3

Vietnamese Communism, 1920–1959

The revisionist critique of Vietnamese Communism is grounded on three major points. First and most important, Vietnamese Communists were not authentic nationalists. Instead, they were committed to an ideology, Marxism-Leninism, under which nationalism in colonial areas was nothing more than a means to the end of a world socialist revolution. This ideology was alien to other Vietnamese nationalists and virtually all ordinary, nonactivist Vietnamese. Second, the Vietnamese Communists had a critical advantage over their traditional nationalist rivals, especially when it came to surviving French repression, because they received vital and continuous outside aid. That aid came from an organization called the Communist International, or Comintern, which served the foreign policy interests of the Soviet Union. Conventional Vietnamese nationalist groups, in contrast, had to fend for themselves. Third, a key reason that Vietnamese Marxist-Leninists were able to attract widespread outside support, especially among the peasantry, is that they deliberately and successfully masked their true ultimate aims. Strong evidence exists to support all these claims.

HO CHI MINH AND THE ORIGINS OF VIETNAMESE COMMUNISM

The man most responsible for the spread and influence of Marxism in Vietnam was Ho Chi Minh. That name, as with many Marxist revolutionaries, was an alias, the last of a series he used during his long career. Ho was born in 1890 into an educated but poor family in central Vietnam. After receiving a traditional Confucian education as a young boy, he

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attended Vietnam's most prestigious modern secondary school in the city of Hue, the same school that Ngo Dinh Diem, Ho's most important nationalist rival, would later attend. The young Ho became a militant nationalist but left Vietnam in 1911, not to return for three decades. He eventually found his way to France, where like many Vietnamese intellectuals he was drawn to Marxism. In Ho's case this occurred after the Allies at the Versailles Peace Conference of 1919 that drew up the treaty ending World War I failed to grant Vietnam its independence.

In 1920 Ho read "Theses on the National and Colonial Questions" by Vladimir Lenin, the founder and leader of Russia's Bolshevik Party. The Bolsheviks had seized power in Russia in November 1917, crushed all opposition to their one-party rule, and established a Marxist dictatorship in that country, which after 1922 was officially known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), or the Soviet Union. Lenin's basic argument was that the nationalist struggles for independence against European colonial rule could contribute to the international effort to overthrow capitalism and establish a socialist world. Lenin's "Theses" deeply impressed Ho, and in 1920, under the alias of Nguyen Ai Quoc, he became a founding member of the French Communist Party. In 1923 he moved to Moscow and became an agent of the Comintern. Tasked by the Soviet regime that had established it in 1919 with promoting Communism throughout the world, the Comintern directed and financed Communist parties from North America to Europe to the Far East. It also had agents in its service such as the man then known as Nguyen Ai Quoc who moved from country to country. All Communist parties associated with the Comintern, aside from building local movements, were required to support Soviet foreign policy without question. For the next two decades Ho served that organization, and Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, effectively and loyally in a variety of Asian countries, most notably China but also in Southeast Asia. Aside from organizing and building a Communist movement in Vietnam for the Comintern, Ho did the same in Siam (today: Thailand), Malaya, and Singapore. As the Comintern official in charge of the Indochinese Communist Party, he controlled Communist activities in Laos and Cambodia as well as in Vietnam.

It is a staple of orthodox historiography, one that gained popularity with best-selling books by journalists David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, and Stanley Karnow, that Ho Chi Minh and his fellow Vietnamese Communists were also authentic nationalists, with the latter commitment not infrequently being placed ahead of the former in importance. Typical of this viewpoint is Sheehan's contention that the "motivating force

within him [Ho Chi Minh] and those who became his disciples has always been nationalism."[1] William J. Duiker, author of the most authoritative biography of Ho (*Ho Chi Minh: A Life*, 2000), essentially takes the same position. However, that volume and Duiker's other works also provide considerable documentation supporting a different view of Ho. Sometimes the presumed non-Marxist aspects of Ho's outlook have had what can reasonably be called a halo effect on how he is viewed. Thus a ruthless politician who ordered the mass murder of political opponents, small landowners, and even peasants resisting the confiscation of their land has received encomiums such as "half Gandhi, half Lenin" and "Confucian humanist."[2] Whatever one thinks about Gandhi, Lenin, or Confucius, the notion that nationalism shared primacy of place with Marxism and its goal of a world communist revolution in Ho's short list of commitments is belied by his actions and political stands. Being Vietnamese did have meaning to Ho, notwithstanding that his priority was international Marxism. However, as Philippe Papin, a French specialist on Vietnam, argues, Ho Chi Minh's actions demonstrate "without any ambiguity – or with ambiguities that are entirely tactical – that he was an orthodox Marxist, an internationalist, a man caught up in the Comintern game."[3] Mark Moyar has summed up this nationalist/Marxist dichotomy well:

> Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist in the sense that he had a special affection for Vietnam's people and favored Vietnamese unification and independence, but, from his reading of Lenin's theses onward, he firmly adhered to the Leninist principle that Communist nations should subordinate their interests to those of the Communist international movement.[4]

[1] Cited in Stephen J. Morris, "The Internationalist Outlook of Vietnamese Communism," in *The Real Lessons of the Vietnam War*, 72–73. This section relies heavily on Morris's article.

[2] For "Half Gandhi" see William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 329; for "Confucian humanist" see Frances Fitzgerald, "Half Lenin, Half Gandhi," review of *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*, by William S. Duiker, *New York Times*, October 15, 2000, Sunday Book Review, 14. Actually, in his biography of Ho, Duiker tones down his description by noting that "Ho Chi Minh's *image* [italics added] was part Lenin and part Gandhi, with perhaps a dash of Confucius." Of course, Duiker himself, a distinguished and influential historian, helped create that image. Lest there be any confusion, this author considers only the "half Gandhi" part of the first phrase to be an encomium.

[3] Philippe Papin, Review of Vietnam: Un État need la Guerre 1945–1954, by Christopher Goscha, in *H-Diplo Roundtable Review* XIV, no. 1 (2012): 24. Available online at https://issforum.org/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XIV-1.pdf

[4] Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 9.

Two anecdotes taken from widely separated periods in his political life provide a useful introduction to Ho Chi Minh's political priorities. In 1941, when he set foot in his homeland for the first time in three decades, Ho established his headquarters in a cave near the mountain village of Pac Bo, about a half mile from the Chinese border. Overlooking the cave was a massive stone outcropping; 140 feet below the cave ran a stream. To mark what he apparently considered a historic event, his return to Vietnam, Ho decided to give them names. The stone outcropping henceforth would pay homage to the prophet of communism as "Karl Marx Peak"; the stream below would do the same for the founder of the world's first Communist state as "Lenin Stream." Heroes from the venerable pantheon of Vietnamese nationalism went unrecognized. Decades later an elderly and apparently somewhat spiritual Ho issued a series of final testaments. He did this three times, so he certainly had the opportunity to refer to Vietnamese nationalist figures he might have initially overlooked. Instead, he accurately framed how his commitments should be understood and his legacy crafted by writing about "when I shall go and join Karl Marx, Lenin, and other revolutionary leaders."[5]

Ho Chi Minh's fidelity to Marxism might be viewed as compatible with a genuine commitment to nationalism had Marxism not consistently dominated policy once he was in power. To be sure, when the Vietnamese Communists were struggling for power and had to garner public support, they understood that proclaiming devotion to nationalism was far more effective in winning the support of most Vietnamese than doing the same to Communism. Their propaganda therefore stressed nationalism rather than Marxist socialism, both when they were appealing to fellow Vietnamese and, significantly, when they were trying to garner foreign support. The latter was particularly true and important when the object of those appeals, as was the case in the waning days of World War II and the months immediately after the war's end, was the United States. However, as Stephen J. Morris aptly notes, "when we consider what happened *after* the seizure of power in North Vietnam in 1954 and South Vietnam in 1975, we find that the domestic policies instituted by the Vietnamese Communists indicate values that are not explained by the 'Communism is nationalism' assumption." Rather, each seizure of power was followed by the establishment of a one-party Marxist dictatorship, the nationalization of industry, collectivization of

[5] Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 250; Stephen J. Morris, "The Internationalist Outlook of Vietnamese Communism," 76.

agriculture (which failed in the south after 1975, but not from lack of commitment by the Hanoi regime), the establishment of a massive secret police apparatus to monitor the people, and other oppressive staples of Communism that have absolutely nothing to do with traditional nationalism. Stalin became a hero in Communist Vietnam and his birthday a cause for celebration. In contrast, when Joseph Broz Tito, leader of the Marxist dictatorship in Yugoslavia, first attempted to infuse elements of genuine nationalism into his country's Communist system, Ho's government, in 1950, called Tito "a spy for American imperialism." In 1963, in a joint statement with the president of the People's Republic of China, Ho Chi Minh denounced "the Yugoslav revisionist clique," saying it had "betrayed" Marxism-Leninism and engaged in "sabotage against the socialist camp." Ho's unwavering devotion to the international Communist movement as his first and foremost priority also was demonstrated by his efforts to mediate the Sino-Soviet split when it emerged during the 1960s.[6]

By the time Ho became a Comintern functionary in the 1920s, Marxism had evolved along various competing lines, some of them bitterly hostile to others. The dominant version, by virtue of the Bolshevik regime that ruled the Soviet Union, is known as Marxism-Leninism or, simply, Leninism. (The terms will be used interchangeably here.) The beauty of Leninism for Ho, in William Duiker's apt phrase, is that it offered Ho exactly what other political organizations in Vietnam lacked: "organization, cohesion, external support, and a plan."[7]

While there are some important differences between Marxism as originally conceived and Leninism, neither had any use for genuine nationalism, or the idea of people identifying with and being loyal to a larger entity based on a common language, culture, history, and geographic living space. Marxism as formulated by Karl Marx in the mid-nineteenth century, categorically opposed nationalism as a reactionary tool of the bourgeoisie in capitalist countries to mislead and oppress the working class and thereby keep it in thrall. As such, it was destructive and had to be combated in all its forms. The workers, *The Communist Manifesto* proclaimed, had no country, only their class identity. Lenin,

[6] Stephen J. Morris, "The Internationalist Outlook of Vietnamese Communism," 73–79. Tito's nationalist gambit failed since Yugoslavia was a conglomeration of feuding nationalities, and the country disintegrated in 1991.

[7] Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 20.

writing during World War I as the leader of the Bolshevik Party and after the war as the leader of Soviet Russia, took a more nuanced but still rejectionist approach to nationalism. As he saw it, world capitalism, or what he called imperialism, depended on the exploitation of European colonial empires in Asia and Africa. Nationalism among colonial peoples, or "revolutionary" nationalism, was a force that could undermine those empires, and as a result world capitalism. Revolutionary nationalism therefore was a useful tool and temporary expedient Marxists could use in their struggle to build a socialist world. But the revolutionary nationalism of colonial peoples in no way was an end it itself: it was simply a means to the end of socialism, a useful tactic during the early stage of the struggle for socialism to be discarded when it had served its purpose.

From 1920 until the end of his life, Ho's main loyalty – or the "main motivating force within him," as Sheehan puts it – was to the grand international vision of Leninism and a worldwide socialist revolution, not to parochial Vietnamese nationalism and local independence. This becomes clear when one examines how Ho and his fellow Leninists dealt with other nationalist groups. Vietnamese nationalists were not countrymen with a common concern that took precedence over their differences, or even rivals within a common political process. They were instead enemies to be exploited when possible and/or necessary and then discarded and, as was brutally demonstrated when Ho and his comrades were in a position to do so, destroyed.

There is a revealing debate in this regard about how Ho dealt with one political figure in particular. Phan Boi Chau was the most revered Vietnamese patriot of his generation (see Chapter 2). His career ended when he was betrayed to French security forces and arrested in 1925. A number of scholars have argued that it was Ho who betrayed Phan Boi Chau in return for a large sum of money. The evidence is not conclusive, and Ho has his defenders. William Duiker is among them, but it is interesting what he has to say about this controversial incident in the history of Vietnamese nationalism. Duiker doubts that Ho would have seen any advantage to having Phan Boi Chau arrested, but he does not put such an act of betrayal past Ho. In his book on Vietnamese nationalism published in 1976, Duiker comments that if Ho betrayed Phan Boi Chau "for a few pieces of silver, it was one of the few truly shortsighted decisions of his long career." Twenty-four years later in his biography of Ho, after stating that "it is unlikely" that Ho wanted Phan Boi Chau arrested, Duiker added: "This is not to deny that he [Ho] was capable of betraying the old patriot if he believed it would serve the interests of the revolutionary cause." In short, even when it came to the revered Phan

Boi Chau, to Ho it was not Vietnamese nationalism but revolutionary socialism and the world socialist movement that mattered.[8]

THE VIETNAMESE REVOLUTIONARY YOUTH LEAGUE

The historical record on revolutionary socialism versus nationalism is clear and goes back to the very beginning of Ho's service to the Comintern in Vietnam. In 1925, working beyond the reach of the French in China, on Comintern orders Ho formed an organization called the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League. The league promoted itself by stressing nationalist and anti-imperialist goals and muting, although not hiding, its actual Marxist ones. In reality it was not what it claimed to be but instead a classic Communist front, run by Ho's secret inner circle of six or seven Marxist-Leninists. The league's purpose was to lay the basis for a Marxist movement that one day would take over Vietnam by attracting nationalist Vietnamese with radical inclinations who subsequently would provide the nucleus for a Vietnamese Communist party. At this early stage the league also tried to spread its influence by establishing alliances with existing nationalist groups while attempting to undermine them. A favored technique was to poach the membership of nationalist organizations, in particular by inviting selected individuals to the league's training school in Canton, China, where their training included orders not to associate with their former colleagues upon returning to Vietnam. Some of the most promising recruits were dispatched to Moscow, where they received intensive indoctrination in Marxism-Leninism and instruction in how to be professional revolutionaries at an institution called the University of the Toilers of the East, also soon known as the Stalin School. Nationalists who rejected the league's advances often became the object of what Bernard B. Fall calls a "simple but effective cure": their photographs and travel plans were leaked to French security officials, and they were arrested upon arrival home. These activities for good reason were resented by non-Communist nationalist leaders, who understood, as Duiker has written, that Ho and his comrades were "more interested in domination than collaboration." This awareness prevented Ho from building an alliance of groups he could control. However, his poaching did enable him to bring many future Communist leaders into the Marxist-Leninist fold, while his betrayal of those unwilling to embrace

[8] Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900–1941*, 87; Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*, 127.

Marxism-Leninism weakened non-Communist nationalist groups. Ho's successful operation of recruitment and deceit was facilitated by a regular subsidy from the Comintern.[9]

THE INDOCHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY (ICP)

Marxism-Leninism nonetheless had its share of problems in Vietnam. The Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League, with Ho absent from the scene while on other Comintern assignments, lasted only until 1929. By that point three feuding Communist factions in Vietnam were competing with one another for members, and in early 1930 the Comintern sent Ho from Siam to Hong Kong to restore order in the movement. He did so in February of that year by melding his fractious comrades into the Vietnamese Communist Party, whose name was then changed in October, on Comintern orders, to the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) so as to include Cambodia and Laos within its purview of operations. Economic hard times resulting from the worldwide Great Depression meanwhile presented what looked like a golden opportunity for the ICP in Vietnam, ironically just months after the Yen Bay uprising (February 1930) that led to the decimation of the Vietnam Nationalist Party (VNQDD). The ICP became active in a rash of strikes in factories and on plantations, and organizations, called soviets, were established in several rural regions to instigate peasant uprisings. The French response to this so-called Nghe-Tinh revolt of 1930–1931 was brutal and effective; an estimated 10,000 Vietnamese were killed and 50,000 arrested and deported. Many ICP members were among the victims; of those arrested, 80 were executed and 400 sentenced to long prison terms. Overall, about 90 percent of the party leadership was eliminated. Like the VNQDD before it, the ICP was virtually destroyed. Ho, in Hong Kong during the turmoil, survived physically but ended up sidelined politically for eight years. Arrested by the British in 1931, he had the good fortune to be released in December 1932. But the Comintern seems to have lost confidence in Ho, as he subsequently remained in the

[9] Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 18–25; Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 122; Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*, 204. Duiker, of course, is an orthodox historian and credits Ho with genuine nationalist sentiments. The quotation is on page 24 of *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*. On Ho's betrayal of Vietnamese nationalists, see Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 11 and Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1967), 93–94.

Soviet Union for five years before the Comintern finally sent him to China as a military advisor in 1938.

While Ho was on the shelf in Moscow, his comrades in Vietnam carried on and over time enjoyed some success in reviving the ICP. As with all Vietnamese political groups, the ICP benefited when the French relaxed their repression beginning in 1936. Many activists of all political persuasions arrested at the beginning of the decade were released. The change in French policy occurred after the parliamentary election of 1936 brought the so-called Popular Front – an alliance of leftist parties led by the French Socialist Party – to power in Paris. The Popular Front included the French Communist Party, as in Moscow Stalin had decided that Soviet interests required a common front against the growing threat presented by Nazi Germany.[10]

The Popular Front policy did not heal the internal divisions in the international Marxist camp; in Vietnam, Marxists, as elsewhere, remained split into factions with various ideological differences. The most prominent rift, part of a fracture that extended across the Marxist world, was that between the Stalinists, who owed allegiance to Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, and the Trotskyists, the followers of Stalin's exiled rival Leon Trotsky. The ICP was controlled by Stalinists, and during the 1930s it enjoyed more success than any other Vietnamese political group. A key reason was the help it received from the Soviet Union via the Comintern. As William Duiker notes,

> the ICP had one incalculable advantage of all other nationalist groups in Vietnam – the support of the world communist movement, headed by the Comintern. During the four years from the fall of the soviet movement [the Nghe-Tinh revolt] until ... March of 1935, the Comintern provided ideological, financial, and educational support, by means of which the ICP was able to busy itself with reestablishing its base in Vietnam ... the Comintern was able to bring to Moscow for training in Marxist-Leninist doctrine and revolutionary techniques several dozen recruits for one to three years. Graduates of the Stalin School were returned by circuitous routes to East Asia, from whence they were directed to rebuild the shattered apparatus of the party.[11]

[10] Stalin's Comintern policy between 1928 and 1935, under which Communist parties throughout Europe had viciously attacked socialist parties as "social fascists" had divided the political left and contributed to the rise of Nazism in Germany. The Popular Front directive was a belated effort to correct this error. After the signing of the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact in August 1939, Communist parties affiliated with the Comintern were ordered to stop criticizing Nazi Germany and turn their ideological guns on Europe's few remaining democracies.

[11] Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*, 234–35.

By 1939 the ICP had an estimated 10,000 members. With the nationalist parties badly divided or dysfunctional, the ICP by default had become the leading party resisting French colonial rule, although at times the Trotskyists bested their Stalinist rivals in local elections permitted by the French. The ICP was even making progress in overcoming the one serious disadvantage of Comintern membership: the ideological straitjacket Stalin imposed on the organization. During the early 1930s Stalin had ordered the Comintern to follow classic Marxist principles and focus on organizing the proletariat, even in unindustrialized countries such as Vietnam where that social class was tiny. Both promoting local nationalism and working with the peasantry – a reactionary and backward class according to classic Marxist theory – were regarded with suspicion. Even with the shift to the Popular Front, this outlook persisted among many ICP members during the second half of the 1930s. However, by the late 1930s the Comintern was paying less attention to Vietnam and Indochina, and this allowed local activists more freedom to formulate their ideas. Their experience during the Popular Front era intensified interest in making use of nationalism in the quest for a social revolution. Ho Chi Minh, from his vantage point in China, agreed with that assessment, and in July 1939 he wrote a report to the Comintern advocating that the ICP cooperate with nationalist groups to build a broad front against the French. In addition, party leaders in Vietnam were increasingly conscious of the potential role the peasantry could play in that effort. One of them was a history teacher named Vo Nguyen Giap, who soon would become a student of military science and then the brilliant commander first of the Vietminh's and later of North Vietnam's military forces. Thus the two key ideological components of the strategy the Communists needed to come to power in Vietnam – the need to place nationalism in the forefront and the importance of the peasantry as a mass base – were taking shape. Meanwhile, the man with the extraordinary skills needed to pull things together, Ho Chi Minh, was in China, right next door to Vietnam.[12]

What the Communists in Vietnam needed in 1939 was a break, some kind of event that would decisively weaken France and thereby its grip on Vietnam. World War II, about to erupt in September of that year, while bringing catastrophe to so many, would give it to them.

[12] Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 26; Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 516–17; Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*, 235–37, 250–51, 254–55, 291–92; Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 234–36.

THE VIETMINH

Two events early in World War II, the defeat of the French in Europe in 1940 and the Japanese occupation of Indochina during 1940–1941, created unprecedented opportunity for opponents of French rule in Vietnam. For the ICP, however, these developments initially led to two costly defeats at the hands of French colonial authorities. Both occurred in late 1940: the first a failed uprising in the mountains north of Hanoi in late September and October, and the second a failed uprising far to the south in Cochinchina during November and December. Meanwhile, Ho Chi Minh, who had been serving the Comintern with Chinese Communist forces in northern China, arrived in southern China and turned his attention to Vietnam. In February 1941 Ho returned to his native country for the first time in thirty years, and he immediately focused on the task of reviving the fortunes of the ICP. In May, as the representative of the Comintern, Ho presided over a seminal ten-day meeting of the ICP central committee in Pac Bo, its so-called Eighth Plenum. The main agenda item, in light of the new circumstances and opportunities, was to develop a strategy for taking power in Vietnam. The key to doing that, the ICP resolved, was to subordinate its ultimate goal of a socialist revolution, which had little popular support, to the traditional nationalist goal of independence, which had wide popular support. The task at hand, according to official resolutions of the plenum, was to "employ an especially stirring . . . method of appeal to awaken the traditional nationalism of the people." This presumably would enable the ICP to win broad popular support and boost its effort to come to power. Socialist revolution unquestionably remained the party's goal; however, it would not be publicized for fear of alienating those who supported independence but opposed Communism. It was time "to take a shorter step in order [later] to try to take a longer one." Publicizing the ICP's real objectives, the Eighth Plenum's resolutions warned, would be counterproductive: "not only will we lose an allied force who would support us in the revolution to overthrow the French and Japanese, but we would also push that force to the side of our enemy, as the rear guard of our enemy."[13] In short, the ICP

[13] Cited in Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism*, 260–61. Khanh generally is sympathetic to Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese communist movement but does not cover up the ICP's manipulation of Vietnamese nationalism, or, as he calls it, Vietnamese "patriotism." On the last page of his book he raises the question of whether Marxism-Leninism has been "a vehicle for Vietnamese patriotism" or if that patriotism has been "exploited for the sake of expanding Communist ideology" (p. 341).

had decided to perpetrate a fraud on the Vietnamese population. This tactic worked, and it would be used repeatedly.

The vehicle for implementing the ICP's policy was a new organization called the Vietnam Independence League, or Vietminh. The Vietminh was a front for the ICP; its purpose was to enlist the backing of nationalist groups and individual supporters of independence while remaining under complete ICP control. Given the task at hand, every effort was made to camouflage the Vietminh's puppet status. This included Nguyen Ai Quoc hiding his Comintern association by taking on a new alias, Ho Chi Minh, and naming a real non-Communist – ironically, with the family name Ho (Ho Ngoc Lam) – as the Vietminh's chairman. Even the Vietminh's name did that, as the word "Indochina," which appeared in the name of ICP, was replaced by what Duiker calls the "more emotive" word "Vietnam."[14] The central committee of the ICP explained the name change at greater length. It noted that the "current tactic of our party is to use a method of great appeal." Therefore, the name used for a previous front organization set up back in November 1939 – the National Anti-Imperialist Front of Indochina – would not do. A name "with a greater nationalistic nature and a greater appeal" that was "more consistent with the present situation" was needed. From that necessity "our party's political front in Vietnam today shall be designated the *Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh* [League for the Independence of Vietnam] or Viet Minh, in short."[15]

Consistent with its new name and goal of broadening its support beyond the Communist faithful, the new front's fifteen-page program stressed three points: expulsion of the French and Japanese to establish Vietnamese independence; alliance with the United States, China, and other countries fighting Germany and Japan; and the eventual establishment of a Democratic Republic of Vietnam, which, the Vietminh promised, would guarantee a wide range of civil liberties including freedom of the press, freedom to organize, and universal suffrage. Not mentioned were earlier ICP policies such as confiscation of land from "counterrevolutionary landlords" and its distribution to poor peasants. As Ho himself admitted later, this was done to attract "all the patriotic forces" to the Vietminh, including "patriotic landlords,"[16] a group, it bears mentioning, Ho and his comrades no longer recognized as existing once the Vietminh came to power.

[14] Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 252. [15] Cited in Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 30.
[16] Ibid., 31.

Meanwhile, during the early 1940s and the upheavals of World War II, the Vietminh's main source of outside help changed. The Comintern – which Stalin abolished in 1943 as a goodwill gesture to his Western allies fighting Nazi Germany – was not providing Ho and the Vietminh with significant help, as all Soviet resources were devoted to the war effort. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) filled that void in an important way. In 1940 both the future People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) commander Vo Nguyen Giap and future Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) prime minister Pham Van Dong went to China to receive military and political training from the CCP. During the early 1940s the CCP also helped the Vietminh with military advisors and training. As a result, Communist Chinese principles were integrated into the Vietminh's approach to guerrilla war, albeit in combination with the operational experience and views of Ho and Giap. In 1942, a future People's Republic of China (PRC) defense minister came to Vietnam to instruct the Vietminh on military matters. This and other help from CCP military specialists contributed to the creation of a force of several thousand organized into small guerrilla units that by 1944 enabled the Vietminh to control much of the mountainous countryside north of the Red River delta.[17]

When in late 1944 Ho Chi Minh entrusted Giap with organizing a more formidable force that would become the basis of the PAVN, the former history teacher could count on more than his experience as a guerrilla fighter in the field and what he had learned from his own self-study efforts. Thanks to the CCP, while in China he had benefited from studying Mao Zedong's writings on guerrilla warfare and learning about tactics, strategy, equipment, training, and recruitment while observing the CCP's army as it fought Japanese forces in that World War II arena. Giap had to begin small when he returned to Vietnam: the first unit of what eventually grew into the PAVN had only thirty-four men and very few guns, some of them antiquated weapons that dated from the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. Still, within days, Giap's troops had won their first victory and captured valuable arms and ammunition in the process when they overran two isolated French outposts.[18] During its war of 1946–1954 against the French, the Vietminh would get much more Chinese Communist military

[17] Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism*, 282–83.
[18] Cecil B. Curry, *Victory at Any Cost: The Genius of Vietnam's Vo Nguyen Giap* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, 1997), 51–53, 80–84.

help, and it would prove crucial in the much larger-scale battles Giap's forces would fight in that conflict.

Before that, however, the Japanese coup of March 1945, by breaking French power in Vietnam and opening the door to political and military activity to all Vietnamese groups, opened it farthest to the Vietminh, the best organized of those groups thanks to its puppet master, the ICP. Two factors were central to the Vietminh's success. First, the Vietminh were able to take advantage of a national crisis. The poor harvest of 1944 had combined with the confiscation of rice by the Japanese and French and wartime conditions to cause a famine in northern Vietnam, and by early 1945 the death toll had reached an estimated million people. No effort at amelioration came from either the French or the Japanese. The Vietminh responded by sending armed units to seize grain from landlords and, more importantly, from Japanese rice transports and granaries, where it was being held for export to Japan. This significantly increased public support for the Vietminh, perhaps most critically among peasants in several of the hardest hit rural areas, and that in turn helped Vietminh expand its area of control in those areas. Second, the Vietminh made effective use of brute force. In rural areas, the overall Vietminh approach was to move into a village or hamlet and dispense what historian David Marr has called "rough revolutionary justice." The targets of this "justice" often were those who had collaborated with the French or Japanese, sometimes by betraying ICP or Vietminh operatives to the occupiers. But, as Marr points out, "the overriding purpose of the killings was to cow opponents and perhaps garner support from ordinary citizens angry at the way they had been treated" by the French authorities. One important target was the Dai Viet National Alliance, which like several other nationalist groups had cooperated with the Japanese because it saw the Japanese as a vehicle for ending French control of Vietnam and thereby achieving national independence. People associated with the Dai Viet National Alliance were assassinated and terrorized, as Marr notes, not only because the Vietminh and ICP considered them Japanese lackeys but also because they were "potential rivals for political power."[19]

These tactics worked, and by the time Japan surrendered to the United States and its allies in August 1945 the Vietminh had established what they called a "liberated area" in several provinces north of Hanoi that contained more than one million people. In Hanoi itself, as well as in other

[19] Khanh, 313–14; David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 234–37.

urban areas where gaining control was impossible, the Vietminh engaged in what historian Huynh Kim Khanh calls "selective terrorism" in an effort to spread fear and demonstrate Vietminh power. These killings, Khanh adds, "were not numerous, but sufficient to cow adversaries and to advertise the Vietminh presence."[20]

One reason for the Vietminh's growing power between Japan's March coup in Vietnam and its ultimate surrender in mid-August was that its armed forces had modern weapons supplied by the United States. The United States agreed to provide these and other supplies in return for Vietminh intelligence on Japanese activities in Indochina, help in rescuing downed US airmen flying missions over Vietnam into southern China, and attacks on Japanese forces. This collaboration was arranged by the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the wartime precursor to the CIA. American supplies included weapons, communications equipment, medical supplies, and other material, with the first arms deliveries beginning in 1942. Aid and cooperation were upgraded significantly in July 1945 when a six-man team of advisors parachuted into northern Vietnam to equip and train Vietminh fighters. The Americans were totally taken in by Ho and his comrades, who successfully portrayed themselves as pro-American nationalists. The OSS reports, as journalist and historian Arthur Dommen has observed, "reveal with unequaled clarity the astounding naiveté of its authors." One early report informs Washington to "Forget the Communist Bogy [sic]. VML is *not* Communist. Stands for freedom and reforms from French harshness." Dommen notes the following: "This snap judgment, which conveniently ignores 15 years of party history and Ho's 22 years in the service of the Comintern, heads a bulky file of many such judgments made by American military men, diplomats, and journalists regarding Vietnam."[21] The Vietminh/US deal certainly did not benefit each side equally. Ho and the Vietminh did provide some intelligence and help with downed fliers, but Vietminh military forces avoided any serious combat against the Japanese. There is in fact only one recorded Vietminh attack against Japanese troops; a total of eight Japanese troops were killed.[22] Prior to the Japanese surrender, and immediately thereafter during late 1945 and 1946, the American weapons and training the Vietminh received found their main use against Vietnamese opponents of the Vietminh; subsequently they would be used against the French.

[20] Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism*, 320.
[21] Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans*, 94–97.
[22] Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 34–35; Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina*, 97.

THE COUP OF AUGUST 1945 AND THE EVENTS OF 1946

On August 19, 1945, the Vietminh seized control of Hanoi. However, the Vietminh did not seize power from the Japanese, who had surrendered to the Allies on August 14, nor from the French, who had been deposed by the Japanese five months earlier. The Vietminh seized power from the government of the Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai, who had served as a puppet ruler from the old imperial city of Hue under both the French and, after they took control of the country, the Japanese. Whatever his many shortcomings, Bao Dai actually had beaten Ho Chi Minh to the punch on one point: in the wake of the Japanese coup, on March 11, 1945, Bao Dai had declared Vietnam independent of France, albeit with somewhat ambiguous language to avoid a military reaction from Tokyo, whose troops, after all, controlled the country.[23]

The well-orchestrated Vietminh seizure of power took place almost without opposition from either supporters of Bao Dai or Japanese troops still in Hanoi awaiting disarmament by the Allies and repatriation home. The Vietminh also had either tacit or active support of various other groups, a result of successful organizing and propaganda that gave it what Duiker calls an "image of moderation."[24] This helped them take control of large parts of Vietnam during the next ten days. Bao Dai abdicated on August 25, a provisional government was formed on August 29, and on September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared the independence of what he called the Democratic Republic of Vietnam at a mass rally of half a million people in the center of Hanoi. He famously quoted the first sentence of the US Declaration of Independence in his speech, a gesture that impressed American officials present at the ceremony but, as events would quickly demonstrate, was meaningless since it did not reflect an intent on Ho's part to establish democracy, or anything close to it, in Vietnam.

It turned out that in 1945 independence was no more in the cards for Vietnam than was democracy, albeit in the former case because of the Allies. In the wake of Japan's defeat and ongoing departure from

[23] For details see Dommer, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans*, 84–85. Bao Dai declared that "the Government of Vietnam publicly proclaims that from today the protectorate treaty with France is abrogated and that the country resumes its rights to independence." He made no reference to the territorial unity of Vietnam, which the French had divided into three units. Bao Dai, with the approval of the Japanese military, chose as his prime minister a respected scholar and educator named Tran Trong Kim.

[24] Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 104.

territories it still occupied, the British and Americans had agreed to allow the French to return to Vietnam as the governing colonial power. The arrival of British troops during September in the south began that process as the British immediately released and armed French troops who had been interned by the Japanese earlier in the year. That same month the Chinese Nationalist government of Chiang Kaishek sent a large army into northern Vietnam. These developments enormously complicated matters for Ho Chi Minh but did not stop him from attempting to control Vietnam. During late 1945 and early 1946, Ho and the Vietminh skillfully acted on several fronts. Ho dealt with the Chinese occupation army by bribing its commanding generals, and they in turn did not interfere with the newly proclaimed Vietminh government. To get the Chinese out of Vietnam, Ho worked out an arrangement with the French regarding their presence in Vietnam (while the French in turn negotiated with the Chinese on the issues dividing them). This triangular set of negotiations brought about the withdrawal of Chinese troops from northern Vietnam and permitted France to position 25,000 troops there for six years.[25]

Covering every flank, the Vietminh, in secret, even sought Japanese help. It came from hundreds of officers and enlisted men in Vietnam who were among the thousands of personnel interned and awaiting repatriation to their homeland. One estimate is that during 1945 General Giap recruited 1,500 soldiers; they were led by a colonel, 230 noncommissioned officers, and 47 officers of the dreaded Japanese military police wanted by the Allies for questioning about war crimes. All recruits were given Vietnamese names, identity papers, and citizenship to hide who they really were. Their most important service to the Vietminh was as weapons instructors and in maintaining equipment.[26] In other words, as he had done in the late 1920s with the French colonial authorities when he provided them with travel information about nationalists who refused

[25] For details regarding these complicated negotiations see Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*, 37–39.

[26] Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 543; Curry, *Victory at Any Cost*, 125–26. Curry's estimate of 1,500 is based on a US Defense Intelligence document he obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. The Japanese military police, or Kempetai, for good reason has been compared to the German Gestapo. For a detailed account of this episode, see Christopher E. Goscha, "Belated Asian Allies: The Technical and Military Contributions of Japanese Deserters (1945–1950)," in *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, ed. Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 37–64, especially 44–47. Most of these Japanese joined the Vietminh; however, some were recruited by the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects.

Communist indoctrination, in 1945 and 1946 Ho did not hesitate to collaborate with the French, Chinese, or Japanese when it suited his purposes. Meanwhile, as punishment for this presumed crime, he had Vietminh hit squads assassinate thousands of members of various nationalist groups, often for far lesser acts of collaboration.

When it came to the Vietnamese people, after the August 1945 coup and into 1946 the Vietminh followed a two-pronged policy of outward moderation combined with systematic repression of non-Communist nationalists. Outward moderation began with the composition of the provisional government. Several non-Communists were given ministries, and every effort was made to hide the real affiliation of the majority of ministers, including Ho himself, who were in fact Communists. In November the ICP, so troublesome to the Vietminh's moderate public relations image, conveniently disappeared when Ho announced its dissolution. In fact the ICP did not dissolve; as Ho himself put it, the ICP "went underground . . . And though underground, the Party continued to lead the administration and the people."[27] While the decision to hide the ICP was taken to appease the Chinese and the Western powers, whose combined military forces controlled most of the country, the main audience for this act of political theater was the Vietnamese people. As one important ICP official, who later defected, explained:

> They [the Vietminh] were not able to mobilize all of the people to fight the French so long as the Communist doctrine and the Communist Party were present. Therefore, as a tactical move, as a temporary measure, they had to put an end to the Indochinese Communist Party . . . If the Communists were there, then the people would not join the [Vietminh] movement. People dared not unite with the Communists – especially the South Vietnamese people, who did not have any liking for the Communists . . . In fact, the Party just went underground.[28]

Another act of political theater was the election of a national assembly, which took place on January 6, 1946. The term political theater is used here because at no point in his political career was Ho Chi Minh, a Marxist-Leninist to the core, ever prepared to allow elections to determine the fate of Vietnam. Elections, when held, were a tool to be used, with the results guaranteed in advance by whatever means necessary, to achieve dictatorial power. In any event, the Vietminh, as Bernard Fall notes, had a great advantage over its nationalist rivals in the January 1946

[27] Quoted in Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 35. See also 69–70 on efforts to hide Ho's Communist past.
[28] Ibid., 35–36.

elections because it had used the previous six months "to implant its power through policy, army, and control of communications and ... [because it] represented 'the Government' to the inexperienced and largely illiterate average Vietnamese voter."[29] The VNQDD and Dong Minh Hoi, aware of their weaknesses, therefore accepted an offer of 70 seats in a legislative body of about 300. The elections were a sham and yielded the required overwhelming Vietminh majority. According to official claims, Giap won his seat with 97 percent of the vote, second only to Ho himself, who according to the official record garnered 98.4 percent of the vote in his Hanoi constituency. Vietnam's National Assembly held its inaugural meeting to do the Vietminh's bidding in March, its first task being to replace Ho's provisional government with one called the Coalition Government of National Union and Resistance. Like the government it replaced – the entire process took only half an hour – the new one featured Ho as president, included some ministers from non-Communist parties who were in practice rendered powerless by a variety of methods, and was dominated by Communists from the Vietminh.[30]

This pose of moderation was a cover for a systematic and ruthless policy of repression, similar to what was done after the Japanese coup in March, designed to silence all opponents to Communist rule. Precise figures on what happened in the months immediately after the coup of August 1945 cannot be ascertained, but the number of assassinations of Vietminh opponents clearly reached into the thousands. Tens of thousands more were arrested and often held for many months. This was a well-organized campaign. The lists of "traitors" and "reactionaries," to be sure, included Vietnamese who had collaborated with the French and/or Japanese but was hardly limited to them. Members of the VNQDD, moderate political parties such as the Dai Viet Nationalist Alliance and Constitutionalist Party, and the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects were assassinated, as were Trotskyites. The victims ranged from Bui Quang Chieu, a longtime Constitutionalist Party leader and advocate of peaceful struggle for independence (murdered along with his four sons), to Ngo Dinh Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Khoi (buried alive), to Ta Thu

[29] Cited in ibid., 45–46.

[30] Ibid., 50. For example, a Communist deputy minister was attached to every non-Communist minister to countermand in one way or another any decision the minister made that was contrary to Ho's policies. Ministerial responsibilities also were shifted so that non-Communist ministers lost their key powers. See Curry, *Victory at Any Cost*, 110–11.

Thau, the country's most talented Trotskyite writer and speaker (shot on a beach after a mock trial). The assassination of Ta Thu Thau shocked intellectuals of most political viewpoints and caused many to believe, correctly it turned out, that the Vietminh hit list included genuine nationalists and anti-colonialists as well as collaborators.[31] The scope and organization of this campaign across the spectrum of the non-Marxist nationalist camp and from there into the non-Stalinist Marxist camp effectively debunks any claim that it was conducted by people to whom nationalism was the first or even a primary political goal. This was a Stalinist political purge designed to destroy anyone opposed to a Marxist Vietminh dictatorship in Vietnam. As Dommen notes, "As the liquidations began, it became obvious that the Viet Minh had no intention of heeding appeals from many quarters for a conciliation of all Vietnamese nationalists in order to 'consolidate independence.'"[32]

What followed during the spring and summer of 1946 was even more violent and emphatic in demonstrating the dictatorial Communist as opposed to nationalist agenda of Ho and the Vietminh. In March 1946, Ho negotiated an ambiguous agreement with the French regarding Vietnamese independence. It called for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to be a "free state" within the so-called French Union. How free the DRV would actually be was unclear, especially since the agreement called for thousands of French troops to be stationed in northern Vietnam. There was, however, an immediate upside for Ho and the Vietminh since the arrival French troops facilitated the withdrawal of Chinese troops, and the latter were providing the main protection for the VNQDD and other nationalist groups in northern Vietnam. The first French troops landed in Hanoi within days, a development greeted with dismay and anger by many Vietnamese nationalists. Meanwhile, subsequent discussions to clarify the agreement revealed that the French in fact had no intention of granting Vietnam real independence. In June, Ho therefore left for France to negotiate directly with the French government. While he tried to deal with the French, the external and most powerful threat Vietminh rule, he left General Giap to deal with local nationalists, the domestic and far weaker challenge to that rule.

As he had done before and would do again, Giap carried out his task with ruthless efficiency. Ho as usual attempted to hide his latest campaign

[31] Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and Americans*, 120–21; Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 435, 519.
[32] Ibid., 121.

against Vietnamese nationalists behind what Dommen calls a "mask of reconciliation," this one a new front group formed in May called the National Popular Front of Vietnam (*Hoi Lien Hiep Quoc Dan Viet Nam*). When the last Chinese troops departed in mid-June, Giap launched his campaign against the now largely defenseless nationalists. He began by demanding that all nationalist groups join the newly minted National Popular Front of Vietnam. Those that refused were branded reactionaries and traitors or, according to the official Vietminh newspaper, "reactionary saboteurs."[33] Along with the Dong Minh Hoi, the VNQDD, and the Dai Viet National Alliance, other alleged reactionary saboteurs included anti-French nationalists who had opposed the March agreement as well as Trotskyists and Roman Catholics. Newspapers were shut down, people were arrested, and hundreds executed. Giap's police and newly formed army were assisted not only by his Japanese recruits but also by the French, who wanted all nationalist opponents of the March 1946 agreement, especially the VNQDD, eliminated. The French therefore released Vietminh leaders from jail and provided Giap's troops with artillery to attack Dai Viet National Alliance strong points. French troops helped Vietminh forces eliminate VNQDD positions in Hanoi and the Dong Minh Hoi positions in a coastal town east of the city. As Giap biographer Cecil B. Curry observes, "Hundreds of nationalists who might in the future provide guidance for a rival anti-French resistance movement were executed during this campaign."[34] Giap's methods included binding people together and throwing them into rivers to drown as they floated out to sea, a technique of execution the general dubbed "crab fishing."[35]

Another technique was to slander opponents with false accusations of atrocities. Thus in mid-July 1946, Giap's forces seized the VNQDD headquarters in Hanoi, an action accomplished with French help in the form of armored cars that sealed off the area to prevent VNQDD activists from reaching the building to help their colleagues on the scene. Giap then ordered what Curry calls a "chamber of horrors" be built and that bodies be exhumed from graves and placed outside the building. People who visited the grisly site were shown evidence of this presumed VNQDD atrocity. Adding insult to injury, many of the bodies Giap placed at the scene were those of murdered VNQDD members. In the end, thousands of Vietminh opponents, perhaps as many as 15,000, were assassinated. Late in July, as Gaip's campaign was nearing its end, the head of the newly

[33] Ibid., 153. [34] Curry, *Victory at Any Cost*, 125–26. The quotation is on page 126.
[35] Ibid.

reopened US consulate in Hanoi, apparently less naïve than the OSS operatives Ho had so impressed, reported to Washington, "the Vietminh League seems steadily to be eliminating all organized organization."[36] Some years later Nguyen Duy Thanh, who before defecting served the Vietminh for four years, including in an important diplomatic post, offered a more in-depth analysis, one that explains why he ultimately rejected the Vietminh:

> Though we all knew that Ho Chi Minh and his Party were all Communists of long standing, still, we thought that they would put first and foremost the cause of their country over party interests. Our expectations were sadly belied. Day after day the communists showed up their fascist tendency and adopted a hostile attitude towards the nationalists who did not brook communist ideals.[37]

By the end of 1946 the non-Communist nationalist political parties had been severely weakened or virtually destroyed. By then the death toll among Vietminh opponents probably reached into the tens of thousands.[38] No domestic nationalist force was capable of resisting the rule of the Vietminh. But France, the foreign colonial power determined to restore its control over Vietnam, had that capability. The destruction of the nationalist parties therefore turned out to be a two-edged sword, as in achieving that goal Ho and the Vietminh had unavoidably weakened the overall Vietnamese ability to oppose French ambitions. During 1946 Ho worked feverishly to delay a showdown with the French, but in this he did not succeed. The French effort to nip Vietnamese independence in the bud would begin with a vengeance before the year was out.

THE FIRST INDOCHINA WAR, 1946–1954

The so-called First Indochina War began during December 1946 when the French launched attacks, including massive artillery bombardments, on Vietminh strongholds in and around Hanoi. The first phase of the war, through 1949, was essentially a military stalemate. During that time, along with fighting the French on the battlefield, Ho had to focus on a second front, the Vietnamese people. The situation was in some ways paradoxical. On the one hand, the vast majority of the Vietnamese people did not want or support Communism; on the other, as Dommen points

[36] Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans*, 154.
[37] Quoted in Curry, *Victory at Any Cost*, 109. Thanh's twenty-eight-page memoir, published in 1950, is titled *My Four Years With the Vietminh*.
[38] Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 19.

out, "in the interests of preserving their independence they supported a government under the control of the communists that was carefully camouflaged by an alliance with other political parties that were largely phantoms . . . and by a front organization, the Lien Viet [National Popular Front of Vietnam], that claimed to represent all strata of society."[39] But the Lien Viet veil could not conceal the real nature of Ho's regime, and the desire for independence notwithstanding, opposition to the Vietminh was growing. Robert Turner points out that ruthless repression of nationalists and what looked like collaboration with the French were taking a toll on Vietminh credibility. So too were Vietminh policies in areas they controlled, the so-called liberated zone. According to Philippe Devillers, a prominent French historian based in Vietnam during those days:

> The Vietminh had subjected the people to an extremely painful strain, practically a permanent mobilization . . . with its control of thoughts and acts, with its atmosphere of suspicion and its informers . . . and with the arrests, the abduction or assassination of its opponents and even of those considered lukewarm or suspect. If the Vietminh still seemed to be the only movement capable of bringing about . . . national independence and . . . social justice, it nevertheless ruled with the aid of physical terror and moral constraint. As under the old regime, the political police . . . was the main buttress of the regime.[40]

In southern Vietnam, especially the Mekong River delta area, where the Vietminh were weakest, efforts to work out some kind of cooperative relationship with Hoa Hao and Cao Dai religious sects ran afoul of Vietminh attacks on those groups, which included the capture and murder of the founder of the Hoa Hao sect. Both groups in the end chose an alliance with the French as the lesser evil compared to the treatment they received from the Vietminh.[41]

As these problems mounted, the Vietminh received a huge boost at the end of 1949. And as had happened before, that boost to the Communist cause in Vietnam came from outside the country. In October 1949, the Chinese Communist Party completed its defeat of the Nationalist regime of Chiang Kaishek and proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Soon PRC military forces reached the China-Vietnam border, and in December Ho Chi Minh began a trip on foot that took him to China in January 1950. That same month both the PRC and the Soviet Union officially recognized the Democratic Republic of

[39] Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans*, 169.
[40] Quoted in Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 68.
[41] Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 132.

Vietnam as the government of Vietnam, notwithstanding that Ho's regime was now based in the countryside with its authority restricted to scattered areas it called liberated zones. Within days, the Soviet Union's puppet regimes in Eastern Europe followed suit. More helpful to the Vietminh was the arrival of military weapons and equipment, most from the PRC but some from the Soviet Union. During the first nine months of 1950, these deliveries included 14,000 rifles, 1,700 machine guns and recoilless rifles, 60 artillery pieces, and 300 bazookas. Significantly, both Stalin and Mao made their commitments to provide military aid to the Vietminh several months before the United States did the same for the French. Stalin insisted that the PRC would have to provide the bulk of the aid but added, "What China lacks, we will provide." By April 1950 Chinese military advisors in the form of the Chinese Military Advisory Group (CMAC) were in Vietnam assisting the Vietminh, and by the summer a force of 20,000 troops had been trained and equipped in China. The Communist victory in China also gave the Vietminh a sanctuary just across the Vietnam-China border where its forces could get away from the French and regroup to fight another day.[42]

Strengthened by its newfound support from the CCP and Soviet Union, the Vietminh concluded it could shed part of its nationalist mask and reveal more of its Communist agenda. It did this in a series of announcements and policies during 1950 and 1951. For example, Ho no longer spoke of the DRV as being neutral in the emerging Cold War struggle "like Switzerland," as he had told a journalist while in Paris in 1946. Instead, as Duiker puts it, "the DRV openly advertised its new 'lean to one side' policy toward its socialist allies."[43] When the DRV officially recognized the Communist states of Eastern Europe that had extended it recognition, it emphasized its position by ignoring Yugoslavia, the one Communist state that had asserted its national independence and broken with that bloc. Inside Vietnam the dominant influence was the neighboring PRC rather than the distant Soviet Union. Throughout areas under its control, using

[42] Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 72–73; Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 140–41; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 22–23; Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 550–51; Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 422–37. The Stalin quote is on page 422. President Truman authorized the first US military aid to help the French in Vietnam in July 1950, after the Korean War began with the North Korea's invasion of South Korea. An American military mission to help the French army arrived in Vietnam in late September.

[43] Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 70; Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 141.

materials translated from Chinese into Vietnamese, the Vietminh carried out a major campaign to indoctrinate Vietminh cadres in CCP doctrine and methods. The step that most clearly revealed the Vietminh's Communist agenda was taken in 1951 when Ho officially revived the ICP, albeit under a new name. The party reemerged at a congress held in northern Vietnam in February 1951 as the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP). Ho naturally occupied the top post of party chairman. In the keynote speech by party general secretary Troung Chinh, the party now openly proclaimed its Marxist-Leninist agenda for Vietnam. Interestingly, while the cloak covering the existence of the party and its agenda was off, a significant fig leaf remained in place. The word "Communist" was not included in the party's name because, as a party circular put it, "if we keep the name of 'Communist Party' a certain number of landowners, progressive intellectuals and members of religious sects would not want to follow us."[44]

The party briefly also continued to pull its punches when it came to land reform by limiting land confiscations in the areas it controlled. The ground began to shift in 1952 as the training activity and hence the influence of Chinese advisors on the Vietminh increased. By the fall of 1952, Ho had a land reform plan. It had been worked out with the top CCP leadership and submitted to Stalin for his approval. In January 1953 Vietminh announced it was accelerating land reform efforts, and, more importantly, in December of that year Ho announced a new radical land redistribution policy. Following the model used by the CCP during its victorious civil war, the Vietminh increased not only the pace and extent of confiscations but the violence it used to accomplish them.[45]

Another way the name "Vietnam Workers' Party" was misleading involved the organization's agenda for Indochina. The first word in its name and the creation of supposedly independent parties for Laos and Cambodia notwithstanding, the VWP party program spoke of

[44] Quoted in Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 78. See also Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 140–43.

[45] Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 153–54. Taylor, *A History of the* Vietnamese, 566–67. For additional information on the violence by which the Vietminh carried out land reform before 1954, see Hoang Van Chi, *From Colonialism to Communism: A Case History of North Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1964). Hoang Van Chi, although not a Communist, supported the Vietminh in its war against the French until 1954. However, he was repelled by North Vietnamese repression and moved to South Vietnam, where he served in the government of Ngo Dinh Diem until 1960. He eventually settled in the United States. There have been attempts to discredit Hoang's work, in particular his estimates of deaths that resulted from land reform in North Vietnam after 1954, but overall his work his withstood that criticism.

establishing a "federation of the states of Viet-Nam, Laos, and Cambodia" with the meaningless caveat "if the three peoples so desire." A memorandum circulated at the time was quite clear about any inappropriate "desires" on the part of the Laotians and Cambodians: "The Vietnamese Party reserves the right to supervise the activities of its brother parties in Cambodia and Laos." In November 1951 a top secret document noted that "when conditions permit" the three Communist parties of Indochina would be reunited. That made perfect sense, since some months earlier Ho Chi Minh, not having consulted any of the peoples involved, had told his comrades that he looked forward to the "great union of Vietnam-Laos-Cambodia."[46] In short, the VWP saw itself first and foremost as a participant in the world Communist revolution, not a nationalist group focused on the country in which it was based and whose name it carried.

The biggest payoff of the Vietminh's close relationship with the CCP was its victory over the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. By then Chinese aid to the Vietminh had reached 4,000 tons of supplies per month, ten times the quantity of 1951. The French had turned this remote village in northern Vietnam into a fortress, one of whose purposes was to lure the Vietminh into a set piece battle that the French, with their superior firepower, were sure they would win. But the French did not anticipate the massive military aid the Vietminh received from China. It included vital advice from top Chinese commanders in planning and fighting the battle, artillery and antiaircraft weapons, 1,000 trucks (made in the Soviet Union), advanced rocket launchers manned by Chinese experts, and thousands of Chinese porters to carry disassembled weapons into position in the mountains surrounding Dien Bien Phu. The Vietminh siege lasted almost two months, with both sides suffering heavy casualties. The fortress fell on May 7, ending the war and setting the stage for the French withdrawal from Vietnam.

It is important to understand the pattern underlying the sequence of events that began in the 1920s and eventually produced the Vietminh's 1954 triumph. Vietnam's Communists always needed, and regularly received, help from outside their country. In the 1920s and 1930s, they received vital help from the Soviet Union, first to get organized and then to survive French repression. In those days that help arrived via the Comintern and its agent Ho Chi Minh. In the 1940s aid came primarily

[46] Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 78–79; Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 143.

from the Chinese Communist Party. Between 1950 and 1954, aid from Communist China was essential first to get the upper hand against the French on the battlefield and then defeat and drive them from Vietnam. Some aid also came from the Soviet Union. It was the Vietminh's good standing in the world Communist movement, not its Vietnamese nationalist credentials, that was decisive in its victory at Dien Bien Phu. For all the military skill of General Giap, the Vietminh could not have planned the battle much less fought and won it without massive Communist Chinese, and some Soviet, help. The decisive events of 1954 in Vietnam reaffirmed the importance of the aid lifeline Vietnam's Marxists had to Communist powers abroad and thereby the pattern for their success established in the 1920s. That pattern, this time involving a massive aid lifeline that ran from the Soviet Union and PRC to North Vietnam, would be repeated in the 1960s and 1970s.

COMMUNISM IN NORTH VIETNAM, 1954–1959

Shortly after Dien Bien Phu, an independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or North Vietnam, emerged from the Geneva Conference of 1954 (April 26 to July 20). The Geneva Accords produced by that conference also led to the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam, or South Vietnam. The two rival states were divided at the 17th parallel, approximately where Vietnam had been divided for about 200 years from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

In North Vietnam, it was a commitment to Communism rather than nationalism that guided Ho Chi Minh and his comrades. The VWP set up a Marxist totalitarian state modeled largely on that of the People's Republic of China and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union. The North Vietnamese state was a one-party dictatorship backed by a ubiquitous secret police that quashed any dissent. The state controlled the media, education, and all cultural and artistic life. Traditional forms of cultural expression, something that presumably would be encouraged by nationalists, were discouraged or suppressed as part of the effort to indoctrinate the people in Marxist values. Traditional village festivals were forbidden and many temples and shrines were shut down. An effort was made to control religion by limiting the number of Buddhist monks and Catholic priests and carefully regulating their activity. Confucianism was denounced, although some of its precepts were recycled to encourage the people to obey the Communist authorities. By the early 1960s the economy had been largely transformed into

a classic Communist planned economy based on state control of all industry and collectivized agriculture. In K. W. Taylor's apt description, "The Democratic Republic of Vietnam became a local version of the type of modern totalitarian state that emerged in the twentieth century under the banners of communism and fascism."[47]

The nature of the North Vietnamese regime is largely beyond debate, other than within a few sectarian Marxist-Leninist circles. More controversial is the land reform program of the mid-1950s, during which the regime seized the land of the landlords and distributed it to the peasantry. The objective, however, was not to create a class of prosperous independent peasants, as the subsequent collectivization of the land demonstrates. The primary goal of this campaign was to destroy once and for all the authority of the landlords and replace it with the power of the state, or, as Pham Van Dong put it at the time, "to abolish the political influence of the landlords and former officials and to establish the political supremacy of the working peasants."[48] Of course, the "supremacy of the working peasants" was to be exercised by the VWP. Ironically, in contrast to the situation south of the 17th parallel, even before land reform more than 90 percent of peasants in North Vietnam farmed their own land. The burning question is how many people died as a result of land reform. One orthodox scholar who tends to be favorable to the North Vietnamese regime has estimated the figure to be between 3,000 and 15,000, with the most likely number being 5,000; that estimate, however, is based on statistics provided by the North Vietnamese, who had every reason to minimize the actual toll. More credible are Bernard Fall's estimate of 50,000 executions and at least double that number sent to forced labor camps and an estimate of 32,000 executions based on the report of a cadre who witnessed the campaign and later defected, a figure cited by both Dommen and Moyar. The French scholar Jean-Louis Margolin believes 50,000 executions took place. He points out that some of the victims were party members swept up in the wave of paranoia and fear that raged across the country. Either way, as Robert Turner points out, the total death toll is much larger than the number of executions since many people committed suicide or starved to death when their families were dispossessed of their property. To that must be added the unknown

[47] Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 571–72.
[48] Quoted in Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 130.

number of people who died when they were imprisoned or sent to forced labor camps.[49]

The situation became so bad that in the summer of 1956 the campaign was halted and the party began a "Rectification of Errors." Both Troung Chinh, the party general secretary, and the vice-minister in charge of land reform lost their positions.[50] A brief time of relaxation followed when intellectuals were allowed to criticize what had happened, a development that, not coincidentally, paralleled events taking place in both the Soviet Union and the PRC.

However, "rectification" and the right to criticize the party were halted at the end of 1956. Although a proposed three-year economic plan was now the most important item on the regime's agenda, by 1957 Hanoi was turning its attention to South Vietnam. Some top party leaders, most notably Le Duan, were arguing for the DRV to intervene forcefully against the Saigon government of Ngo Dinh Diem. After personally inspecting the situation south of the 17th parallel, Le Duan warned the party in 1959 that Diem was on the brink of successfully crushing the Communist movement there. This led to direct Northern intervention in the South to overthrow Diem, resulting in a crisis for the Diem regime, the US decision to upgrade its role in preserving South Vietnam, and to what we know as the Vietnam War.

An additional word on Communism in Vietnam seems in order here. After 1959, along with embarking on a conquest of South Vietnam, the Vietnamese Workers' Party established a centrally planned socialist economic system in North Vietnam. This was done dictatorially according to the principles of Marxism-Leninism and included the forced collectivization of agriculture and the nationalization and state control of all industry. The goal was to modernize Vietnam according to the model pioneered in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and largely replicated in China during the 1950s. From 1954 until 1963, there was a competing modernization model in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem's doctrine known as Personalism, which drew on Catholic philosophy for many of its basic ideas (see Chapter 4). Personalism had its problems and quirks, and certainly its critics, from the America officials who had to work with Diem to

[49] Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 62, 431, n.7; Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 130–31, 142–46; Jean-Louis Margolin, "Vietnam and Laos," in *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, Stéphane Courtois et al. (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 568–70; Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans*, 339–41; Fall, *The Two Vietnams*, 156.

[50] Hoang Van Chi, *From Colonialism to Communism*, 209.

orthodox journalists and scholars who have evaluated him. These commentators have consistently compared Personalism unfavorably to Marxism-Leninism as an ideology providing a blueprint for modernization. This is true whether the author in question is discussing Personalism in particular or, without specifically mentioning Personalism, Diem's program for South Vietnam in general. Thus Herring notes that Diem had "no blueprint for building a modern nation" and Moss lists among Diem's flaws his "obsolete ideology." Even Philip E. Catton, a historian whose book on Diem demonstrates convincingly that these assessments are inaccurate, writes that Diem's "chosen formula ... paled in comparison to the theoretical rigor of Marxism-Leninism."[51]

What one does not read in these assessments is that Marxism-Leninism, which was imposed on Vietnam under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, has everywhere been a catastrophic failure as a blueprint for modernization. Its "theoretical rigor" notwithstanding, Marxism-Leninism as an economic system failed completely in the Soviet Union. In China Marxist-Leninist economics was discarded in the 1980s by the Chinese Communist Party and replaced by a form of state capitalism. Marxist-Leninist economics also failed in Eastern Europe and everywhere else it was tried. In Vietnam, in the 1980s, following the example set in China by the CCP, the Vietnam Communist Party (the VWP's name after 1976), while preserving its one-party dictatorship, junked its moribund Marxist-Leninist economic system in favor of its own version of state capitalism, at which point the country began to develop and prosper. All of this raises a basic question: if one is going to be critical of Ngo Dinh Diem for lacking a realistic program to modernize, what should be said – in fairness, at the same time – of Ho Chi Minh?

[51] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 59; Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*, 110; Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 48. For an overview of collectivization of agriculture in North Vietnam see Alec Gordon, "Class Struggle, Production, and the Middle Peasant," *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, no. 10/12: 459–64.