.

⁹⁰ "Dân Bêntre chóng hoạ loạn," *Tân Việt* n. 95, 23 May 1946.

⁹¹ For example, see the Stalinist Saigon-based newspaper *Dân Chúng* which spoke of the "Chinese Communist Central Committee" ["Ban trung-ương Trung-Cộng" (sic)] "Bức thư của Đảng Cộng-Sân Tàu gửi cho Đảng Cộng-Sân Tây-ban-nha," *Dân Chúng* n. 11, 27 August 1939.

⁹² See for example Kuomintang officials use the Chinese term *Việt Cộng* in their communications, Telegram n. 1878B, Division of European Affairs to Ministry of Foreign Affairs [KMT], 020-011002-0083-0061a, AH.

That changed when the Hanoi-based paper *The Call* began to write about the approach of Mao Zedong's military forces in November 1948. "If the *Việt-Cộng* army is able to joins hands with *Trung Cộng* at the Sino-Vietnamese border, then what more can prevent the communization of Vietnam?"⁹³ *The Call* was not surprisingly affiliated with the Đại Việt party and operated by its party member Nguyễn Đình Tại. He was also a confidant of the Đại Việt member Nguyễn Hữu Trí, who held leadership positions in the Empire of Vietnam and early DRV, and was now serving in Nguyễn Văn Xuân's Central Provisional Government. The following year, Nguyễn Hữu Trí would become governor of Tonkin after the inauguration of the State of Vietnam, while Nguyễn Đình Tại would become head of the security forces for Tonkin.⁹⁴ From that point, the term *Việt Cộng* would begin to appear with increasing frequency in newspapers and journals. If the term had

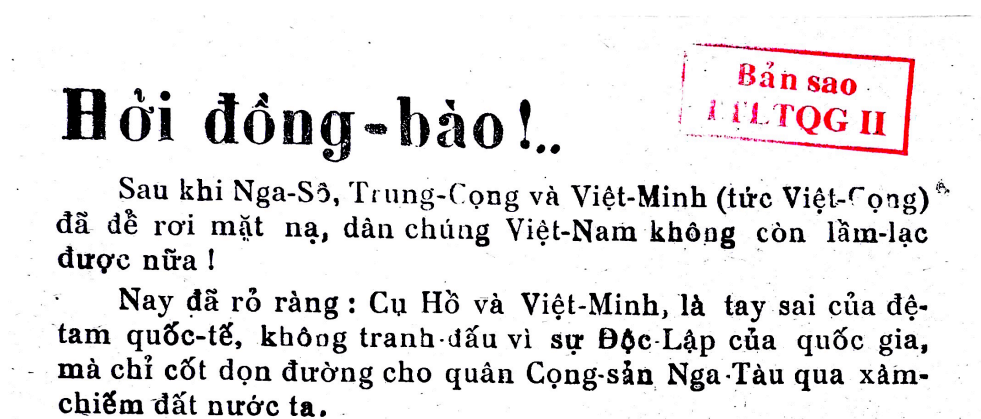


Figure 28: A tract released in early 1950, after the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China recognized the DRV. It made an explicit and linguistic link between the Chinese communists (*Trung Cộng*) and Việt Minh (*Việt Cộng*) and denounced Hồ Chí Minh as a Stalinist.

"After the Soviet Union, the Chinese communists, and Việt Minh (that is *Việt Cộng*) let their mask fall. The people of Vietnam can no longer be misled! Now it's clear: Hồ Chí Minh and the Việt Minh are lackeys of the Stalinists. They do not fight for the independence of the nation, but only to prepare the way for the Sino-Soviet communist army to occupy our country."

⁹³ "Làn sóng Do dang la-trần tại HOA-BAC," *Tiếng gọi* n. 18, 25 November 1948.

⁹⁴ Guillemot, *Dai-Việt*, 609.

a pejorative sense in its origin, it was insofar as it linked the communist leadership of the DRV to the Chinese Communist Party.

This was not the only term that Vietnamese adopted from Chinese political discourse. Already from 1945, the DRV had championed the use of the derogatory term for a traitor to the Chinese race, *hanjian* [漢奸], transferring it into Vietnamese as "Việt gian," or traitor to the Vietnamese race. Both the Chinese Communist Party and Kuomintang widely used the term to denounce those deemed guilty of collaboration with the invading Japanese Imperial Army. Vietnamese on both sides similarly made use of Việt gian to denounce their enemies in and after the August 1945 revolution. In this sense all the state projects and political groupings sought to consolidate the nation and their state project, branding political opposition as opposition to the national race writ large.

The origins of the terms used to justify revolutionary violence and assert the competing sovereign claims of the DRV and the Central Provisional Governments point to the deeper origins of the civil war in Vietnam. The conflict that enveloped Vietnam had begun two decades before in late-colonial society. It was there that Vietnamese communists and nationalists in southern China, France, and within the colonial prison system first began to struggle for control over the revolutionary movement and the post-colonial state. In 1945-1946, those tensions erupted in a civil war that divided the country and witnessed the ICP capture control of the revolutionary DRV state. Thereafter, conservative colonial elites, messianic politico-religious organizations, and nationalist parties took advantage of the French invasion to construct an alternative political space over which they could exert control. Like Vietnam's other past state projects, they were willing to compromise their national sovereignty and accept the return of a French federal state, hoping that they could reduce French influence over time.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE STATE OF VIETNAM

* * *

Three years after the Bảo Đại solution took shape in Nanking and Hong Kong, the former emperor signed the Élysée accords on 9 March 1949 with French President Vincent Auriol, giving birth to the State of Vietnam as an "associated" state within the French Union. France recognized the unity of Vietnam as a nation, but insisted that the state would have a progressive transfer of powers rather than full independence. Once Bảo Đại returned to Vietnam and appointed the State of Vietnam's first cabinet, negotiations could begin to delimit the specific powers that Vietnam and France would possess and the pace of decolonization.¹

In May, the French National Assembly did what the colonial lobbies in Paris and Saigon had long tried to prevent: ratified the reintegration of Cochinchina into a federal Vietnamese state. The measure moved with no ease. The anarchy of French policy once again reared its head. Members of the right bemoaned the "abandonment" of their national patrimony. The Stalinist Jeanette Vermeersch, wife of the French Communist Party General Secretary Maurice Thorez, broke into the debate to denounce Bảo Đại as a French "collaborator."² And when the State of Vietnam's delegates took their place in the Assembly of the French Union in Paris, they received the same jeering treatment from their fellow delegates in the French Communist Party. At the opening session, the party's dogmatic colonial pundit, Raymond Barbé, shouted down the

¹ Portions of Chapter Five appeared in Brett Reilly, "The Sovereign States of Vietnam, 1945-1955," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, n. 3-4 (Winter 2016): 103-139.

² Edward Francis Rice-Maximin, *Accommodation and Resistance: The French Left, Indochina, and the Cold War, 1944-1954* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 94-95; *Annales de l'Assemblée de l'Union Française Débats, Session de 1950, I du 10 janvier au 27 juin 1950* (Paris: Imprimerie des journaux officiels, 1950).

Vietnamese as "puppet delegates of a puppet sovereign," before leading a walk-out of communist delegates.³

The State of Vietnam would neither be a simple puppet nor a mere paper government. It was a Janus-faced creature that began to deliver the promise of liberal democratic governance and prosperity in urban centers but retained old structures of colonial dominance alongside new forms of authoritarian governance. It was a work of bricolage: the unanticipated collection of state projects and personalities left over from the recent past and conditioned by the fragmentary character of the state midst the civil war. Its French and Vietnamese animators fashioned this state from the concrete and ideational remnants of the various state projects that came before it: the Indochinese colonial state, the Japanese-sponsored Empire of Vietnam, the Republic of Cochinchina, and even elements of the DRV. Further supplementation came from the military forces and political ideology of anti-colonial revolutionary parties like the Vietnam Nationalist Party, the Revolution Society, and Đại Việt, as well as the Catholic, Cao Đài, and Hòa Hảo religious organizations, among others. This state's agents thus ranged from modern French trained bureaucrats and republican reformers to autonomous confessional enclaves, ethnic administrative units, and military commands.

In the five years after its formation, the State of Vietnam made gradual but continuous progress towards establishing independent control of domestic and military affairs. The state possessed a decentralized administration, with the three *kỳ* retaining their own governors and administrations, overseen by the national State of Vietnam government. All the while, however, a federal French administration sat above the entire Indochinese enterprise. From 1951, the State of Vietnam's newly formed national army and its partisan forces grew rapidly and assumed an

³ Ibid.

important battlefield role. By 1953, State of Vietnam administrators held independent command of a significant area, especially in urban centers and the southern provinces.

Its international sovereignty, however, remained partial and subordinate to Paris in the French Union. Though ultimately betrayed by France, these Vietnamese accepted a Union that acknowledged Vietnam's right to independence and promised it equal footing with the former metropole. That the centralized, sovereign nation-state would become the dominant ideal in the 1960s was by no means a foregone conclusion, nor one that seemed possible, to many Vietnamese now remembered as collaborators or feudal remnants.

The Return of Bảo Đại

International events in 1949 gave Vietnamese cause for optimism. At the same time Bảo Đại signed the Élysée accords, pressure mounted at the United Nations after a Dutch invasion of the Republic of Indonesia violate accords that the Netherlands and Indonesia had signed. In response to the Élysée accords, official DRV propaganda warned the Vietnamese against repeating the "error" of Indonesian politics by negotiating with France. But at the time Bảo Đại arrived in Vietnam late in 1949, international pressured had forced Dutch Queen Juliana to grant Indonesia its full independence. For those like Phạm Công Tắc, who compared himself to Sutan Sjahrir and spoke of the possibility of a negotiated independence, the Indonesian case raised hopes that the State of Vietnam would obtained its full independence.⁴ The DRV saw this moderate path of negotiations as a looming threat to their state's existence. They instructed officials to denounce "puppet" governments like Burma and India which had obtained independence through

⁴ FTEO, 2eme Bureau, BR n. 1310, 5 march 1949, Valeur B/3, 4311, 10H, SHD.

compromise with colonial authority.⁵ There were important factors, however, that would prevent either the State of Vietnam or DRV from obtaining the international support that Indonesia enjoyed.

Léon Pignon was responsible for preventing just this scenario. As the successor to High Commissioner Bollaert, Pignon decided that further internationalizing the war was the only means to guarantee French influence in Indochina. Pignon portrayed the three new associated states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as proof of France's benevolent intent and framed the French war effort as one front in the global Cold War. With this ploy, he and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs were able to prevent the possibility of an international campaign against French colonialism in Indochina. Moreover, France won the monetary support of the United States, overseen by the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group in Saigon, allowing a weak postwar France to finance its failed attempt to recolonize Indochina and limiting the leverage that the State of Vietnam could exert over France.⁶

On the eve of the inauguration of the State of Vietnam in June 1949, Bảo Đại declared his vision for the future to an audience gathered at Saigon's city hall and across the airwaves. He would act as "Chief of State" and once again rule according to Mencius' adage, 'The People Above All' [*Dân Vi Quý*]. Four years earlier this had also been the guiding principle of the Empire of Vietnam. Sovereignty belonged to the people, but would have to remain suspended. The ongoing war made a national election impossible. He would take temporary control of the state to find a peaceful resolution. When circumstances allowed the people to clearly express their opinion, sovereignty

⁵ Translated DRV Document, "Armee Nationale Zone 8, Le Commandement, 'Instruction Politique'" Commandement de la zone 8: Nguyen Van Vinh, 6 June 1949, 4693, 10H, SHD.

⁶ Varga, "Léon Pignon, l'homme-clé de la solution Bao Dai," 277-313.

would return the people through national elections that decided the country's political system. Even Bảo Đại's position as chief of state would be put to a vote – a promise that Ngô Đình Diệm would later take up in 1955. In the meantime, the government promised democratic reform, the promotion of peace and individual liberty, and an end to illiteracy.

After four years of war and deprivation, the Bảo Đại solution generated enthusiasm and curiosity. Thousands attended rallies in Saigon, Hanoi, and Hà Đông.⁷ Urban centers had begun to see signs of economic recovery and battlefield success allowed refugees to come from the countryside in the tens of thousands. But there was also great uncertainty and fear. Elites looked at the civil war tearing apart China and hoped that the new government would not lead to an expansion of war. Bảo Đại and southern politicians agreed Saigon would become the State of Vietnam's new capital, hoping it would cement the country's new unity and overcome any lingering separatist tendencies in the south.⁸

The DRV likewise understood that the State of Vietnam and Bảo Đại possessed an appeal and presented a threat to their state project. When DRV officials first learned that Bảo Đại might ally with the Countrywide Front, it caused considerable alarm among their leadership. Even in Cochinchina, where conventional accounts assure us that Bảo Đại had no influence, their cadre reacted swiftly to this news, conducting polls to evaluate the public's attitude toward Bảo Đại and his declarations from Hong Kong.⁹ Soon thereafter, the emissaries from the DRV appealed to the

⁷ “Lời tuyên cáo của Đức Bảo-Đại tại Saigon,” *Thương nghiệp tuần báo* 30 June 1949; Directeur de la Police et de la Surete Federales, note no. 9548, May 13, 1949, 42, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

⁸ “Chính phủ mới sẽ đóng tại Sài-Gòn để tranh-dấu cho xong nền Thống-Nhất,” *Dân Việt* 15, 25 June 1949.

⁹ Rapport d'Ensemble no. 149-C/ST, November 8, 1947, Adj. Administrator d'affaires courantes à Cantho, B04-16, Phòng Phủ Thủ Hiến Nam Việt (THNV), TTLT2; Goscha, *Vietnam*, 500-501nXXXIII.

still-exiled Emperor Thành Thái to join their revolutionary government. They were not alone in trying to draw on a dynastic prestige that was clearly still relevant. The Cao Đài also tried to persuade High Commissioner Bollaert that Thành Thái would be safer living in Tây Ninh.¹⁰

Even among the non-communist officials in the DRV, the Bảo Đại still retained a real measure of respect. At one meeting of the Southern Administrative Committee chaired by its head Phạm Văn Bạch, the DRV province chief for Tân An defended Bảo Đại after another participant likened the former emperor to a turkey fattened by the French. The province chief retorted that he had much consideration for Bảo Đại, who he called a patriot for his 1945 abdication. He was, however, unable to stand up to the French in any definitive way. The colonial administration always knew that if they pushed hard enough, they could get their way. For this shadow province chief, it was thus not possible for the State of Vietnam to resolve the question of its independence to the satisfaction of the people.¹¹ Bảo Đại's strategy of inertia simply was not adequate, in his opinion.

Nonetheless, some DRV officials betrayed their anxiety. The dominance of the communist leadership over the DRV state grew exponentially after Chinese aid and advisors arrived from 1949, prompting the defection of numerous intellectuals and non-communist officials to the State of Vietnam. The hardship of life in the resistance and the growing role of party cadres had the same effect on foot soldiers and the peasant population. In early 1950, Lê Thị Kim defected to the State of Vietnam and denounced the DRV. The defection carried tremendous importance. Lê Thị Kim was the wife of the Southern Administrative Committee chief Phạm Văn Bạch, signaling a

¹⁰ Letter No. 184, Phạm Công Tắc to High Commissioner of Indochina [Émile Bollaert], 8 March 1948, D01-411, Phòng Phủ Thủ Hiến Nam Việt, TTLT2.

¹¹ SDECE, BR n. 292/MC/LP/1000, Valeur: C/3, 29 January 1951, 452, HCI, ANOM.

series of defections that would come in the next four years as intellectuals and non-communist revolutionaries grew disaffected with the Vietnamese Communist Party's growing domination of the state.¹² At the same time, refugees fled the countryside to move into urban centers and provincial capitals. Saigon, which had some 400,000 residents in 1945, had grown to a population of more than 2 million by 1951.¹³

Any optimism was tempered by the meager administrative resources that the State of Vietnam inherited from the remains of Vietnam's numerous state projects since 1940. Saigon was left with just 4,800 officers to police its public. Of those, 3,000 were Vietnamese officers, 1,100 Khmer, Malays, or Indian, and 440 French officers in the employ of the State of Vietnam. That equated to one officer per 450 persons in a city at war. By comparison, Paris had one officer for every 133 persons.¹⁴ The State of Vietnam's police force would struggle to counter Nguyễn Bình and the DRV's used of indiscriminate terrorism in the city, but largely succeed in preserving security. In one month during 1950, there were more than 52 grenade attacks on restaurants, shops, and movie theaters. Like the 12-year-old boy selling cigarettes who was killed in one blast, the vast majority of the DRV's victims were Vietnamese civilians.¹⁵

The State of Vietnam's administrative capacity in the cities, however, remained far more

¹² Christopher Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885-1954* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), 327; Ministère de la Relations avec les Etats Associes, Direction General de la Documentation Bordereau des pièces adressées, "Declarations de NGO QUY TOAN," n. 17/DGD, 3 January 1953, 611, 10H, SHD.

¹³ "Un beau et courageux discours de M. Le Tan Nam, préfet de la Région," *Journal d'Extrême-Orient* 7 December 1951.

¹⁴ "La tâche ingrate et périlleuse de la police préfectorale gardienne de Saigon-Cholon," *Journal d'Extrême-Orient* 21 May 1952.

¹⁵ Secteur Saigon/Cholon, Etat Major, 2eme Bureau, BR Mensuel (Decembre 1950) n. 12/2S, 5 Jan 1951; Etat du Vietnam, Direction des Services de Police et de Surete Nationales au Sud-Vietnam, 1ere section, Bulletin Quotidien, n. 1 du 1 Janvier 1951, 3963, 10H, SHD.

robust than its rural presence. Since 1945, territory had passed between control of traditional village notables, the DRV, sect militaries, and French forces and their Vietnamese auxiliaries. The situation was worst in Annam and Tonkin, where DRV control was more entrenched than in Cochinchina. Việt Minh cadres had assassinated a staggering 473 village notables in Thừa Thiên province alone by the end of 1949. A clear demarcation between the cities and the countryside existed, the barrier of control between two states. Village officials in this liminal zone were forced to play a “double game” as agents of both the DRV and State of Vietnam, tacking between the two authorities depending on circumstance and the possibility of retribution.¹⁶

The formation of the State of Vietnam exacerbated these battles. In Thừa Thiên province, the home of imperial capital Huế, the province chief reported that local DRV agents had accelerated their assassinations and propaganda against Bảo Đại after the State of Vietnam’s formal assumption of power in January 1950. It was not just the DRV that challenged the State of Vietnam's monopoly on violence. In this bricolage state, the religious sects and anti-colonial parties exerted their own sovereign power. In Thừa Thiên, members of the Vietnam Nationalist Party had formed their own militant cells to identify and assassinate DRV cadre.¹⁷

At the national level, however, attraction remained the overarching aim of the State of Vietnam in these early years. High officials of the State of Vietnam and much of the political elite sympathized with the goals of the resistance. In their eyes, the vast majority of the Việt Minh front was noble and brave (“our heroes” even among Bảo Đại’s family) but led astray by the communist leadership at the top of the DRV. Bảo Đại and his first prime minister, Nguyễn Phan Long, once

¹⁶ Report, Inspection des Affaires Politiques Administratives et Economiques 1949, 11, Phủ Thủ Hiến Trung Việt, TTLT2.

¹⁷ Letter, no.16-VP/M, Tỉnh trưởng Thừa-Thiên to Thủ Hiến Trung Việt, January 11, 1950, 23, Phủ Thủ Hiến Trung Việt, TTLT2.

again declined diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China in the hope that they could keep the broader Asian Cold War at bay and allow for reconciliation between the government and Việt Minh foot soldier. French military officials were incensed by the SVN government's stance, unable to comprehend that the SVN was not a rejection of the revolution but a means to fulfill it on more moderate terms and under different leadership.¹⁸

It was also true that the State of Vietnam's own supporters were one of the forces most responsible for its failure to achieve unity. Bảo Đại configured the first cabinet from various political and religious organizations, operating in effect as fronts to unify the country's fractious political scene. In 1950, the cabinet of Prime Minister Nguyễn Phan Long was quickly undone by what amounted to a coup d'état of the Đại Việt party. In the cabinet's first week, party members grew dissatisfied following the DRV's assassination of one of their leading figures in Saigon. Soon after the prominent DRV sympathizer Nguyễn Hữu Thọ organized a large demonstration and riot to protest the visit of American warships, leaving parts of Saigon in ruins. Just weeks earlier the Việt Minh had also organized a violent demonstration in central Saigon that led to the death of a young student named Trần Văn Ôn. The government of Nguyễn Phan Long seemed overwhelmed from the start.

The Đại Việt attacked the passivity of Nguyễn Phan Long in the face of what they described as a communist offensive against the State of Vietnam. Three Đại Việt members of the cabinet resigned in succession, Nguyễn Tôn Hoàn, Lê Thắng, and Phan Huy Quát. In a public letter they criticized the cabinet's "equivocation" and "hesitation." The act was choreographed to cause the collapse of the cabinet and, they plotted, the appointment of a unitary Đại Việt cabinet. If

¹⁸ Memo, Lê Tấn Năm to Trần Văn Hữu, August 14, 1950, 1616, Thủ Tướng Quốc gia Việt Nam (TTQGVN), TTLT2; Ellen Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954), 246.

successful, the Đại Việt planned to try to circumvent French authorities and obtain direct aid from the United States. Only the first part of the plan worked. Just four months after its inauguration, the first cabinet of the State of Vietnam collapsed.¹⁹

Bảo Đại did not, however, appoint the Đại Việt cabinet that they had hoped for. Instead he chose Trần Văn Hữu, a left-leaning agronomist and member of Saigon's bourgeois community. He was also a former member of Dr. Nguyễn Văn Thinh's Indochinese Democratic Party in the late 1930s.²⁰ He was the safer choice, one that would not greatly upset Léon Pignon and French officials. Since 1947, Bảo Đại had dismissed the Đại Việt and Vietnam Nationalist Party's dreams of obtaining direct American aid to oust France from Indochina. Such was wishful thinking, he believed. Indeed, Bảo Đại had sent telegrams pleading for American assistance in 1945 and 1946. It was not lost on him that Harry Truman's reply only came in February 1950, after Washington recognized the French-sponsored State of Vietnam.²¹

Like Nguyễn Văn Thinh before him, French officials soon found that Trần Văn Hữu was not the safe choice he had seemed after all. He had pardoned 120 Việt Minh prisoners as an act of goodwill and a gesture of rapprochement, in the process earning the ire of Saigon's *colon* community which attacked him as weak.²² In the summer of 1950, he attended the French-hosted Pau Conference to settle relations between Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and the role that France

¹⁹ "La lettre de démission des trois ministres du cabinet Nguyen-Phan-Long," *Saigon Presse* 7 April 1950; Intercepted telegram n. 611, Dao Van Dau du Cabinet de SM Bao Dai to Tran Dinh Vinh Attaché au Cabinet de SM Bao Dai, 31 March 1950, 78, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

²⁰ In the 1960s, Trần Văn Hữu would protest the dictatorship of Ngô Đình Diệm and keep in contact with Paris-based representatives of the National Liberation Front (NLF). NLF sympathizers even proposed him as a possible minister in the NLF's shadow government. "Vietcong and Their Allies Set Up Anti-Thieu Regime," *New York Times*, 11 June 1969.

²¹ *AFP Special Outre-Mer*, 10 Feb 1950, n. 1048, 258, AGEFOM, ANOM.

²² Rictus, "Le film du jour," *L'Union Française* 28 December 1949.



Figure 29: As part of Trần Văn Hữu's campaign to increase the State of Vietnam's sovereignty at the Pau Conference, the famous Húc Bridge in Hanoi's Hoàn Kiếm lake was decorated to read "Only the Vietnamese people are masters of Vietnam."

would play in what remained of this Indochinese federation. Trần Văn Hữu used the platform to criticize France's betrayal of its promises in the Élysée accords, and lamented that French officials seemed intent to use the French Union as a means to "prepare the return of a disguised protectorate." He moreover called on Washington and London to help Vietnam obtain full sovereignty. In Hanoi and Saigon, the State of Vietnam led a campaign to support Trần Văn Hữu's assertion of Vietnamese sovereignty and refute French attacks on the prime minister. By October, French officials in Saigon were pressuring Bảo Đại to remove Trần Văn Hữu and appoint a new prime minister.²³

The appointment of General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny as both high commissioner and head of the French military in December 1950 seemed to derailed those plans. The new High Commissioner was more concerned with eliminating other, more critical members of the State of

²³ MAE, Bordeaux d'Envoi n. 314, 24 Oct 1950, 'démarquage d'un télégramme de Bangkok en date du 21 octobre' telegram marked Bangkok, 21 Oct 1950 and "Tract 'Dân-chúng Việt-Nam với những lời tuyên-bố vừa rồi của Thủ-Tướng Trần-Văn-Hữu'," 180, 174QO, MAE.

Vietnam. His primary target was Bảo Đại's cousin, Prince Bửu Lộc, who was serving as Vietnam's representative in France. Bửu Lộc soon earned De Lattre's ire. That spring, French police officers executed twenty DRV soldiers in Dalat as retaliation for the assassination of a French *métis* police officer. Bửu Lộc encouraged the State of Vietnam's delegate to the Assembly of the French Union to publicly denounce the atrocity. It drew criticism to De Lattre's program just as he was attempting to build up the State of Vietnam's armed forces and roll back the DRV's territory in Tonkin. In the wake of the incident, he labeled Bửu Lộc as a proponent of "an anti-French nationalism, all the more dangerous because he conceals it under a mask of *bonhomie*."²⁴

De Lattre was unable to get rid of Bửu Lộc, but he did succeed in pressuring Trần Văn Hữu to adopt a harder line toward the Việt Minh front and the DRV. It was then, only in mid-1951 that the rhetoric, and war at large, began to harden. Trần Văn Hữu's speech after the Franco-Vietnamese victory at Vĩnh Yên in April 1951 was the first time the State of Vietnam labeled the Việt Minh an "enemy," as opposed to just the DRV leadership. Those words merely confirmed reality. As Trần Văn Hữu noted in his speech, the DRV troops were not fighting Frenchmen, but killing Vietnamese youths in State of Vietnam's new national army. No longer was it tolerable to speak forgivingly of the resistance.²⁵ He also denounced the Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, and the Bình Xuyên forces that rallied in 1948 for their continued contact and economic relations with Việt Minh elements. Trần Văn Hữu and General De Lattre's plans for a national army increasingly brought them into conflict with the politico-religious forces. Having enjoyed autonomy within the State of Vietnam, each group resisted the prime minister's attempts to

²⁴ Telegram n. 61/RAD, Haussaire to Etats Associes Paris, 23 June 1951, 252, 10H, SHD.

²⁵ *Discours de Vĩnh-Yên, 19 avril 1951* [Vĩnh Yên Address, April 19, 1951] (Saigon: Impr. Française d'Outre-Mer, 1951).

integrate their forces into the federal military.²⁶

In the summer of 1952, Bảo Đại turned to Nguyễn Văn Tâm, a more assertive, militant figure for his new prime minister. Echoing the words of Georges Clemenceau, another ‘tiger’ who confronted weak domestic support for war against a formidable opponent, Nguyễn Văn Tâm came to office with a promise: *Je fais la guerre!* [I make war!]. In strong terms, he framed the war as a choice between tradition fused with liberalism in the State of Vietnam or a foreign communist dictatorship in the DRV. Through 1953 he oversaw an escalation in national army mobilization underway since 1951, a modest land reform law, and a new labor code. Nguyễn Văn Tâm also instituted a three-stage, ground-up national democratization [*dân chủ hoá*] that he argued drew on Vietnam’s strong democratic tradition in the village. The administration linked voter registration to the census, and thus to the military mobilization, for the first municipal and provincial elections in January 1953. Voting was restricted to areas deemed pacified and suffrage was limited to males in the lowlands.²⁷ Over two-thirds of nearly one million registered voters cast ballots for an election that was limited but free. The election posed a grave threat to the DRV’s international reputation, but scattered Việt Minh assassinations and propaganda had a limited effect.²⁸

A group of affluent professionals won the Saigon elections campaigning on basic services and aid to the lower classes. Reflecting the differing experiences of the north and south, in Hanoi the election became a referendum on the war and national politics. The ticket headed by Nguyễn Thế Truyền, Hồ Chí Minh’s closest associate and leading anti-colonial activist in 1920s Paris, and

²⁶ Bảo Đại, *Le Dragon d’Annam* (Paris: Plon, 1980), 298-299.

²⁷ In the highland areas, which fell under a separate legal status as part of Bảo Đại’s kingdom, women were permitted to vote.

²⁸ Speech, Nguyễn Văn Tâm, “Hỏi an hem chi em nông-phu,” 3357, PTTQGVN, TTLT2; Vietnam Presse no. 712. January 26, 1953, 637, TTQGVN, TTLT2.

other anti-Việt Minh *attentistes* ['those who wait and see'] won convincingly. They pledged to push for an end to remaining French privileges, the establishment of an elected national assembly, and an end to the war. Nguyễn Thế Truyền continued his campaign through his newspapers. He became the foremost advocate of non-alignment in the Cold War, arguing forcefully for the neutralization of Vietnam and alliance with the non-aligned Afro-Asian nations.²⁹

The national-level leadership argued that the foreign threat of communism and its rejection of individualism necessitated the French presence and the need to defend the State of Vietnam. At the commissioning of 700 new National Army of Vietnam officers in Saigon, Minister of Defense Phan Huy Quát told tens of thousands of spectators that Vietnam represented the plight of the world at large, divided between two modes of life and two modes of thinking. "The Viet Minh communists, for whom the ends justify the means, consider the soldier as a simple instrument of war, whose value does not exceed that of an automatic gun. By contrast, the national government recognizes you as more than a soldier, for all that which makes humans sacred."³⁰

But the distinction appeared less dramatic to the young men subject to mobilization. After Bảo Đại decreed a new 'total' mobilization as the siege of Điện Biên Phủ escalated, a sense of uncertainty fell over Hanoi. Even the cinema provided no escape. Police now lurked in the wings, stopping shows to inspect the crowd for draft-age youths. If caught without papers, he was taken directly to the Bureau of Mobilization office. Young men now had to choose between mobilization in the *maquis* or under their former monarch. A dozen students at the *Ecole Supérieure de pédagogie* chose to abscond in the night and search out Việt Minh units beyond Hanoi's edge. One student,

²⁹ Letter, Nguyễn Thế Truyền to Mayor of Hà Nội, June 11, 1953, 68, Phòng Toà Thị Chính Hà Nội, TTLT1; His newspapers were *L'ami du peuple* and its Vietnamese version *Thân Dân*.

³⁰ "Discours prononcé par le ministre de la défense nationale, Phan Huy Quat," *Vietnam Presse* 985, October 26, 1953, 1568, PTTQG, TTLT2.

Pham Van An, struggled to decide if he would join them. The choice was not as clear as framed by Minister Quát or Hồ Chí Minh. An's feelings of camaraderie, patriotism, and individual liberty conflicted, pulling him both ways. He ultimately refused to go. "I fear too much," An explained to a friend, "that the V[iet] M[inh] would forcibly enlist me in that army of coolies transporting weapons." Another student confided to a friend his determination to avoid military service on either side. "Nationalists or communists, they are only *boys* in service of the French, Americans, or Russians."³¹

Similar themes animated Minister of Social Action Lê Thăng's village reorganization scheme, which aimed to improve the lot of peasants while bringing them more firmly under the government's authority. He billed the project as the centerpiece of the national government's social program and the model for thousands of future villages. Each new village was comprised from refugees and peasants willing to move out of Việt Minh dominated areas. Organizers felt that the planned scheme of houses, schools, temples, markets, athletic fields and military posts would help modernize country life. And the villages' placement near major highways would also facilitate commerce and ensure the national army could reinforce their defense.

In Lê Thăng's vision, the aid was a "moral loan" between the state and peasant that carried an obligation to contribute to the political and economic strength of the nation. The resettlement program struck at the core of the DRV's existence. If the State of Vietnam could separate it from the rural population and their resources, the DRV state would essentially cease to exist. Conversely, the government would be able to better mobilize soldiers, recruit labor, and collect taxes. To combat the program in the south, the Việt Minh commander for Gia Định ordered cadre into not

³¹ Intercepted telegram, No. 256, April 27, 1954, Pham Van An (Ecole Supérieure de pédagogie, Hà Nội) to Dang Van Nhan (Ecole Supérieure des Travaux publics, Saigon) and Intercepted telegram no. 212, Nguyen Lan Giac to Nguyen Dinh Cat, April 7, 1954, both in 57, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

yet moved villages to propagandize and spread misinformation, but to limited effect.³²

The DRV was more worried about the *Đồng Quán* model village in Tonkin. Though subsumed under Lê Thăng's broader agenda, the Governor of North Vietnam Nguyễn Hữu Trí was the driving force behind the most ambitious of all the village projects. Sixteen miles south of Hanoi at the juncture of Route 1 and 22, the Northern Vietnam Service of Public Works laid out a 100-hectare development with housing for 10,000 peasants drawn from 25 villages. As soon as work began, Việt Minh troops attacked the structures nightly. Laborers hired to repair the damage fled after the Việt Minh threatened to burn their nearby homes. Despite resistance, by the end of 1953 administrators were able to finish the village and begin moving thousands from the surrounding villages. On its heels the Northern Vietnam Service of Public Works produced another ten smaller model villages before the end of 1954. But modernization projects found what would become familiar hurdles. Local State of Vietnam officials – and from 1951 their American counterparts in the forerunner to USAID – grappled with peasants who had little interest in their newly dug wells or put their pesticides to different uses than intended.³³

While the public face of the State of Vietnam showed socio-political reform and a modern state model, its underside revealed a tenuous lattice of alliances. To draw away the base of the Việt Minh resistance and build the first government spanning from the Chinese border south to Cà Mau and west to Lai Châu and Ban Mê Thuột, the State of Vietnam needed to incorporate

³² Vietnam Presse no. 670 “Le President Nguyen Van Tam Inaugure le village des rallies de Tan Phu Trung,” 1634, PTTQGVN, TTLT2; Translation, “Mesures prises contre la direction ennemie du rassemblement de la population,” Front Lien Viet de la Province de Gia Dinh Ninh, Vo Van Tao, 1 Jan 1952,” 1635, PTTQGVN, TTLT2.

³³ “Conference de Presse” Nguyễn Hữu Trí, 29 Jan 1953,” 000190, Sở Thông Tin Tuyên Truyền, TTLT1; Report, James Hendrick (Special Representative to North Vietnam), February 1953, 13, RG 469, Mission to Vietnam, Subject Files 1950-58, NARA.

highlands that remained outside effective lowland state control through the 1940s.³⁴ Negotiating each arrangement was particularly difficult, with terms having to satisfy the French High Commissioner, the State of Vietnam, and the local population. The resulting bricolage of states contained overlapping authorities and sovereignties. While the lowlands formed the majority of the State of Vietnam's territory the highlands remained outside its jurisdiction. In the highlands, Bảo Đại once again became king, an act of legal fiction demanded by France. The highlands would remain a separate territory attached to the person of Bảo Đại, which French officials hoped would safeguard their freedom of action in Indochina over and above the State of Vietnam.

Leaders of the upland ethnic groups agreed that they would only affiliate to the State of Vietnam on a separate basis, but not subject to control of the lowland state. Speaking at a ceremony of allegiance in the northwest highlands, the Nùng delegate Cao Văn told Bảo Đại that they had administered their own government and defense for several years. They had already “acquired de facto autonomy” which they would not forfeit it. The corresponding ceremony in the central highlands went far worse. Chiefs from the Rhadé, Mnong, Bahnar and others paraded their elephants, sacrificed buffalo, and drank rice wine with Bảo Đại and High Commissioner Léon Pignon. In their minds, it was another empty colonial ceremony, only begun 1933 under Pierre Pasquier. But as Pignon spoke they were shocked to hear him boast that the uplands were joining the government of the lowland Vietnamese empire, even with a separate statute. In vain, the chiefs drafted a letter of protest to the High Commissioner.³⁵

³⁴ Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 285.

³⁵ *Discours prononcés au cours de la Cérémonie de prestation de serment d'allégeance à S.M. Bao Dai par les Représentants des Minorités Ethniques du Nord Viêt-Nam, 17 Juillet 1949* [Speech at the ceremony for the pledge of allegiance to H.M. Bảo Đại given by the representatives of the ethnic minorities of northern Vietnam, July 27, 1949] (Hà Nội: Imprimerie Le-van-Tan, 1949), section V; Letter, Keo Ama Kham

In the lowlands, the Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, Catholics, Bình Xuyên, Chinese congregations, and old nationalist parties continued to form their own parallel administrative apparatuses, replete with armed forces, social services, and political arms. Their authority over significant territory had made them formidable rivals of the Việt Minh, but also to Vietnamese officials who aimed to refashion this bricolage state into a centralized, modern administration. In a way, the logic of this strategy countered aims to build a viable central government. In allying with the state fragments that had broken away from the DRV, the State of Vietnam was working with forces that had proven most resistant to the control of a central government. As the preeminent legal historian Frederic W. Maitland concluded, “the modern state is an almost fortuitous collection of functions left over from other bodies, and performs these functions in ways dictated to it by what those other bodies have already done.” Too often the religious sects, anti-colonial political organizations, and political organizations continued to function as they had since before 1949, less collaborators than competitors.³⁶

Further complicating matters was that each organization experienced some degree of inner dissension due to leadership rivalries and ideological differences. Forces under the command of the Hòa Hảo’s top military official, Trần Văn Soái, remained locked in a low-scale war with those of a rival leader, Nguyễn Giác Ngộ, throughout the wider Vietnamese civil war. Within the Cao Đài similar disagreements persisted, notably between the military commanders Trình Minh Thế and Nguyễn Văn Thanh, preventing unity of action at crucial moments. Quite often these military men passed into *dissidence*, temporarily disavowing the State of Vietnam only to negotiate a new *ralliement*,

Suk, Bok Mohr, Ya-ju, and Nai-hun to Delegate of the High Commissioner for the PMS, July 11, 1949, 1028, QTQGVN, TTLT4.

³⁶ This is English philosopher R.G. Collingwood’s elegant summation of Maitland’s work, in *Essays in Political Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 106.

switching their allegiance back to the State of Vietnam. Each negotiation could yield a larger area of operations or new material aid.

Smaller state fragments largely escaped public attention, but illustrate how the State of Vietnam expanded its sovereignty through older state projects and indirect authority. Vũ Hồng Khanh, leader of the Vietnam Nationalist Party, fled to China after the failed uprising at Yên Bái, thereafter organizing Vietnamese revolutionaries in southern China and serving as an officer in the Kuomintang army. He returned to Vietnam after the August Revolution and took a leadership position in the DRV, before retreating back into China after the defeat of the nationalist parties at the hands of Võ Nguyên Giáp. As Chinese communist troops neared victory in December 1949, Vũ Hồng Khanh cobbled together an army of Vietnamese, upland minorities, and demobilized Kuomintang soldiers. In December 1949, they headed toward Lạng Sơn intent on attacking the Việt Minh and French forces. After suffering defeats at the hands of both, Vũ Hồng Khanh had few other options. He agreed to pledge his loyalty to Bảo Đại and the State of Vietnam.

Under North Vietnam Governor Nguyễn Hữu Trí's authority, Vũ Hồng Khanh gained command of a mountain redoubt. His base of operations and several hundred soldiers became a small Whampoa academy in northwest Vietnam where Chinese Republican values were studied. Though he had pledged loyalty to the SVN and its French sponsorship, one of Vũ Hồng Khanh's first maneuvers was a covert appeal to American officials for direct US aid to supplant France.³⁷ Two years later, Prime Minister Nguyễn Văn Tâm named this former revolutionary his Minister of Youth and Sports in a cabinet that drew heavily on leaders of the nationalist revolutionary party members who had formerly served in the early DRV coalition government of 1945-1946. It is not

³⁷ “V/v Truy to ten Vu Hong Khanh” no.130/B/KHN, Oct 14, 1950, 905, Phủ Thủ Tướng, TTLT3.



Figure 30: Vũ Hồng Khanh's mountain base near Lạng Sơn. At right, Khanh's soldiers study the three principles of Sun Yat-sen in class.

clear what happened to Vũ Hồng Khanh's mountain base. Other Kuomintang soldiers were sent to Phu Quốc island for temporary internment and repatriation. However, in the late 1950s they were still farming pepper while directing and manning the island's militias.³⁸

Creating and transforming the State of Vietnam's institutions led not only to contests with DRV cadres, but also among the central state's bureaucrats. The division of administrative duties between the central government and these state fragments created daily contests to expand one's sovereignty at the expense of the other. Who exactly wielded power and the terms of its exercise were open questions at the ground level even within the state. The creation of the National Army of Vietnam brought one more competitor into the countryside and cities. On several occasions, the National Army and the religious sect militaries could face off in full scale battles when disagreements arose over command. But even in Saigon, low level violence betrayed the difficulties of building the coercive apparatus of the new state. After witnessing yet another brawl between his

³⁸ Interview, Calvin Mehlert, 11 Jan 2014. As a Chinese speaker and Foreign Service Officer, Cal embedded with these pepper farming militiamen in the mid-1950s and stayed on at the embassy through the 1970s. During that time he interviewed Vũ Hồng Khanh and Nghiêm Kế Tổ.

police officers and National Army soldiers, the district three's police inspector reported that “at this moment uniformed police are faced with two enemies: the Viet Minh and the Vietnamese soldiers.”³⁹

The tension was greatest between the State of Vietnam's official apparatus and the co-opted politico-religious sects' military forces that controlled swaths of the countryside. Administrators resented these religious forces as archaic obstacles blocking the formation of their modern centralized state. Often they had good reason to feel so. As province chief of Long Xuyên, Nguyễn Ngọc Thợ watched helplessly as the Hòa Hảo leader Ba Cụt ransacked government buildings, implemented illegal taxes, and assassinated local police chiefs during his five dissidences.⁴⁰ Nguyễn Ngọc Thợ would go on to orchestrate Ngô Đình Diệm's battle against the sects in 1955 for his own reasons. Over the prior nine years Ngô Đình Diệm himself was intimately involved with the litany of front organizations comprised from old political parties and the sects. All faltered over internal division and competing leaders' aspiration for national power. That long and familiar series of failures provided some part of the inspiration for the divide and conquer strategy he later deployed.

His task was complicated by the empowerment of this new segment of elites that formed the SVN bricolage state. For the first time since the early nineteenth century, military prowess became an avenue to integrate and propel new leaders. This form of state building allowed armed leaders to trade on their authority over a locality, thus climbing a “ladder of militarization” to provincial, regional, and national prominence.⁴¹ Though most histories speak of monolithic and distinct Hòa

³⁹ Commissaire de Police du 3ème Arrondissement [Hoa Van Mui] to Directeur de la Police Municipale, Feb 24, 1951, 53, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.

⁴⁰ “Ralliement de Lê-quang-VINH dit Ba Cụt,” no. 431-Cab/C, Nguyễn Ngọc Thợ to Hồ Quang Hoài, 5 Dec 1953, D 5-563, Phủ Thủ Hiến Nam Việt, TTLT2.

⁴¹ Philip Khun, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China: militarization and social structure, 1796-1864* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

Hào, Cao Đài, Bình Xuyên, Catholic and Việt Minh organizations, their military leaders shared a comparable character. They possessed strong leadership, charisma, and a martial prowess that elevated them to popularity and military command midst the revolution. Nguyễn Bình, Nam Lửa, Bảy Viễn, Ba Cụt, Trình Minh Thế, Nguyễn Giác Ngộ, and their lesser-known compatriots were more similar than different. But whereas the DRV was able to channel its local agents into its party-state framework or suppress them, the State of Vietnam struggled to integrate them. Historians have tended to repeat the moralizing partisan discourses of Ngô Đình Diệm and the DRV, which labeled the Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, and Bình Xuyên as feudal or criminal elements, incapable of building nationalist support.⁴²

The popularity of historical Chinese novels in Cochinchina is one way to understand the perception of these latter-day men of prowess. *Tam Quốc* [*Three Kingdoms*] was the first Chinese epic translated into the Romanized Vietnamese script at the turn of the century and rose to tremendous popularity in Cochinchina. At least 135 translations of Chinese stories were published in Saigon, bringing readers adventure, political intrigue, and strong heroes. It was not a surprise then in the early 1940s that outlaws and self-styled revolutionaries tended to adopt *nom de guerre* based on these Chinese figures. When one such bandit managed to kill a Vietnamese colonial militiaman, he taunted the survivors that he could not be caught for “I am the terrible Tiết Nhân Quý [Xue Rengui]!” The writer Bình Nguyễn Lộc thus felt that through their adoration of these novels, southerners acquired a “very strong Chinese worldview.” Still in the 1960s “commoners and bandit chiefs alike all try to style themselves after *Đôn Hùng Tín* [Shan Xiongxin] or *Quan Công* [Guan Yu].” Other observers also tied these stories to a real sentiment of legitimacy behind these southern

⁴² Jessica Chapman explains American perceptions of the ‘sects’ in the 1950s as well as Diệm’s political and military campaign against them in *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

strongmen. Like their Chinese heroes, they too became high officials in a new government after beginning political life as rebels.⁴³

A Chinese proverb explains "Young people should not read the *Water Margin*, old people should not read the *Three Kingdoms*," – the young likely to mimic the banditry and disregard for old social orders captured in the former, while the aged susceptible to partake in political intrigue glorified in the latter. If the proverb traveled with its inspiration, southerners did not endorse its wisdom. When the Hòa Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ dedicated a poem to the Bình Xuyên troops he and others invoked the Chinese term *giang hồ* [errant], popularized in the context of these Chinese novels, to romanticize their errant origins as pirates and praise the development of their revolutionary spirit.⁴⁴

These stories offered a popular point of reference to legitimate their authority, particularly when it came to the delicate subject of collaboration with foreign powers. The Cao Đài military commander Trình Minh Thế persuasively weaved these stories with contemporary events. During his 1952 dissidence, he distributed leaflets that chastised the Cao Đài military's chief of staff Nguyễn Văn Thanh and called for all Vietnamese to oppose France. The collapse of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220) in *Three Kingdoms* and the fall of Edgar Faivre's government in Paris offered a prescription for action. Just as Guan Yu had served under the tyrannical Eastern Han Chancellor Cao Cao when he was captured, circumstance had forced the Cao Đài to collaborate with France.

⁴³ Cited in Lưu Hồng Sơn, "Ảnh hưởng của tiểu thuyết Tam Quốc diễn nghĩa và sự tiếp nhận tác phẩm này ở Nam Bộ đầu thế kỷ XX," *Văn Học Việt Nam* (Khoá Văn học và Ngôn ngữ) 25 April 2010, <http://khoavanhoc-ngonngu.edu.vn>; Nguyễn Ngọc Huy and Stephen Young, *Understanding Vietnam* (Bussum: DPC Information Service, 1982), 24; "La brillante conduite d'un milicien" *La Dépêche d'Indochine*, June 25, 1937.

⁴⁴ See the poem "Tặng Chiến-sĩ Bình-Xuyên" in *Sám Giảng Thi Văn Giáo Lý* (Saigon: Ban Phổ-thông Giáo-lý Trung-ương, 1966).

But when Cao Cao suffered a critical defeat, Guan Yu seized the opportunity to turn against him and escape. This same opportunity was now at hand. To collaborate with France in pursuit of independence was no crime, Trình Minh Thế claimed, but to continue collaborating after this opportunity was a great crime.⁴⁵

That there existed some legitimacy and favor for this governance by strongmen does not mean all viewed it as just or desirable. Absent ideology, the style of governance practiced by these military leaders resembled apolitical bandits. Despite pillaging certain members of the community, people frequently saw their "racket" as commensurate to state power. The band or unit would implant in an area and provide protection from other pirates. In disputes, a villager could turn to his local strongman for assistance in settling the argument or imposing his justice.⁴⁶ The arrangement became essentially another familiar form of governance, a protection racket not fundamentally different from the repertoires of the central state. Charles Tilly may have noted in the 1980s that state making and organized crime were fundamentally similar processes.⁴⁷ But the insight of his argument was not new. Then, and still today, it is found in the Vietnamese saying, "the bandit robs you at night, the state robs you in the day" [*cướp đêm là giặc, cướp ngày là quan*]. As the State of Vietnam national army moved into the countryside, that racket became more competitive. Those living within the area of a new national army post were subject to corvée or

⁴⁵ "Traduction d'un tract du Général Trinh-Minh-The & ses soldats au Général de Div. Nguyen Van Thanh, Cdt. les troupes Caodaistes du St-Siège de Tay-Ninh en date du 16.2.52," FTSV, 2ème Bureau, No. 185/2.R, Feb 29, 1952, 10H4163, SHD.

⁴⁶ For a contemporary description of the Vietnam-Cambodia border, see André Souyris-Rolland, "Les pirates au Cambodge," *Bulletin de la Société des Études Indochinoises* [Bulletin of the Society of Indochinese Studies] XXV no. 3 (1950): 426, 435.

⁴⁷ Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in *Bringing the State Back In*, eds. Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 169–187.

taxation to support the imposition of yet another state.

In the cities too, the infusion of American aid to the State of Vietnam exacerbated the problem of good governance. There was a longer pattern of governance in Vietnam which saw elites hoard wealth. One of Saigon's leading newspapers, *The Telegraph* [*Điện Báo*] dissected the issue in a recurring series. Titled "I was a victim of bribery," the regular column featured reader letters describing their experiences with government and societal corruption. One writer noted that the problem was the product of a certain state model that dated back decades. Power was concentrated in dynastic castes, administrative classes, and now parties. People studied or worked to attain positions of prominence as *quan* [lit. 'mandarins', but figuratively 'administrators']. They effectively became "gods" while the people were "disposable." Money became the only thing that bridged that yawning gap, allowing the commoners to interact with the gods.⁴⁸

With this shared heritage, the pattern manifested to different degrees in all of Vietnam's aspiring post-colonial states. Similar to African states, Vietnam too had a "politics of the belly" that saw elites hoard state resources, where the distinction between private and public resources often seemed absent, and where idioms of the belly and eating playing a role in political discourse.⁴⁹ Already in 1946, one newspaper critical of the Việt Minh remarked that the DRV was guilty of practicing "*chính trị của cái bụng' là politique du ventre*" [politics of the belly]. The writer's primary critique was that members of the DRV confiscated and hoarded resources and power. In this sense, they favored their own well-being over others. Taking the charge further, the writer argued that the DRV practiced another form of politics of the belly in its terrorism. Cadres often killed their

⁴⁸ "Hối lộ! Hối lộ!" *Điện Báo* 7 July 1950.

⁴⁹ Jean François-Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (London: Longman, 1993).



Figure 31: "Politics of the Belly": (left) The taller man asks "You're a politician, but how does your belly grow so big?" To which the other man replies, "why that's a secret of the profession, practicing 'politics of the belly!'" At right, a cartoon on "a sated belly" explains that one who is already "full" then needs to disburse benefits for others. Unfortunately, this cartoon points out, too often those with "full" bellies do not see that lower class share in their wealth."

cadres by gutting open the bellies [*mổ bụng*] of their enemies.⁵⁰

By the late 1940s, the issue was apparent on both sides of the Vietnamese civil war. The emergence of the State of Vietnam provided elites with a chance to lobby for new positions of power vacated by the French colonial state. Journals and newspapers noted that the rising prosperity in Vietnam's urban centers was concentrated among this same elite. In 1949, *New Saigon* ran a series of cartoons that pilloried this state of affairs. In one, a rotund and wealthy politician ascribes his success to the "politics of the belly." A separate cartoon emphasized the concept of benevolence, "tốt bụng" [lit. "good belly"]. Those with "full bellies" [*bụng no nê*] were satisfied and comfortable. They could afford, and indeed had an obligation, to disburse aid and assistance to others. The cartoonist lamented, however, that too often this was not the case.

⁵⁰ Chon-Ly, "Chuyện hằng ngày - Chánh-trị và cái bụng," *Phục Hưng* 9 February 1946.

To a lesser degree in this era, the DRV state suffered from the same politics of the belly. One provincial newspaper described a similar consolidation of political and economic power within the DRV forces, as well as the permeable division between state and private resources. In a satirical article, the journal noted that in this revolutionary era woman could now escape the old strictures of Confucian life. No more did they have to abide the four Confucian manners of diligence, appearance, speech, and behavior [*lễ-lối Công-Dung-Ngôn-Hành*] to find a husband. To assist women in adapting to the times, the paper reprinted a saying that had become popular in both the State of Vietnam and DRV zones of control. Titled, "Picking a worthy husband..." the text examined the fate that awaiting women who married different types of DRV officials. "If you want luxury, marry an administrator [*hành chánh*]," "If you want to wear gold, marry a tasking official [*công tác*]," but "If you want to be poor, marry a soldier [*vệ quốc đoàn*]."⁵¹ These problems would continue to plague the State of Vietnam's successor the Republic of Vietnam, just as they would the Socialist Republic of Vietnam following its economic liberalization in the 1980s.

The Failure of the State of Vietnam

It was the contradiction at the heart of the State of Vietnam which hastened its ultimate demise. Try as they might, French colonials could not indefinitely ignore what had long ailed the Empire and now the French Union. Within the *mission civilisatrice* and its more benign successor "association" was the promise that France would indeed reimburse the colonized with their sovereignty. The promise of the French Union was that this moment was finally at hand, that association would be made freely and as equals. Yet time and again metropolitan and colonial officials subverted the State of Vietnam's ability to manage its affairs and actively discredited their

⁵¹ "Lấy chồng cho đáng ...," *Phim hàng tuần* (Hóc Môn) 64, 16 April 1950.

leaders.

At the twilight of French colonialism, one Vietnamese politician explained to Jean Cousseau, the *éminence grise* of the colonial administration, that the former emperor had been like a lemon. Over the course of the various state projects and Bảo Đại solutions, all the juice had been extracted. But a lemon without juice still can offer a useful “zest”. Now, “for the French, the zest is discarded. We Vietnamese, perhaps, know how to use this zest. Your error is having kept it to use for yourselves since 1947.”⁵² In other words, France had continued to place heavy restraints on Bảo Đại and the State of Vietnam, sapping both of their potential to fully develop as an alternative to the DRV. The emperor was highly compromised by this time, but the stories demeaning his person were often eggagerated.⁵³

By the end of 1953, sentiment had shifted strongly against continued association with France as conceived in the French Union. Even Nguyễn Văn Tâm, who history has remembered as a caricature of colonial collaboration, demanded the abrogation of all Franco-Vietnamese treaties. Vietnamese, he said, would refuse the French Union as constructed. He affirmed that Vietnamese “no longer want to be tenants of a house built without us,” in a speech broadcast over radio. Realizing that sentiment, the prime minister literally destroyed the house. In a crowded ceremony, Nguyễn Văn Tâm wielded a sledgehammer to break down the door of the *Maison Centrale*, Saigon’s French colonial prison, before demolishing the entire structure. He timed the

⁵² Hồ Hữu Tường, *Le Défi Vietnamien* (Unpublished memoir, 1969), 294;

⁵³ The former emperor was not the inveterate gambler made out in various caricatures. When he spent four months in Cannes in 1950, Bảo Đại visited the casino twenty times, or just less than once a week. The French officers monitoring him noted that he won a sizable sum on roulette (the equivalent of \$27,000 today) over the course of the summer. Direction Générale de la Sûreté nationale, Service des Renseignements Generaux de Cannes, n. 205/S, 26 October 1950 and Direction Générale de la Sûreté nationale, Service des Renseignements Generaux de Cannes, n. 204/S, 26/10/1950, both in 28W014, Sous-Préfecture de Grasse, DAM.



Figure 32: In 1953, Nguyễn Văn Tâm marches down Gia Long Street (Lý Tự Trọng today) to preside over the demolition of the *Maison Centrale*. The Republic of Vietnam's national library was built on the site, which is known today as the General Sciences Library.

demonstration for the fourth anniversary of Élysée accords to convey a symbolic message.⁵⁴

Paris contributed to the worsening situation that summer by unilaterally devaluing the piastre-franc exchange rate in violation of the State of Vietnam's right to consultation on economic matters. An indignant Nguyễn Văn Tâm rebuked French officials for violating their agreements. This wasn't consultation, he complained, it was notice. More than pride, the devaluation suddenly burdened the Vietnamese with inflationary food prices and budget shortfalls. In response, the State of Vietnam was forced to freeze the national budget and suspend all government projects.⁵⁵

The piastre devaluation exacerbated the growing sense of dissatisfaction with the Franco-Vietnamese relationship and frustration over a seemingly endless war. Two prominent religious

⁵⁴ "Press interception, DAYMARD, Saigon to Presse AFPA in Paris," n. 2054, 6 June 1953, 600, PTT, TTLT2.

⁵⁵ Governor of Tonkin, Circulaire n. 406/Tc-PTH/TT, 25 June 1953, 000087-04, Phòng Phủ Thị Chính Hà Nội, TTL1.

leaders called for the abrogation of the 1949 Élysée accords and the ratification of a true constitution for the State of Vietnam. Without this, the Catholic Bishop Lê Hữu Tứ argued, Vietnamese citizens had the right to refuse the government's demands, even military conscription. When the French Prime Minister Joseph Laniel promised to "perfect" their independence in July, it made little difference. That fall leading political and religious personalities convened two national congresses in Saigon. The 150 delegates were a diverse group, representing the state's diversity. *Attentistes*, recently rallied DRV officials, as well as provincial officials elected in the previous spring's elections all gathered to discuss the future of the State of Vietnam and the French Union. Even Hoàng Xuân Giu, who had trained at the Comintern before leading the Fourth International's Colonial Section in 1930s Paris, was present as a representative of the Bình Xuyên. Arrested in 1932 by the French police who feared he would protest Bảo Đại's return home to Vietnam, Hoàng Xuân Giu was now lending his support to the state helmed by the former emperor.⁵⁶

Lê Đình Cự, a representative of the Vietnamese Socialist Party and a former Việt Minh supporter, asked his fellow delegates "how many times have we negotiated, negotiations where we were only figureheads? How many times have we declared an illusory independence?" Overwhelming now, the delegates agreed the war could only end once the State of Vietnam had achieved full independence and total sovereignty. Without these, it was impossible to decisively win over the population. When the conference ended, the delegates passed a resolution stating that the State of Vietnam would not adhere to the French Union in its present form. That decision

⁵⁶ Prefecture de Police (Paris), 1eme Bureau, Letter n. 8658, 18 Oct 1932; Cabinet du Préfet, Resignements Generaux n. 1.211, 23 October 1953, both in 1W2193 - 8658, PDP.

would be put to a vote only after the state had achieved full independence.⁵⁷ What little tolerance remained for Franco-Vietnamese collaboration was soon shattered when Paris agreed to partition Vietnam as part of the Geneva Accords.

The State of Vietnam's delegates to the 1954 Geneva Conference opposed the division of Vietnam. France and the DRV agreed to partition Vietnam at the 17th parallel, allowing the DRV to come out of the countryside and take control of all of northern Vietnam. The State of Vietnam would have to retreat and consolidate in south. In two years, an election overseen by Indian, Polish, and Canadian observers would be held to determine the government of a reunified Vietnam. The State of Vietnam's lead delegate, Trần Văn Đổ, tried in vain to prevent this partition. He insisted on the disarmament of both states, the United Nations' temporary administration of the country, and a final settlement through an election administered by the United Nations.⁵⁸ The scheme was entirely unacceptable to the DRV delegates who sought to consolidate, not reduce, the sovereignty of their state. French officials acknowledged Trần Văn Đổ's proposal and ignored it. The accords were to settle their war in Indochina with the DRV, not the Vietnamese civil war that France had encouraged and amplified. As a result, only the former would end in 1954. The latter would continue.

⁵⁷ Translation of "process-verbaux des séances du Congrès National," October 15, 1953, 27, HCI-SPCE, ANOM; François Guillemot, *Dai Việt, indépendance et révolution au Viêt-Nam* (Paris: Indes Savantes, 2012), 534-41.

⁵⁸ "Eight Plenary Session on Indochina, Geneva, July 21," 21 July 1954, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954. The Geneva Conference* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1981), 1497.

EPILOGUE

* * *

Shortly after the signature of the Geneva accords, a messenger arrived at the Hanoi home of Nguyễn Thế Truyền. His task was to deliver the letter and return with a response. Nguyễn Thế Truyền read the note and told the messenger all he had to say on the matter. The letter sat in his home for a day before Nguyễn Thế Truyền burned it. It would be the last time he communicated with his former friend and political confidant, Hồ Chí Minh.¹

The letter was an appeal from Hồ Chí Minh for Nguyễn Thế Truyền to remain in Hanoi after the partition of Vietnam. There he was invited to assume a high ceremonial office in the triumphant DRV state. Recalling that moment more than ten years later, Nguyễn Thế Truyền said he had responded by thanking Hồ Chí Minh for his generous offer, but replied that he could certainly not accept. Everyone must follow their ideals, he said, and at that moment it required the two men to follow two different paths. Less diplomatically, he told others that the offer was hollow, for in practice it was an invitation to submit and serve the agenda of the Stalinists controlling the DRV. Nor could he overlook the executions and violence that the DRV had committed. The deaths of those he had worked with closely in Paris – Tạ Thu Thâu, Dương Văn Giáo, Lê Bá Cang, Hồ Văn Ngà, and others – still weighed heavily on his mind. Nguyễn Thế Truyền's path would be to the south. Like some million others, that summer he chose to remain in the State of Vietnam and moved to Saigon.²

¹ Đặng Hữu Thụ, *Thân thế và sự nghiệp nhà cách mạng Nguyễn Thế Truyền* (Melun: Self-published, 1993), 351-352. The author was a friend of Nguyễn Thế Truyền and recounted these stories from their conversations in the 1960s.

² Ibid.

In Saigon, Nguyễn Thế Truyền would see the conflict between Vietnam's various political projects continue. The State of Vietnam's newly appointed Prime Minister Ngô Đình Diệm led a campaign to overcome the politico-religious sect forces that had still not integrated into the National Army of Vietnam. Thereafter he led a campaign to "denounce the communists." Ngô Đình Diệm sought to overcome the weaknesses of the bricolage State of Vietnam by empowering its central institutions, suppressing its myriad of dissident voices, and nurturing a strong state-sponsored nationalism. There were all traits that he diagnosed as absent from prior governments. Nguyễn Thế Truyền watched as his political collaborators from 1947-1948 – Trần Văn Ân, Hồ Hữu Tường, Phạm Công Tắc, and others – were arrested or fled into exile. Finally, in the fall of 1955 Ngô Đình Diệm unseated Bảo Đại as chief of state in a staged referendum. After declaring victory, he took the title of president of a renamed Republic of Vietnam, better known thereafter as 'South Vietnam'.

Critics denounced Ngô Đình Diệm's drive to empower the state, his personal position, and that of his relatives as a new form of authoritarianism and family rule. Nguyễn Thế Truyền was among those critics, as were the Vietnam Nationalist Party members Vũ Hồng Khanh and Nguyễn Hoà Hiệp. They too had been at the forefront of Vietnam's radical political scene in the 1920s-1930s. While Nguyễn Thế Truyền had been organizing Paris' radical political scene and the VIP, Nguyễn Hoà Hiệp had languished in colonial prisons, witness to the growing conflict between his Nationalist Party the Indochinese Communist Party. Vũ Hồng Khanh meanwhile was in exile in southern China, where that same competition played out for leadership of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement. Then, in 1945, Nguyễn Hoà Hiệp had led a Việt Minh division in the fight against France but soon grew disaffected with the DRV's southern leadership and rallied to the Republic of Cochinchina. Vũ Hồng Khanh served in the DRV central government before the

war between his and Võ Nguyên Giáp's troops in 1946 forced him into exile.

In the wake of Ngô Đình Diệm's campaign against the sects and his domestic rivals, Nguyễn Thế Truyền drafted a public letter criticizing the new president and accusing the United States and France of interfering in Vietnam's political affairs. He remained an outspoken critic of the regime. Five years after Ngô Đình Diệm's first staged election, he and the political dissident Dr. Hồ Văn Nhựt made a symbolic challenge in presidential elections, the results of which were never in doubt.³ Both were eventually targeted as enemies of the South Vietnamese president. After a failed coup by members of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm's security services arrested Nguyễn Thế Truyền. Vietnam Nationalist Party members Vũ Hồng Khanh and Nhất Linh were also accused of being the coup's plotters. Vũ Hồng Khanh was sentenced to several years in prison, while Nhất Linh chose to take his own life rather than suffer the same false charges.⁴

As the DRV sponsored insurgency in South Vietnam intensified, Nguyễn Thế Truyền inveighed against all forms of authoritarianism, including communism. He published *Lên Án Kút Sếp* [The Condemnation of Khrushchev], a monograph that criticized Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Union's imperialism in Eastern Europe, and its treatment of Asian and African nations.⁵ Following the coup that killed Ngô Đình Diệm and four years of military rule, Nguyễn Thế Truyền once again ran for executive office, this time with Nguyễn Hoà Hiệp as his running mate. Vũ Hồng Khanh also ran, as did the former leader of the Cochinchinese Popular Movement, Trần Cửu Chấn. None possessed the political networks that delivered votes in the Mekong Delta. The ticket

³ Their campaign manager was a leader of Saigon's opposition press, Nghiêm Xuân Thiện.

⁴ "Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," 2 March 1962, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v02/d96> (accessed April 21, 2018).

⁵ Nguyễn Thế Truyền, *Lên Án Kút Sếp* (Saigon: Long-Giang, 1960); Đặng Hữu Thu, *Thân thế và sự nghiệp nhà cách mạng Nguyễn Thế Truyền*, 372-373.

of the military government led by Nguyễn Văn Thiệu won the election with 35 percent of the vote.



Figure 33: At top (L-R) Nguyễn Hoà Hiệp, Nguyễn Thế Truyền, and Vũ Hồng Khanh in the 1920s-30s. In middle, Nguyễn Hoà Hiệp and Nguyễn Thế Truyền ran on the same ticket in the 1967 South Vietnamese presidential election. Below, Vũ Hồng Khanh ran on a separate ticket.

On September 2, 1969 Hồ Chí Minh died in Hanoi. Nguyễn Thế Truyền passed away two weeks later in Saigon, on September 19. Vietnam's civil war had outlasted two men who had been present at its origin, but chose divergent paths within it. Nguyễn Thế Truyền was buried in a small tomb at a Saigon cemetery. His tomb was placed nearby that of Phan Châu Trinh, his and Hồ Chí Minh's political mentor in Paris. Fifteen hundred kilometers to the north, Hồ Chí Minh was buried in an imposing mausoleum in central Hanoi, modeled on Stalin's tomb in Moscow. The burials said much about their respective adherence to the ideals of Phan Châu Trinh at the time of their deaths.

Some time after the DRV triumphed over the Republic of Vietnam in April 1975, Nguyễn Thế Truyền's tomb was demolished and his remains moved to a common cemetery outside Saigon.⁶ Phan Châu Trinh's tomb remains adorned and celebrated as part of a national narrative of unified resistance to French rule and American intervention under the leadership of the communist party. Like Nguyễn Thế Truyền's tomb, that narrative requires the selective destruction of Vietnamese history from the late-colonial period onward.

⁶ Ibid., 398-399.

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