

## The August Revolution of 1945

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The wars for Vietnam in 1946–75 came out of a revolution. That revolution took place in August 1945, after months of dramatic social, political, and military change. The previous January, Japan had decided to launch a coup against the French colonial regime. Until then the French governor-general in Hanoi, who served under Marshal Philippe Pétain's Vichy government, had been allowed by Japan to keep governing French Indochina on the condition that Japan could station troops there. Since 1940, French and Japanese forces lived side by side in the French colony. In communist propaganda, people were said to suffer under a "double yoke." To prevent the French colonial army from assisting an anticipated Allied landing, Japan launched its coup on March 9, 1945. The French were quickly defeated and lost all control of their colony. If Japan had not taken this action, the August Revolution would not have occurred in August – or, if it had, it would have been quelled in blood.

Once Japan had launched its coup, it arranged for the French puppet emperor, Bảo Đại, to declare an independent Vietnam. He appointed the widely respected scholar Trần Trọng Kim to form a government. Its greatest achievement was to obtain Japan's permission to unify Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin, which the French had given separate status, into one Vietnamese state, governed from the imperial capital, Huế. Japan controlled the government at the highest levels, but at this late stage of the Pacific War, it did not have the capacity to replace the French colonial administration. The result was a local power vacuum. Traditional mandarins and organized groups with a variety of ideological or religious convictions seized upon this chance to compete for power. Some acquired weapons in the hope of being able to prevent a French return when Allied forces arrived to fight Japan. Notably, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) prepared itself for launching a general insurrection in conjunction with the expected arrival of Allied forces, be they British, Chinese, or American.

Japan's surrender on August 15 caught everyone by surprise. Yet it sparked a widespread revolt. On August 19, young activists seized power in Hanoi, the Indochinese capital (Figure 5.1). Subsequently, similar popular takeovers took place in all three parts of Vietnam – but not in Cambodia or Laos. The local insurrections varied in form, but they did not meet armed resistance. Local activists held demonstrations in the streets in order to probe the intentions of the Japanese Army and local representatives of Bảo Đại's government. When there was no resistance, the activists seized power, and set up people's committees. In several places, the activists also used the occasion to settle old scores and kill political adversaries.

Four years earlier, the veteran communist leader Hồ Chí Minh had taken the initiative to set up a national liberation front in the border area to China: The Việt Nam Độc lập Đồng minh hội (Việt Minh for short). A small National Liberation Army was later formed under the command of a former history teacher, Võ Nguyên Giáp. His forces did not play a part in the revolution as such, but once power had fallen into the hands of local activists, his army and the Việt Minh leaders could leave their secret headquarters in the countryside and enter Hanoi, where Hồ Chí Minh assumed the presidency of a new provisional government.

In Huế, local communists probed the intentions of Bảo Đại and his cabinet. On August 20, the emperor made a huge impression by declaring that he would “prefer to be citizen of an independent country rather than king of an enslaved one.”<sup>1</sup> Ho's provisional government sent a delegate to Huế in order to demand Bảo Đại's abdication. He solemnly abdicated on August 30, and was subsequently appointed “supreme advisor” to Hồ Chí Minh's government.

On September 2, Hồ Chí Minh mounted a platform in Hanoi's Ba Đình square, and asked a huge crowd through a microphone: “Can you hear me?” When they roared back “We hear you,” a mythical thread was knit between the people and its leader. One can still observe the force of that thread by watching the lines of visitors waiting to pass by Hồ Chí Minh's glass coffin in his mausoleum next to Ba Đình square.

At the September 2 meeting, Hồ Chí Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) with himself as president. The term democratic republic was an innovation, which in Marxist–Leninist thinking signified an interim democratic stage on the way to socialism. Of course, those with different convictions could see democracy as an end in itself. What unified the

1 David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley, 1995), 439.



Figure 5.1 Public gathering in Hanoi (August 19, 1945).

Source: Keystone-France / Contributor / Gamma-Keystone / Getty Images.

revolutionary movement was not a shared understanding of “democracy” but a common aspiration for national independence of a united Vietnam.

Once the DRVN had been formed, all of Vietnam’s rival political groups faced the choice between supporting the new republic or being accused of treason. From the perspective of the communists, power had fallen into their hands like a ripe fruit. The challenge now was to defend the revolution against a combination of internal and external enemies. In September–October, a huge Nationalist Chinese Army poured in from the North to receive the surrender of Japanese troops in northern Indochina. A British force landed for the same purpose in the South, and an expeditionary corps was on its way from France to reconquer its Asian empire.

### What Is Revolution?

The American and French revolutions have informed modern concepts of revolution. They are at once associated with dramatic events, such as the Boston Tea Party and the storming of the Bastille, and with the long-term changes they fostered. The Vietnamese revolution of 1945 was sparked by the

August 19 storming of the *Résidence Supérieur* in Hanoi, a symbol of French colonial rule. The American and French revolutions were borne out in two basic texts: The US Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration on the Rights of Man and the Citizen. Hồ Chí Minh cited both of these texts in his Declaration of Independence. The American and French revolutions replaced monarchies with republics and led to radical social change as well as violence and war. The Vietnamese revolution did likewise.

“Revolution” may be defined either as *a successful political rebellion* leading to radical political and social change or as *the radical political and social change itself*. In the first case, an incumbent government is overturned and a new government established, which proceeds to drastically change political institutions, property distribution, and ways of organizing the economy. This often includes the adoption of a new constitution. If we use the second definition, a revolution does not require any revolt or change of regime, but may be initiated by the victorious party in a war or by an incumbent government deciding to launch radical reforms.<sup>2</sup>

The American, French, Russian, and Vietnamese revolutions satisfy both definitions. Existing governments were overturned, and new leaders initiated radical change. The American Revolution was anticolonial. So was the Vietnamese – though the Vietnamese case did not involve the substitution of white settler rule for metropolitan authority. The French and Russian revolutions would also combine internal change with struggle against external enemies. Moreover, all of these revolutions abolished monarchy and instituted republics – though France would alternate between monarchic and republican governance until its Third Republic was consolidated in the late 1870s.<sup>3</sup> China, in contrast, had two modern revolutions: the republican revolution of 1911–12 that ended the Qing Dynasty, and the communist revolution that established the People’s Republic of China in 1949. The first of these aligns with the “political rebellion” definition, while the second fits better with the “radical political and social change” definition.

If we use the second definition, it is difficult to say when a revolution ends. One might argue that the Vietnamese Revolution ran out of steam in the 1960s, when it was absorbed in the war to liberate the South, but that a new revolution of sorts was also imposed on southern Vietnam after 1975. Alternatively, we could say that the Vietnamese Revolution lasted all the way to 1986, when its communist leaders gave up their attempt to create

2 Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolutions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2014), 4.

3 François Furet, *La Révolution I (1770–1814), II (1814–1880)* (Paris, 1997).

an ideal socialist society and instituted market economic reforms under the slogan *Đổi Mới*. Vietnam now immersed itself in the capitalist world. Yet the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRVN), which was created through national unification in 1976, has survived till this day as a Communist Party state.

For the most part, this chapter uses the first definition of revolution. The Vietnamese August Revolution consisted of a sequence of events lasting from August 15 to September 2, 1945. These events resulted in the demise of the Vietnamese monarchy, and the establishment of Vietnam's First Republic. At the same time, I readily acknowledge that the August Revolution can also be thought of as one episode in a much longer Vietnamese Revolution of the second type.

After Vietnam's colonization in the late nineteenth century, its intelligentsia was exposed through textbooks and newspapers to the French revolutionary tradition. Some Vietnamese saw it as a threat to their Confucian or Buddhist heritage. Others were inspired to organize their people for the twin struggles against French colonialism and Vietnam's backwardness. For many Vietnamese nationalists – communists and noncommunists – the American, French, and Russian revolutionary traditions served as the backdrop for the drama that unfolded in Vietnam in 1945.

### Hồ Chí Minh and Trường Chinh

Vietnam's two main communist leaders in August 1945 were Hồ Chí Minh (1890–1969) and Trường Chinh (1907–88). They intensely admired Vladimir Ilych Lenin as the mastermind of the Russian revolution. During March–August 1945, Hồ Chí Minh and Trường Chinh dedicated themselves to preparations for the launch of a general insurrection to coincide with an expected landing of Allied troops. After the August Revolution, Hồ Chí Minh dedicated himself to the work as president, while Trường Chinh maintained a shadowy role as leader of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). The irony is that neither of them played a part in the August Revolution as such. It happened while the ICP's main leaders were assembled in a place called Tân Trào, 80 miles (130 kilometers) northwest of Hanoi. They received radio news but had no way to send out instructions to the party's local members far away. The revolution happened without the ICP's most senior leaders. This has never been acknowledged in official Vietnamese narratives. They claim that the August Revolution was both planned and carried out by the party.

It was not Hồ Chí Minh but Trường Chinh who coined the term "August Revolution." While Hồ Chí Minh was the public face of the new revolutionary

powers, Trường Chinh operated behind the scenes as party organizer and author of doctrinaire texts. Yet Hồ Chí Minh was more deeply immersed in the international revolutionary tradition.

A native of central Vietnam, Hồ Chí Minh had traveled widely and taken part in the 1920 French socialist congress at Tours, which led to the founding of the French Communist Party. In the 1920s–30s, under the name Nguyễn Ái Quốc (Nguyễn the Patriot), Hồ Chí Minh became Vietnam’s most famous revolutionary of his time. He spent time in the Soviet Union, traveled for the Communist International (Comintern) to various Asian countries, trained young Vietnamese émigrés in Guangzhou, founded the ICP in Hong Kong in 1930, and was arrested there by the British in 1931 and kept in jail for a year. After his release, he returned to the Soviet Union, where he survived Stalin’s purges.<sup>4</sup>

In 1938–41, Nguyễn Ái Quốc traveled from Russia through China, where he stayed for some time in Mao Zedong’s wartime capital, Yanan. From there he journeyed to the Vietnamese border. This is when he took up his new name Hồ Chí Minh (The Enlightened Will). He set up secret headquarters inside Vietnam and convoked a number of comrades in May 1941 to join him in founding the Việt Minh. This is when Hồ Chí Minh first met Trường Chinh.

Trường Chinh (Figure 5.2) grew up in an intellectual family in the Nam Định province of northern Vietnam. He took part in revolutionary activities from 1925. In 1929–30, he played his part in organizing the northern section of the new ICP. Trường Chinh had none of Hồ Chí Minh’s charisma. He was a nerd, an avid reader of books, and became a rigorous Marxist–Leninist, always concerned to boost the standing of his party. He is described in his official biography as “the most outstanding disciple of President Hồ Chí Minh, a brilliant moral example of a true communist, a humble and simple man of high principle, who worked scientifically and carefully, knew how to listen to and be democratic to his subordinates, an elite child who had profound affection and gratitude to his homeland.”<sup>5</sup> His real name was Đặng Xuân Khu, and although his family denies it, he most probably adopted the pseudonym Trường Chinh (Long March) in admiration of Mao Zedong.<sup>6</sup>

Trường Chinh joined a small group of communist intellectuals in Hanoi during the 1930s and wrote a treatise on *The Peasant Question* in 1938 together with the history teacher Võ Nguyên Giáp, another young comrade who

4 Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years 1919–1941* (Berkeley, 2003); Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Hồ Chí Minh in Hong Kong* (Cambridge, 2021).

5 *Đồng chí Trường Chinh* [Comrade Truong Chinh] (Hanoi, 2007), 7.

6 According to his son, he did not admire Mao as much as people think. Interviews with Đặng Việt Bích (Trường Chinh’s son) in HCM-City, February 17 and March 15, 2017.



Figure 5.2 Vietnamese Communist political leader and theoretician Trường Chinh (1907–1988).

Source: Pictures from History / Contributor / Universal Images Group Editorial / Getty Images.

joined up with Hồ Chí Minh in the Chinese border region and took command of Vietnam's nascent National Liberation Army of some 400 men. Trường Chinh managed to survive clandestinely in the northern lowlands, consistently avoiding arrest in a period when the French severely repressed not just communists but any opponents of their rule. A failed uprising in Cochinchina in November 1940, in which the northern communists did not take part, led to the arrest or execution of the ICP's southern leadership, thus opening the way for Trường Chinh's northern group to form a new national leadership.<sup>7</sup>

Trường Chinh took up the role of acting general secretary, and was confirmed in his role as general secretary by the group of communists who met with Hồ Chí Minh in May 1941. In party history, this meeting is called the 8th Central Committee Plenum. From 1941–5, Trường Chinh moved from one

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York, 2016), 193.



village in the Red River Delta to another, disguised as a merchant, village clerk, or rural schoolteacher, sometimes entering a town or even Hanoi.<sup>8</sup> His main achievement was to convene a three-day meeting of leading communist organizers right after the Japanese coup against the French on March 9, 1945. On March 12 he issued a set of instructions to prepare an insurrection to be launched once Allied forces arrived to fight against Japan. These instructions were sent by couriers to local communist leaders throughout much of north-central Vietnam.

Trường Chinh's loyalty to Hồ Chí Minh would be tested in November 1945, when Hồ Chí Minh for tactical reasons persuaded a majority of party leaders to officially dissolve the ICP, and only let it continue in the form of Marxist study groups.<sup>9</sup> This forced Trường Chinh to close down his newspaper *Cờ Giải Phóng* (Liberation Banner) and make do with the theoretical journal *Sự thật* (The Truth). The dissolution of the ICP – and the failure of the DRVN to carry out radical land reform in 1945–6 – would harm the reputation of the Vietnamese communists within the international communist movement. Trường Chinh played a key role in rebuilding the party until it could be re-established officially as the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP) in 1951.

The Vietnamese Communist Party considers Hồ Chí Minh to have been the soul of the revolution, while Trường Chinh was its brain. Apparently, the brain was always loyal to the soul, even when their attitudes differed. Trường Chinh was not personally ambitious. During 1945–7, he stayed in the shadows. I have not found a single French intelligence file on Đặng Xuân Khu (Trường Chinh) from that period, and in the many French intelligence reports discussing the relative influence of personalities in Hồ Chí Minh's entourage, I have only found one reference to a person who is likely to have been Trường Chinh.

The differences between Hồ Chí Minh and Trường Chinh are reflected in the contrasting ways that the two men have been memorialized. When Hồ Chí Minh died in 1969, his body was preserved by Russian forensic experts and exhibited in a mausoleum in Hanoi similar to Lenin's in Moscow. Its construction began right after the Paris Agreement in 1973, which allowed the United States to withdraw from Vietnam. The mausoleum opened in August 1975, four months after the communist conquest of Saigon. In the 1990s, a Russian architect designed a Hồ Chí Minh museum next to the mausoleum, in the form of a lotus, Vietnam's national flower.

8 Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 185.

9 Author's interview with Hoàng Tùng, July 14, 2007, and with Đặng Việt Bích, March 15, 2017.



Trường Chinh would die alone in 1988 after a fall on the stairs of his home. In a small section of the Hồ Chí Minh museum, a modest exhibition was arranged in 2017, on the occasion of Trường Chinh's 110th anniversary. It included his books and articles and some artifacts from his exemplary life, and multiple photographs of him and Uncle Hồ together.

### The Concept of "August Revolution"

Naming revolutions after the month in which they occurred is a practice dating back to 1830. Paris had a July Revolution that year, a June Rebellion in 1832, and a February Revolution in 1848. St. Petersburg had a February and an October Revolution in 1917. Marxist–Leninists used to treat revolution as a kind of science. They debated their defeats, successes, and mistakes with a view to arriving at a correct course of action. Since April 1975, when Vietnam's long war for independence and unification reached its end, all Vietnamese schoolchildren have been told that the *Cách mạng Tháng Tám* (Revolution of Month Eight) is the origin of their national independence. It was achieved, their textbooks say, through the wise leadership of the Communist Party. The national day of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is September 2, the date when the DRVN was proclaimed.

Trường Chinh's writings about the revolution are worthy of a study, both because they reveal the thinking of a key actor at the time, and because his teachings form the basis for the Vietnamese Communist Party's historical narrative. His way of thinking was instrumental. He led an organization – the party – that took responsibility for carrying out a popular insurrection according to scientific principles. A key purpose of Trường Chinh's analysis of the August Revolution was to establish what had gone right and wrong. A second aim was to enhance the legitimacy of the party in Vietnam as well as internationally. While the first ambition required some factual accuracy, the second encouraged distortion and exaggeration.

In his analysis, Trường Chinh had two basic problems to tackle. First, the sudden Japanese surrender had come as a surprise for the communist leaders and made the seizure of power *too easy*. Too little blood was spilled. Second, there had been too little central direction. Hence it was imperative to pretend that the party had prepared meticulously for using the opportunity when it arose, that the seizure of power had not been a spontaneous revolt or coup but a genuine revolution, that violence had been used in many places, and that the party had led the revolution throughout. To promote this narrative was all the more important since the August Revolution received only scant

and ill-informed attention in the international communist press. Moscow had not expected a revolution in French Indochina. Stalin was keen to see a further strengthening of the Communist Party in France, which was represented in the provisional French government of General Charles de Gaulle. The French communists did not care much about Indochina. The French communist press speculated that the “disturbances” there had been instigated by Japan.<sup>10</sup>

Trường Chinh set out to study the events immediately after they had happened, and presented his first analysis in the ICP mouthpiece *Cờ Giải Phóng* on September 12, 1945, the first issue to be published on an actual printing press in Hanoi. The title of his article was “Coups or Revolution?” (*Cách mạng hay đảo chính?*), and the first sentence read: “We have accomplished the August Revolution” (*Chúng ta đã làm cuộc Cách mạng Tháng Tám*). Then he sought to prove that it had been genuine: “We have driven the enemies of the country away, gained power, abolished the old order, established the new order, abolished the feudal regime, established a Democratic Republic regime, abolished the poll tax, the market tax, liberated political prisoners, etc. Was not this a revolution?”<sup>11</sup>

Then he added violence as a defining feature: “A revolution must use violence.” He noted as a fact that the Japanese had surrendered to the Allies, and on August 16, the Việt Minh leadership had issued an order for a nationwide insurrection. Immediately afterward, he claimed, the Liberation Armies spread to all fronts. He did not mention that the orders issued at Tân Trào would become known only after the revolution. He also did not mention that the armed units had no role in the revolution itself. In a number of localities, Trường Chinh claimed, the Japanese Army was disarmed, and was even destroyed in some places. This was not true. He also asserted that a nationwide armed demonstration was held for the three days of August 17–19. While it is true that there were demonstrations all around, they were not orchestrated, only inspired by each other, and they were mostly unarmed.

Next, Trường Chinh accurately admitted that “we succeeded because the French had been disarmed by the Japanese, and then the Japanese themselves were defeated, lost their morale, and the Vietnamese traitors were frustrated and smashed.” But he immediately added: “However, it was not by chance

<sup>10</sup> Alain Ruscio, *Les communistes français et la guerre d'Indochine 1944–1954* (Paris, 1985), 79–83, 89–90.

<sup>11</sup> *Cờ Giải Phóng* no. 16, September 12, 1945. Vietnam National Library, Hanoi.

that the power was given to the hands of the people. It was given to the hands of the people because of the organized activities of the armed masses, because of the timely and rapid attacks by the vanguard revolutionary groups.”

He explained that a coup happens when one ruling circle overthrows another and establishes a new government while leaving the old regime intact. So then he asked: “How can anyone dare to call an uprising of the oppressed people to liberate itself and seize power a coup d’Etat?” He conceded that the seizure of power had been easy. The favorable circumstances had made the situation ripe. The victory of the August Revolution was like harvesting a ripe fruit. This was partly thanks to the favorable conditions created by the world war. “But,” he asked rhetorically, “was it not mainly due to the heroic struggle of our Party and the Việt Minh League?” This question was followed by a list of armed incidents in the border region with China after March 1945. “A lot of blood has been pouring,” he claimed, “and many heads were cut off.”

In 1946, while preparing for the first anniversary of the August Revolution, Trường Chinh extended his analysis in a series of articles in the theoretical journal *Sự Thật*. These articles were subsequently collected and edited for publication in a booklet that would be reprinted many times in several languages as *The August Revolution*.<sup>12</sup>

In the preface to the 1946 edition, Trường Chinh warned against listening to those reactionary traitors who denied the importance of the revolution and claimed that power fell into the hands of the people by chance. The author announced that he would particularly stress “the leading role and organizing work of the Indochinese Communist Party and the Việt Minh Front as well as their skilful tactics in the preparatory period leading up to the insurrection.”<sup>13</sup> He saw the revolution as a “treasury of experience” that revolutionary fighters could draw upon. Then he proceeded to explain about the meeting he himself had organized in Bắc Ninh right after the March 9 coup. This meeting called for the creation of a national salvation movement against the Japanese fascists. He claimed that guerrillas had subsequently fought hard both against French and Japanese troops. The people had stormed thousands of Japanese paddy stores and their stocks of rice had been distributed among the poor. In April, a High Command of the Liberation Army had been set up at a meeting

12 For the full text of Trường Chinh’s *History of the August Revolution*, as published in Hanoi by the Foreign Languages Press in 1958: [www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/archive/chinh.htm](http://www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/archive/chinh.htm).

13 Trường Chinh, “The August Revolution,” in Trường Chinh (ed.), *Selected Works* (Hanoi, 1977), 13.

in Bắc Giang province, and a liberated zone had been established in June: “The new Vietnam came into being.”<sup>14</sup>

According to Trường Chinh, events at the end of the war against Japan “provided the August General Insurrection with extremely favourable conditions at the outset.” The intention had been, he said, to convene a national congress as soon as possible after March 9, but for various reasons it could not be done until August, “at the very moment of the Japanese capitulation.” He did not mention that Japan’s surrender came as a surprise. Yet he conceded that in numerous places the Việt Minh militants took the initiative to seize power even before receiving the general insurrection order.<sup>15</sup> Although he noted the confusion among the Japanese troops, who – he must have understood – no longer had much to defend except their lives and arms, he claims that the ICP advocated an “extremely judicious policy” when it decided at Tân Trào to lead the masses in insurrection in order “to disarm the Japanese before the arrival of Allied forces.” Luckily for the unarmed activists who carried out the revolution, they did not know about that “judicious policy” and refrained from trying to disarm the Japanese.

In good Marxist fashion, Trường Chinh explained the triumph of the revolution by one subjective and one objective condition. The objective condition was the favorable occasion created by the fact that the French were first defeated by Japan, whereafter the Japanese were forced to surrender. Yet, he said, this could not have led to triumph without the subjective condition.<sup>16</sup> “It is impossible,” he stated, “to speak of the August Revolution without stressing the role of its leading core, the Indochinese Communist Party.” And he asked: “Was not the triumph of the August Revolution due in great part to the intelligent and correct leadership of the Party?”<sup>17</sup>

In a chapter on “flexibility of tactics,” Trường Chinh claimed that the party had “correctly foreseen that the Japanese and French would inevitably come into conflict.”<sup>18</sup> This was not in fact inevitable. The Japanese would have let the French continue to administer the colony if they had not anticipated an Allied landing. What triggered that anticipation was a raid of the Vietnamese coast conducted by US Admiral William Halsey’s carrier groups in mid-January 1945. It made Tokyo decide to launch the March 9 coup.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 26, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>19</sup> Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War* (Oslo, 1991), 204–7.

Trường Chinh was probably right, though, that the ICP's effort to organize seizures of French and Japanese rice stores enhanced its standing among poor peasants in north-central Vietnam. The US Marxist scholar Gabriel Kolko has seen Vietnam's 1944–5 famine as the key to understanding how the Việt Minh was able to gain widespread support in a very short time.<sup>20</sup>

In his capacity as a revolutionary scientist, Trường Chinh dedicated one chapter to the good and one to the bad. The good things were careful preparation by “a genuinely revolutionary party,” the induction of “the great majority of the people to rise up,” and the “promptitude and timeliness” in launching the general insurrection. It would have been a mistake, he said, to launch an insurrection immediately after March 9 or to wait until the Allies arrived. The leaders of the August Revolution, he claimed, had *chosen* the right moment for the decisive blow.<sup>21</sup> This elided the inconvenient fact that Japan's unexpected surrender had created the moment. The main reason why Trường Chinh had to repeatedly emphasize the leading role of the party was that its actual role remained obscure.

What were the August Revolution's weaknesses? First, according to Trường Chinh, the party had few means of communication. The insurrections were launched at different times in different places, while it would have been better to launch them simultaneously in the main towns. The southern leaders were not as well organized as in the north, and believed too much in diplomacy with the Japanese, instead of fighting them. Second, there was a “failure to fully implement the slogan of disarming the Japanese troops.” As in the Paris Commune of 1871, there was also a lack of firmness in the repression of counterrevolutionary elements “on Jacobin or Bolshevik lines,” and there was a failure to seize the Bank of Indochina. When holding these out as major weaknesses, Trường Chinh did not take into consideration that the local activists were armed only with spears, machetes, pistols, old muskets, and hunting rifles, and thus could only disarm the Japanese or seize the Bank of Indochina if the Japanese ceded them voluntarily. Another general weakness of the August Revolution, in Trường Chinh's view, was that it was only anti-imperialist, not social; it did not carry out land reform and give the land to the tillers. Yet the August Revolution had elevated the Vietnamese people to the “rank of the vanguard peoples” and had been warmly welcomed by progressive opinion in the world.

20 Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York, 1985), 36–8. The famine is estimated to have cost the lives of 1 million people; see Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 104.

21 Chinh, “The August Revolution,” 38.

Trường Chinh's insistence on the party's leading role may have created an illusion among Vietnam's communist leaders that it is possible for a well-organized party to plan and produce a popular uprising. In February 1968, the party got a chance to test this assumption in Huế, Saigon, and many other towns in South Vietnam. A lightning military attack took place, coinciding with the Vietnamese New Year (Tết). It had been well prepared and organized by the party. Yet it did not unleash any popular uprising. The Tet Offensive would have gone down in history as an ignominious defeat had it not been for the way it affected the American will to pursue its Vietnam war. It is possible that Trường Chinh's misinterpretation of the August Revolution was partly responsible for Hanoi's mistake.

The most convincing of Trường Chinh's arguments to demonstrate the party's decisive leadership was the claim that his March 12 instructions had prepared local communist cadres for seizing the chance and launching an insurrection at the moment when the Allies arrived. These instructions are likely to have reached the party branches throughout northern Vietnam and all the way down to Nghệ An province of north-central Vietnam. This helped prepare the local communists for taking decisive action when the opportunity arose.<sup>22</sup>

### The Global Context and the Role of the United States

Trường Chinh's frank admission about the importance of the Japanese coup against the French in March 1945 belies an important truth: the circumstances in which the August Revolution unfolded were profoundly influenced by states and leaders outside of Indochina. The Japanese removal of the French regime, followed by Tokyo's surrender five months later, created a power vacuum in Indochina. Although ICP membership numbered only around 5,000 in 1945, the party's sponsorship of the Việt Minh league provided Hồ with the opportunity to fill the vacuum with the creation of the DRVN state – a feat that no other Vietnamese leader or group was able to accomplish. The emergence of the power vacuum thus appears as a crucial precondition to the success of the revolution. But why had the Japanese opted to move against the French in the first place?

The answer may well turn on the strategic decisions and deception operations undertaken by the United States during the last months of World

22 Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 152.

War II. With hindsight, it is clear that Japan's decisions in Indochina were driven by fears of an Allied landing in the region. This raises the question of whether US President Franklin D. Roosevelt may have helped encourage the March 9 coup against the French. FDR had long wanted to liberate Indochina from France and place it under an international trusteeship, with no role for France and with Nationalist China as one of the trustees. Admiral Halsey's massive naval raid against Japanese targets on the Vietnamese coast during January 10–12, 1945, convinced Japan that the United States intended to invade Indochina. Moreover, US intelligence services learned of the Japanese plan for the March 9 coup through Magic intercepts well before it was executed. Yet they did not warn de Gaulle's French government, which had instructed the commander of the French Indochina Army to set up a secret resistance organization against Japan. It is therefore possible that Roosevelt may have deliberately lured Japan into carrying out the coup.<sup>23</sup>

### A Divided Nation

In August 1945, among all of Vietnam's groups and parties, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) was in the best position to lead a national revolution. It had supported the Allies and had established a working relationship with the US intelligence services. It was the only party to have maintained a clandestine presence in all three parts of Vietnam during the war. Unlike many other nationalist groups, it had not sought Japanese support. Compared to other groups, the ICP was especially strong in northern Vietnam. In contrast to other northern groups, it did not depend on support from Nationalist China. It had a charismatic leader in the person of Hồ Chí Minh, whose front organization, the Việt Minh, recruited widely. Moreover, support for the Việt Minh in northern and north-central Vietnam was enhanced by the front's efforts to provide relief from the devastating 1944–5 famine.<sup>24</sup>

This does not mean, however, that the Việt Minh were lacking for rivals in northern Vietnam. The Việt Nam Quốc dân Đảng (VNQDD) and Đồng

23 Stein Tønnessen, "Franklin Roosevelt, Trusteeship, and Indochina: A Reassessment," in Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall (eds.), *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 56–73.

24 Halsey's raid contributed to the famine by sinking a number of small ships that could have carried excess rice from the Mekong Delta (where rice was used for fuel) to the starvation areas in north-central Vietnam.



minh Hội (ĐMH) followed in the footsteps of the Nationalist Chinese occupation army entering Indochina to disarm the Japanese. Because of their ties to the Chinese government, both groups were invited to appoint members of the DRVN's parliament and given ministerial posts in the government. They also took control of areas along the China border. However, after Hồ Chí Minh signed an agreement with France on March 6, 1946, the Chinese Army began to withdraw from Indochina. Under the March 6 agreement, France recognized Vietnam as a "free state" and in return was allowed to station troops in the north. The VNQDĐ and ĐMH stepped up their opposition to the French presence, hoping to undermine the nationalist credentials of the communists. But once the Chinese Army had departed, the DRVN government had a free hand to crack down on the anti-communist parties. By the time war between France and the Việt Minh broke out in Hanoi on December 19, 1946, the noncommunist groups in the North had been decimated by arrests and assassinations, and the Việt Minh had consolidated its position as the dominant nationalist group in the North.

The ICP was considerably weaker in southern Vietnam. The French suppression of the 1940 "Southern Uprising" had devastated the party's apparatus in the region. As a directly ruled French colony, Cochinchina had developed its own political culture, characterized by religious and political diversity. In 1945, the South had two communist factions, with two rival regional committees, none of which wielded the same level of authority in the South as the ICP in the North. One of the southern factions worked in tandem with a front organization, the Vanguard Youth, which was tolerated and even encouraged by the Japanese. Its leader was an undercover communist, working closely with the leader of the main communist faction in Saigon, the Moscow-trained Trần Văn Giàu. Giàu would lead the August Revolution in Saigon. But because the party's position was so tenuous, he established a revolutionary coalition government, in which noncommunist groups were represented. The Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo religious movements both had a huge following in the southern countryside. They had relied on Japan for support and built their own armies. A criminal syndicate in Saigon, the Bình Xuyên, also maintained its own armed forces.

Trần Văn Giàu's power did not last long. In mid-September, British forces landed in Saigon to disarm the Japanese. They released and rearmed French prisoners of war, and arranged for them to resume control of Saigon on September 24. Moreover, instead of disarming the Japanese, the British ordered them to help crush the revolution. From September 1945 to February

1946, British Indian Gurkhas and Japanese troops dealt severe blows to the armies of the communists, Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài, one after the other. Meanwhile, conflict also arose among the Vietnamese groups, as ICP leaders sought to assert control over the noncommunist groups. Amidst this chaos, Trần Văn Giàu was summoned to Hanoi and replaced as leader of the southern revolution by a former nationalist, Nguyễn Bình, who built a new guerrilla force that would engage in a drawn-out but indecisive struggle against the French and the rival southern groups.

The Vietnamese Catholic leader Ngô Đình Diệm was another potential rival to the communists in 1945. He briefly served in the first cabinet of Emperor Bảo Đại in 1933, but left it when the French refused to implement reforms to restore certain powers to the Vietnamese monarch. Diệm also declined a Japanese request in March 1945 to lead Bảo Đại's new cabinet in Huế. The job went instead to Trần Trọng Kim. Kim's cabinet was dissolved when Bảo Đại abdicated, and its ministers ended up in different camps. Some joined the Việt Minh. Others would again serve Bảo Đại when he returned to Vietnam in 1949 as head of a new French-controlled State of Vietnam (SVN), backed by a panoply of noncommunist groups and personalities. Diệm declined another offer to join Bảo Đại in 1949, but would re-emerge in 1954 as the SVN prime minister.

## Revolution and War

Revolutions are often born of war and lead to further wars. The August Revolution is no exception. Right after Trường Chinh's *The August Revolution* had been published, war between the Việt Minh and France broke out in Hanoi. Trường Chinh's next task was to write *The Resistance Will Win*, a classic introduction to people's war.

Although the August Revolution was an event of relatively short duration, it would have a lasting influence on the ensuing decades of war in Indochina. Its impact was especially strong in three areas.

First, the August Revolution gave the communists a flying start in their bid for power. August 1945 was their moment. They rode to power on a wave of popular enthusiasm. Moreover, as David G. Marr has shown, they were able to take over existing state institutions and form new ones.<sup>25</sup> The August Revolution also gave Hồ Chí Minh his chance to establish himself as both a national and international leader. In May 1946, he was invited to

25 David G. Marr, *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945–1946)* (Berkeley, 2013).

France as a guest of the French government. His national and international “investiture” was almost like a coronation, and made it impossible for Bảo Đại in 1949, Ngô Đình Diệm in 1955, and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu in 1965 to match Hồ Chí Minh’s standing.

The second major impact of the August Revolution was to divide Vietnam into hostile camps fighting each other. Instead of uniting the nation against France, the communist domination of the DRVN, and its repression of non-communist opponents, alienated a sufficient number of people to make it possible for Bảo Đại to gain a following in 1948–9, and to convince France, the United Kingdom, and the United States that they could bet on him. This paved the way for the rise of a rival State of Vietnam (SVN), which would eventually be transformed into the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). After 1954, many of South Vietnam’s leading politicians did not hail from the south, but had fled from communist-controlled areas. Moreover, as David G. Marr, Christopher Goscha, Brett M. Reilly, Shawn McHale, and others have pointed out, the communists never won the same degree of control in the South as in the North. The success of the August Revolution in the South was fleeting and quickly gave way to war not just with the British and French, but also between rival Vietnamese groups.<sup>26</sup>

Third, the August Revolution influenced the strategy of revolutionary warfare pursued by the communists in their struggles against France, the United States, and their internal enemies. Within the international communist movement there were recurring debates between advocates of city-based revolts with the working class as vanguard, and those who backed a rural “people’s war” strategy to build up peasant armies, following the model of Mao Zedong. In the August Revolution, local rebels quickly took control of cities and towns, allowing Võ Nguyên Giáp’s rudimentary army to enter them unhindered. Although the communists would subsequently retreat to the countryside and wage a Maoist-style war, the memories of the 1945 uprisings in Hanoi and other cities lingered. During both the Indochina War against France and in the “Vietnam War” against the United States and the RVN, the communists would rely on a mix of Leninist and Maoist strategies. Especially during the latter conflict,

26 Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 83–4, 217–21, 453–71. Marr, *State, War*, 8–9, 114–18, 385, 443, 464–5. Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York, 2016), 206–10. Brett M. Reilly, *The Origins of the Vietnamese Civil War and the State of Vietnam*, Ph.D. dissertation (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2018). Shawn McHale, *The First Vietnam War: Violence, Sovereignty, and the Fracture of the South, 1945–1956* (Cambridge, 2021).

the communists built a peasant army in rural areas while still planning for uprisings in urban centers.

However, the fortuitous circumstances of August 1945 never reappeared. The final victory of North Vietnamese forces in the Hồ Chí Minh campaign of 1975 had none of the elements of the August Revolution. It was a conventional military campaign, ending in the conquest of a mostly hostile Saigon. In this respect, the August Revolution still appears as a unique moment in modern Vietnamese history and the history of modern revolutions.