

Chapter X

THE AUGUST REVOLUTION: THE MEN FROM PRISONS, JUNGLES, MOUNTAINS, AND FOREIGN COUNTRIES

Sunday afternoon, September 2, 1945. High on a stage at Cot Co [Flag Pole] park—which was surrounded by a jungle of people, banners, and red flags—a thin, old man with a goatee was introduced. Ho Chi Minh—Ho the Enlightened—Ho the Brightest—a mysterious man who had set off waves of emotion among Ha Noi's inhabitants and inspired countless off-the-record tales ever since the *National Salvation [Cuu Quoc]*, the Viet Minh organ, had announced the first tentative list of the "Viet Minh" government on August 24.¹

It was to take the Vietnamese months, if not years, to find out who exactly Ho Chi Minh was.² However, this did not matter, at least not on that afternoon of September 2. The unfamiliar old man — who remarkably did not wear a western suit but only a Chinese type "revolutionary" uniform — immediately caught the people's attention with his historic Declaration of Independence.

¹*Cuu Quoc [National Salvation]* (Hanoi), No. 31, 24 Aug. 1945.

²From this chapter on, I shall use his alias Ho Chi Minh instead of his personal name Nguyen Sinh Con.

To begin his declaration, which allegedly bore 15 signatures of his Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam [DRVN] constituted on August 28, Ho first quoted the American Declaration of Independence of 1776:³

All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

He then quoted the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen after the “1791 Revolution”:⁴

Every man is born free and equal and enjoys free and equal rights.

Ho went on to accuse the French colonial regime of grave crimes, such as denying the Vietnamese democracy, bathing the anti-French patriots in blood, establishing more prisons than schools, endorsing policies aimed at "stupidifying" [*ngu dan*] the people, weakening the Viet race with alcohol and opium, impoverishing the people with heavy taxes, confiscating lands and properties and monopolizing commerce. More important, he insisted that the French had twice delivered Viet-Nam to the Japanese (in 1941 and 1945) and that the Vietnamese "have regained their independence from the Japanese not from the French." He concluded:

³I have used the Vietnamese text in *Liberation Flag [Co Giai Phong]* (Hanoi), No. 16, 12 Sept 1945.

⁴As for the “1791 revolution,” Ho probably refers to the Parisian revolt on June 21, 1791 during which the Parisians occupied Tulleries, demanding to bring King Louis XVI and his wife to trial and establish a republican regime. The uprising, however, was suppressed by the government. For the list of “15 members” of the Provisional government, see *Cuu Quoc*, 31 Aug. 1945, *Dan Chu [Democracy]* (Hanoi), 31 Aug. 1945, and Section IV of this chapter.

Viet Nam has the right to be free and independent and, in fact, has become free and independent. The Vietnamese people have decided to mobilize all their spiritual and material forces in order to safeguard their right to liberty and independence.

After Ho, Vo Nguyen Giap, Minister of Interior, gave a long speech outlining the government's policies and appealing for "national unity."⁵ Tran Huy Lieu, Minister of Propaganda, followed with his report on Nguyen Phuoc Dien's abdication ceremony in Hue on August 30 and handed to Ho the royal seals and sword. Examining the sword, Ho declared that in the past it had been used to oppress the people but from now on will be used "to cut off traitors' heads."⁶ On behalf of the Viet Minh Front, Nguyen Luong Bang, better known under French rule as Red Star, spoke on the need to support the government by the whole people's contribution of their talents, efforts and material wealth.⁷ Finally, Ho incited the masses with his four-*no* [*bon khong*] motto, asking them to pledge *not* to serve in the French army, *not* to collaborate with the French administration, *not* to sell food-stuffs to the French and *not* to act as scouts for the French if French troops were to attempt to reconquer Viet-Nam.⁸

The ceremony ended with a street demonstration in downtown Ha Noi, recently renamed Hoang Dieu city to commemorate a former Governor of Ha Noi/ Bac Ninh who

⁵For an English text of Giap's speech, see Porter, *Documentation*, vol. I, pp. 66-71.

⁶*Doc Lap [Independence]* (Hanoi), No. 1, 4 Sept 1945.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Cuu Quoc*, 5 Sept 1945; *Co Giai Phong [Liberation Flag]* (Hanoi), No. 20, 27 Sept 1945. This motto is reprinted in Vo Nguyen Giap, *Nhung nam thang khong the nao quen [The Unforgettable Years and Months]* (Hanoi: NXB Quan doi nhan dan, 1974), p. 32 [henceforth, *Khong the nao quen*]. This work has been revised in 2001.

had committed suicide after the fall of the Citadel into French hands in 1882.⁹ Similar ceremonies were organized in nearly all provincial towns and cities. Although this was the second independence ceremony within five months, it appeared to be more substantial than Nguyen Phuoc Dien 's declaration of independence—Ho's Viet-Minh had been rumored to be on the winning Allied side, and in light of this "alliance," his independence would be internationally recognized and long lasting. Consequently, ignoring the dangers embodied in General de Gaulle's plan to reconquer Viet Nam under the British auspices and the Chinese advance units of the Allied-designated occupation forces which had entered several border towns since August 26, the majority clearly welcome Ho and his men—the mysterious and awesome figures emerging from prisons, jungles, mountains, and foreign countries. A newly converted Communist living in Hanoi at that time recalled:¹⁰

2 September 1945. Independence Day of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam. Viet Nam's history book has just added a new glorious page besides those concerning the historic victories of Tran Hung Dao, Le Loi and Quang Trung. The souls of the earth and water [i.e., the nation] have returned to the former capital on this imperishable day. . . .

The Nation has become independent and united. The grievance of having lost the nation has come to an end. Looking at the present, who among the Vietnamese present at the Ba Dinh park on last Sunday afternoon [September 2, 1945] did not hear the sound of life's stream rolling?

⁹Hoang Dieu (1829-1882), born in Dien Phuoc, Quang Nam province, Central Viet-Nam. Obtained his Subordiante-Boarded Laureate in 1853. Promoted to Governor of Ha Noi-Bac Ninh in 1880. Hanged himself after Henri Riviere sacked the Ha Noi citadel on April 25, 1882; SHAT (Vincennes), 10H 6; *DNTLCB*, Bk. 38, vol. 4, pp. 314-315. His heroic death has been mentioned in many English works.

¹⁰*Dan Moi [New People]*, (Hanoi), No. 10, 5 Sept 1945. The author, Tran Xuan Sinh, was to become an editor of the Viet Minh organ, *Cuu Quoc*.

The same aspiration appears in the writings of many other writers who had previously been apolitical or non-committal.¹¹ These writings and the mass gatherings in other cities and provincial towns made September 2, 1945 one of the most emotional events during the period between March and September 1945. It was in fact the peak of what has often been called the Fall or August Revolution, beginning with the stunning takeover of Ha Noi by the local Viet-Minh forces on August 19, which produced a general collapse of the Tran Trong Kim government and its replacement by local Viet Minh cadres, who were not necessarily under the direct control of the ICP Central Committee.

Diplomatically, the declaration of independence on September 2 convincingly undermined any allegation that the Viets were grateful to their French "civilizers." It was a clear and brave denunciation of French colonial rule, pointedly ignored by the Great Powers at that time, and a demand for the sovereign rights of a small nation which had been dominated by a foreign power for over eight decades. Domestically, it marked the beginning of a tidal wave of change. The elite-centered society—overshadowed and complicated by foreign domination, Catholic-dominated indigenous administrative brokers, and the poverty and technical backwardness of the rural masses—began to transform itself into a new form of socialist society, in which the gap between the intellectuals and the cultivators was gradually narrowed down. For a few, it was the end. For the other few, it was the beginning.

Various attempts have been made to interpret the "August Revolution" and especially the Viet Minh's success. However, such ideological issues as revolutionary

¹¹See, for instance, *Dan Ba [Women]* (Hanoi), 7 Sept 1945; *Tin Moi [New News]* (Hanoi), 5 Sept 1945; *Thong Tin [Information]* (Hanoi), Sept 1945.

theories, colonialism and patriotism have so far plagued writers on this period. Frenchmen, for instance, have blamed themselves and their allies for stimulating and supporting a government born out of turbulence. Non-Communist Vietnamese have found their excuses in the failure of the Chinese to liquidate the Viet Minh, Tran Trong Kim's weakness, or the Viet Minh's lies, cunning, and ruthlessness. Meanwhile, the Viet Minh have proudly interpreted their success as a result of their "creative application of Marxist-Leninist principles to the revolutionary conditions in Viet Nam" and their skillful planning and correct analysis of their opportunities.

These are all only partial truths. Although the ICP was extremely skillful in manipulating the masses and exploiting the explosion of tensions built up throughout French rule and the Japanese occupation, its success in August 1945 was also a *coup de force*. "The Revolution" in fact started as early as March 1945, under a very different regime. In August, Ho and his lieutenants simply initiated a new phase of revolution that was more violent and radical, but still far away from a revolution of the so-called proletariat.

I. VIETNAMESE SOCIETY UNDER TRAN TRONG KIM'S RULE:

As mentioned earlier, Japan's military takeover of Indochina brought about a sudden collapse of French rule, throwing the Viets abruptly into a power vacuum. The disappearance of French police, troops, and other coercive forces brought about a temporary breakdown of law and order and then an increasing contempt for any authority. Meanwhile, war conditions, propaganda of all colors and independence fever intensified

the trend toward radical militancy while the famine of At Dau [1945] in Bac Bo (North) and Trung Bo (Central) and economic crises in Nam Bo (South) initiated a trend toward anarchy in the big cities and some rural areas. Although partially filling in the administrative vacuum left vacant by the French, Kim's government failed to restore law and order. Kim's projects soon took a life of their own beyond his control. The elite-led revolution from above ate its own actors and children.

A. INDEPENDENCE FEVER:

Whatever the true intentions of the Japanese in abolishing French rule and whatever their definition of "independence," the *Meigo* Operation in March 1945 brought about an immediate independence fever in Viet Nam. The word *doc lap* [independence] had a magical effect that suddenly altered the attitude of nearly all men in the streets. A journalist in Ha Noi at that time noted:¹²

We are entering into a new historical phase. The Japanese troops' gunshots here on the night of March 9, 1945 destroyed the life of enslavement that had lasted for almost a century under cruel French domination. From now on, we are allowed to conduct our own true life.

This new nationalistic trend was so obvious that the Japanese grew increasingly alarmed and more than once warned Viet activists that the war was still going on, and that the independence of Viet-Nam would depend on Japanese victory in the war. Besides those who had collaborated with the Japanese since 1940-1941, those who had once considered

¹²*Tieu thuyet thu Bay [Saturday Stories]* (Hanoi), 5 May 1945.

French rule closely tied with their "bowl of rice" also changed their attitude. Japan's employment of Nguyen Phuoc Dien, together with its abandonment of such "extremists" as Ngo Dinh Diem and Nguyen Xuan Chu, successfully cultivated support among the elite and established families. Hoang Trong Phu, the most powerful francophile figure during French period in Tonkin, was invited to Hue to advise Nguyen Phuoc Dien on the future independent government of "Annam." Vi Van Dinh, the leading notable among the Tay population in Lang Son, came to Hanoi to advise the Japanese Resident Superior *per interim* in Bac Bo, Nishimura Kumao.¹³

The members of the French created Consultative Council of Tonkin formed the new Council of Bac Bo.¹⁴ Ho Dac Diem, considered by the French (or, Paul Mus, at least) as one of the 17 candidates who could be smuggled out of the colony to represent the Indochinese people at the French Consultative Assembly, retained his post of Governor of Ha Dong province, on the southern outskirts of Ha Noi.¹⁵ Even Pham Quynh, unjustly defamed for his collaboration with the French, was reportedly willing to collaborate with the Japanese.¹⁶ The roads that led to Hue was suddenly crowded with important figures in western suits and mandarin robes, invited by the Japanese or by themselves to make Vietnam an independent nation within Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

¹³*L'Action* (Hanoi), 7 April 1945.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 25 April 1945.

¹⁵Pham Quynh was on top of this list; CAOM (Paris), AP, Carton 3448, d. 5.

¹⁶Pham Khac Hoe, "Bao Dai," pp. 59-60. Quynh was, in fact, a successful collaborator while the others failed to secure French trust. One of his adversaries was Tran Dinh Nam, belonged to Huynh Thuc Khang's clan. Nam proposed to arrest Quynh, but Nguyen Phuoc Dien did not approve. Quynh was also bitterly hated by the Catholic collaborators in Central Viet Nam, especially the Ngo clan. For details, see chapters I & V. Keenly acknowledging this jealousy among their servants, the French administrators decided to avert their glaze. See Graffeuil's letter to Decoux; CAOM (Aix), PA 14, Carton 2.

The Vietnamese press—with or without Japanese support and encouragement—took an important role in stimulating independence fever. On the one hand, it concentrated on denouncing French rule, characterizing it as inhumane and oppressive. Accounts of "savage" French behavior, from the misconduct of Ducoroy, the Commissioner General of Youth and Sports, to the annual award competitions in the French National Festivals (July 14) were mockingly and bitterly recalled.¹⁷ "Frenchness"—i.e., the French way of life in the colony and its adaptation by Viet urbanites and elite—was severely criticized. Writers vehemently urged the abandonment of French in offices and classrooms as well as habit of educated Viets had of inserting French words into their Vietnamese speech. They also called for the destruction of all "humiliating" remnants of French rule, starting with French statues in the parks and then the French cemetery.¹⁸ On the other hand, serious writers culled their collections and personal records to resurrect heroic Viet figures and their activities in the long struggle for independence from France. A Ha Noi weekly magazine ran a series of articles on the fall of Hue in 1885 and a biographical sketch of King Ham Nghi [Nguyen Phuoc Minh].¹⁹ A newspaper in Sai Gon published a series of anecdotal writings on ex-King Duy Tan [Nguyen Phuoc Hoang], who had been exiled to Reunion in the Indian Ocean after the abortive anti-French uprising of May 1916.²⁰ Those who had to various degrees participated in anti-French activities, including Prince Cuong De, Sergeant Nguyen Van Cung, Phan Chau Trinh, Phan Boi Chau, Tran Cao Van, Nguyen Thuong

¹⁷See, for instance, *Dan Moi* (Hanoi), No. 7, 18 July 1945.

¹⁸See chapter I *supra*.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, No. 6, 11 July 1945.

²⁰*Sai Gon* (Saigon), 24 April 1945 and *passim*.

Hien and Duong Ba Trac, were also highly praised.²¹ Whatever the true motives behind these writings,²² this serious "intellectual menu" [*mon an tinh than*] drew a large audience. The theme of Viet Nam's heroic tradition of struggle against foreign invaders was given a new dimension: the struggle against the French.

This nationalist/patriotic fervor, which was linked to anti-French feeling, the process of Vietnamization and the opening of mass participation, were certainly not well received by all social sectors. The majority of peasants and poor workers in big cities, for instance, paid more attention to the current famine and economic hardship than they did to politics. Meanwhile, pro-Allied groups, especially the Viet Minh Central Committee under Ho's direct control, vehemently denounced Nguyen Phuoc Dien's independence as token independence [*doc lap banh ve*]. Although it took advantage of Tran Trong Kim's national unity to consolidate and expand its bases and local cells, the Viet Minh ordered its local cadres to concentrate on defeating the Japanese and overthrowing their "puppets." Not without reason, several Viet Minh leaders in Trung Bo and Nam Bo reportedly ignored Ho's orders, causing hostile speculation in the Viet Minh leadership.²³

Receptive or not to Japanese-sponsored "independence," all Vietnamese political parties and groups realized that national independence had become a fashion during Kim's

²¹See, for instance, *Nuoc Nam [Southern Nation]* (Hanoi), Nos. 269-276, May-July 1945; *Dan Moi* (nearly all issues).

²²It should be noted that one of the French propaganda goals during this period was to exploit the personal hatred and antagonism among the "Indochinese princes" and political organizations and parties. See Chieu Ngu Vu, "Political and Social Change in Viet-Nam Between 1940 and 1946," Ph.D. Dissertation, UW-Madison (December 1984), chapter XII [henceforth, "Social and Cultural Change"].

²³See, *Co Giai Phong*, No. 15, 17 July 1945; reprinted in *Ngon Co Giai Phong [Liberation Flag]* (Hanoi: Su That, 1974), pp. 181-184. According to an eye-witness, there existed two Viet-Minh Fronts in the South. One, led by Tran Van Giau, worked closely with the Japanese collaborators. The other Viet Minh adopted the anti-Japanese attitude. See Nguyen Thi Thap, *Tu dat Tien Giang [From the Upper Mekong Country]* (Santa Ana: Van Nghe, 1986) [henceforth, *Tien Giang*].

tenure. One had to speak and behave in the new light of independence. For the more realistic activists, independence became an attainable goal—in line of thought that had been less than convincing in the past. This might partly explain the bold move by the local Viet Minh leaders in Ha Noi, when they gambled on taking control of the mass demonstration on August 17, 1945, and went on to seize power two days later without direct orders from the ICP Central Committee. Ho himself was also influenced by this new trend, leaping forward from his stance of a "self-governing Viet-Nam within the Indochinese Federation and the French Union" in July 1945 to his declaration of independence in early September.²⁴ Simply put, this so-called "dizzy taste of self-rule"²⁵ enabled Ho Chi Minh and his lieutenants to use it as both a bargaining card in negotiations with the French and as an effective weapon to mobilize the Viets when the Franco-Viet talks broke down, letting the guns do the work in the second round of "negotiations."²⁶

B. THE INTENSIFICATION OF MASS PARTICIPATION:

The most direct consequence of the nationalistic upsurge was the intensification of mass political participation. Prior to March 1945, mass political participation was illegal in Indochina. Any social gathering of over ten people had to obtain authorization in advance. Occasionally, the French organized a mass political meeting but this was mainly

²⁴Patti, *Why Viet-Nam*, pp. 128-129; Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh*, p. 71.

²⁵Truong Buu Lam, "Japan and the Disruption of the Vietnamese Nationalist Movement," in Walter F. Valla (ed.), *Aspects of Vietnamese History* (Honolulu: The Univ. Press of Hawaii, Asian Studies at Hawaii, No. 8, 1973), p. 265.

²⁶See, for instance, Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh*, p. 71.

aimed at demonstrating French strength, greeting the newly arrived or honoring a retired French administrator, and celebrating noble French achievements in the colony.

During the first phase of the Japanese occupation, Decoux's administration allowed the Viets to participate in sports events. A few youths were allowed to follow special training programs in Ducoroy's apolitical Youth and Sports programs. Meanwhile, coach-trainees attending the youth training centers in Phan Thiet and Da Lat had to pass a thorough security check by the local *Surete*. A majority of them were in fact selected from the ranks of teachers and the military.²⁷ Moreover, many well-known sportsmen turned out to be secret informants or brute investigators in the *Surete* offices, or underground gangsters.

Under Tran Trong Kim's rule, mass participation had two aspects. On the one hand, the people were free to organize themselves into various parties and groups. They were so free that there was a glut of parties, politicians and leaders.

A satirical columnist in Ha Noi made the following remarks in May 1945:²⁸

The Vietnamese nation is certainly heading toward a brighter future. In the past, there were free political parties and one had to propagandize one's party's political goals cautiously to avoid French ears and eyes. Now, they grow as fast as bamboo-shoots in the shining summer. Fifty men form a party. Thirty men also founded a party. There is even a party that has just enough members to fill the posts of its Executive Committee.

The same writer noted:²⁹

²⁷*La tribune indochinoise* (Saigon), 11, 18 & 25 Aug. 1941.

²⁸*Dan Moi* (Hanoi), No. 1, 6 June 1945.

²⁹*Ibid.*

Several years back, one observed that there were two professions which attracted numerous people, because to be in these professions one did not to do anything. These were contracting and journalism. Recently, there has appeared a third profession of the same sort: the profession of politics.

Under Kim's rule, both his government and the Japanese paid special attention to organizing the youths. In Bac Bo and Trung Bo, Minister of Youth Phan Anh successfully mobilized youths and created a working hierarchy from the central government down to the communal level. The Japanese also organized some youth organizations, such as Vo Van Cam's *Patriotic Youths* in Ha Noi and supported those led by Hoang Dao Thuy and Ta Quang Buu in Thuan Hoa. Meanwhile, prior to the return of Nam Bo to Kim's government, the Japanese created various youth groups in the region, aiming to use them as reinforcements for the police and militia. In May-July, the Japanese set out to unify the various youth groups into the *Vanguard Male Youth* under the command of Thai Van Lung (a Catholic Scout leader), Kha Vang Can, Nguyen Van Thu, Pham Ngoc Thach and other intellectuals who had previously belonged to the *Van Lang* group. On July 1, the Sai Gon branch of the Vanguard Male Youth was officially formed.³⁰ Several weeks later, as provincial affiliates successively came into existence under the Japanese sponsorship, a women's branch was established, headed by Mrs. Ho Vinh Ky, a physician whose husband

³⁰*Sai Gon*, 25 & 26 May and 2 July 1945. Thach, a physician who married to a French woman, was reportedly recruited by Giau, the highest ranking ICP leader in the south at that time. See Tran Van Giau, "Huynh Tan Phat trong cuoc cach mang thang Tam 1945 o Sai Gon" [Huynh Tan Phat during the August 1945 Revolution in Saigon]; Huynh Van Tieng, et al., *Lam dep cuoc doi: Huynh Tan Phat, con nguoi va su nghiep* [Making the Life Prettier: Huynh Tan Phat, The Man and His Achievements] (Hanoi: NXBQG, 1995), p. 22. Some progressive intellectuals, including Architect Huynh Tan Phat (1913-1949) and Huynh Van Tieng, were also reportedly behind this movement.

was Deputy Chief of the secret police in Nam Bo.³¹ Viet Minh youth groups, the Youth for National Salvation, were mainly drawn from the Japanese-sponsored organizations.

Like the *pemuda Indonesia*, the Vietnamese youth organizations played a very important role in the Viet Minh's seizure of power in August 1945. In Sai Gon, for instance, Pham Ngoc Thach's Vanguard Male Youth, together with the Binh Xuyen gangsters under Le Van "Bay" Vien, cast their support for Tran Van Giau's Provisional Executive Committee of Nam Bo. Vien himself served as Giau's bodyguard and became Supreme Commander of the Resistance Forces in Sai Gon/Cho Lon. Although not all youth organizations supported Ho's regime, they all took arms against the French after Free French troops had begun their reconquest of Nam Bo in October 1945 and subsequently formed the four Divisions of People's Army.³²

C. RISING ANARCHY:

It is a misconception that social and public order in Viet-Nam suddenly collapsed after Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945. In fact, the process of social discomposition

³¹*L'Action* (Hanoi), 5 Aug. 1945. Born Nguyen Thi Suong in 1910, she was one of the first female physicians in Viet Nam. For her biographical sketch, see GGI, *Souverains*, 1943, p. 45.

³²The four People's Army Divisions were reportedly created on August 28, 1945; *Cuu Quoc*, 5 Sept 1945. The first division composed chiefly of the Vanguard Youths and Binh Xuyen gangsters, led by the ICP cadres. It was later reinforced by ICP soldiers from the North and Central, including the one-eyed General Nguyen Binh (Nguyen Phuong Thao), Tran Van Tra (Nguyen Chan), Le Hien Mai (Nguyen Duy Phuong) and a platoon of graduates from the Son Tay-based Military Administrative School of Tran Quoc Tuan (distinguished from the Quoc Dan Dang's Tran Quoc Tuan school). The religious armed forces and pro-Japanese youths formed three other loosely organized units: Luong Trong Tuong (alias, Ly Hoa Vinh) commanded the Second Division (Hoa Hao) in Bien Hoa, Cai Von (Vinh Long) and Can Tho; Nguyen Hoa Hiep, the Third Division (VNQDD), in Thu Dau Mot; and Tran Quang Vinh commanded the Cao Dai forces in Tay Ninh. Each "division," however, did not exceed 3,000 soldiers. In May 1946, for instance, Hiep's 3rd Division was reorganized into a battalion under the supervision of the French 22nd Colonial Regiment; SHAT (Vincennes), 10H 4202. After Tran Quang Vinh's arrest by the French in early 1946, Huynh Phu So's followers reorganized the fourth division and later renamed it the 30th Division, under the general commandment of Tran Van Soai. This division consisted of about 2,000 gunners and 10,000 militia.

(or destabilization) had started as early as when Japanese troops had landed on Indochinese soil.

The rising anarchy ranged from the apex to the bottom of society, beginning among the French community. Prior to March 9, the French community had been deeply divided not only along the Petainist-Gaullist line but also the “committal” and “non-committal” attitude toward Japanese troops and their occupation of Indochina. From the summer and fall of 1945 onward, de Gaulle’s so-called “purification” [*epuration*] plan, which was put in force by the decrees of August 25 and November 28, considerably exacerbated the mutual suspicion within the tiny French community.³³ Japan’s military action temporarily unified the French. Faced with the Viets’ counter-xenophobia and the *Kempeitai*’s close surveillance—and in some cases, maltreatment of suspected-Gaullist spies—a common French reaction was a mixture of bitterness and hatred. A natural impulse was to find a way to restore “lost face.” Those most frustrated escaped from Viet-Nam to China. Others attempted to open contact with the Viet Minh. The majority, however, reacted much more cautiously. On the one hand, they secretly mocked the Japanese and particularly the “independent” Viets. On the other hand, they turned to social action such as founding local mutual assistance groups, in an effort to relieve their frustration.³⁴ No matter what outward attitude they adopted, the French community consciously resented the new status quo. In addition, there were reportedly several groups of “bandits” [*tho phi*] and “pirates” [*hai tac*] in the Dong Trieu and Mong Cay (Quang Yen) regions in northeastern Bac Bo: French

³³See CAOM (Aix), AP, Carton 3440, d. 3, and PA 14, Carton 2.

³⁴Francois Martin, *Heures tragiques du Tonkin, 9 mars 1945-18 mars 1946* (Paris: Berger Levrault, 1948).

commandos dispatched to Viet-Nam by the French Military Mission in South China along with soldiers who had lost contact with their original units. They ravaged the communication lines between Hai Phong and Mong Cay and robbed the remote villages for supplies.³⁵

French spies, largely of Viet origin, were also sent back to Viet Nam to carry out intelligence service for the French. The best known among them included a certain Lieutenant Phac³⁶ and Andre Tran Van Don who later became a leading General in South Viet Nam and who was involved in the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brothers in the coup in of November 1963.³⁷ Their presence created, or at least stimulated, hope for the eventual "liberation" of Indochina and encouraged the French and their Francophile collaborators to challenge the newly established authority.

The Chinese also significantly contributed to the rise of the anarchy. Controlling the rice markets and retail networks, they freely profited from the wartime situation and shortages of foodstuffs. The black market grew rapidly.³⁸ Meanwhile, various political groups, affiliated either with Chiang Kai-shek, the Chinese Communist Party, or Wang Jing-wei's pro-Japanese regime, made their contributions of the underworlds of Ha Noi, Hai Phong, Lang Son, and Cho Lon.³⁹

³⁵*Thong Tin* (Hanoi), No. 11, 10 June 1945.

³⁶Patti, *Why Viet-Nam*, pp. 127-128. Phac, a French intelligence agent who opened contact with various Vietnamese political groups in China, accompanied a French M-5 team entering Ho's base in July 1945. His alleged membership of the pro-Chinese VNQDD is questionable.

³⁷Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), pp. 19-20.

³⁸The role of the Chinese residents in Indochina during the war deserves special study by scholars competent in Chinese and French. For French archival materials, see CAOM (Aix), AP, Cartons 3441 and 3444, GOUGAL, 7F 27, and HCFI, CP, Carton 161.

³⁹According to French police source, there was a branch of the Chinese Communist Party in Cho Lon; *Ibid.*, CP, Carton 161.

In order to prevent this rising contempt for authority, as mentioned in previous chapters, the Decoux administration launched various programs of social, educational and administrative reforms, based on the principle of "the carrot and the stick." However, Decoux's reforms were shallow, mainly aimed at mollifying a minority of elite and educated collaborators, whose sympathy and collaboration were also actively cultivated by the Japanese. Even so, Decoux's liberalism could not satisfy the educated class. Their expectations appeared boundless. Meanwhile, due to a considerable reduction of foreign trade, Decoux had to cover all of his reforms by issuing uninsured banknotes and steadily increasing taxes. In a chain reaction inflation skyrocketed, putting the salaried workers and, particularly, the functionaries under constant humiliating economic and social pressure. Crimes—especially thievery, robbery and tax fraudulence—steadily grew in the cities. Worse, the Japanese—for obvious reasons—certainly did not close their eyes to encourage Decoux's reforms to maintain Viet support. All of Decoux's projects and even his ambition of maintaining "essential rights" of French sovereignty over Indochina, were as ineffective as filling holes in a dike about to be obliterated by a typhoon. Anti-French aspiration widely spread among the intellectuals. The Francophiles were also divided along the Petainist-Gaullist lines. Panic was in the air.

After Japan's subjugation of the French in March 1945, Tran Trong Kim and his government failed to halt the trend toward anarchy. In the countryside, the famine of At Dau sparked the explosion of economic pressures which had been building up for a century and which had significantly intensified during the Japanese occupation. It wiped out all peasants' inhibitions regarding the status quo. Although starvation in itself was not a

revolution, this famine provided a destabilizing opportunity that the Viet Minh skillfully exploited to attain their political goals.

In the cities and urban centers, the anarchic atmosphere also steadily increased. Among the educated and "would-be-leaders," it was obvious that Kim's tenure was very limited. However, having awaited a *thoi co* [strategic opportunity] for a long time, all of them—the *nhan tai* [talented men]—decided to participate in a race for power or prestige. Even Kim, a retired school master, could not escape the attractions of the "curving circle of fame and interest" [*vong danh loi*].⁴⁰ However, most of them were somewhat opportunistic and adopted a "noncommittal" attitude toward Kim's regime.⁴¹ Meanwhile, taking advantage of Kim's "national unity," the most powerful parties and armed groups consolidated their organizations, recruited new members and even established their "armed zones." In Bac Bo, the Viet-Nam Nationalist Party established its armed zones in Vinh Yen, Hai Duong and Kien An. The Dai Viet became lord of Phuc Yen. The pro-Japanese patriotic youths roamed around the cities and towns, serving as an informal police force. Their autonomy posed a menacing threat to Kim's regime and public order. Meanwhile, in the Southern Region (Nam Bo), there were various small warlords in Saigon, Cho Lon, and other provinces. The Binh Xuyen occupied Rung Sat [Sac], a swamp adjacent to Cho Lon. The Hoa Hao lorded over Cang Long and Long Xuyen. Meanwhile, the Cao Dai—probably the strongest force at that time—ruled Tay Ninh and Gia Dinh. After the Japanese agreed to return Nam Bo to Kim's government in mid-August 1945, the most powerful lords of

⁴⁰Although proclaiming that he was not interested in politics, Kim left Viet Nam for China in July 1946, attempting to organize an anti-Communist front under Bao Dai. See Kim, *Gio bui*, pp. 170-174.

⁴¹*Dan Moi* (Hanoi), No. 1, 6 June 1945.

the Vietnam National Independence Party [*Viet Nam Quoc Gia Doc Lap Dang*], Vanguard Youths [*Thanh Nien Tien Phong*], Intellectual Group [*Nhom Tri Thuc*], Federation of Public Servants [*Lien Doan Cong Chuc*], Pureland Buddhist Laymen [*Tinh Do Cu Si*], Hoa Hao Buddhists [*Phat Giao Hoa Hao*] and Cao Dai [*Cao Dai Giao*]. formed a *Unified National Front* to support Kim and the Imperial Commissioner, Nguyen Van Sam, but they ruled their own fiefs.⁴²

Even in classrooms the atmosphere began to change. The master-student relationship was politicized. Student ceased to consider their "non revolutionary" teachers as venerable figures while their teachers retreated from their autocratic stance. The younger generation of teachers threw themselves into politics. No less excited, writers and journalists—who had been viewed as opium addicts or big liars— espoused an ultra-nationalistic tone, freely criticizing anyone they considered unsuitable in an independent Viet Nam.

In the markets, small merchants and hawkers challenged tax collectors. "Independent" *cyclo*-drivers ceased to respect the policemen [*ma ta* or *cut lit*] as well as traffic regulations. Peasants were reluctant to pay taxes.

There were also a few who decided to maintain the old way of life and former connections. Some former Frenchmen's "mothers," or mistresses [*me Tay*] refused to abandon their foreign husbands, continuing to visit and feed them in the Japanese

⁴²The *United National Front* Their four stated goals were: To fight against the French imperialism, to fight against foreign invasion, to maintain public security and order, and to eliminate the reactionaries. *Sai Gon*, 18 Aug 1945. Nguyen Van Sam, Ho Van Nga, Tran Van An and Pham Ngoc Thach were reportedly behind the scene. Thach, it should be repeated, and his *Thanh Nien* [Youth] group had leaned toward Giau's Communist camp since March 1945. See *infra*.

concentration camps.⁴³ Other faithful domestics stayed in their masters' households. Many intellectuals adopted an apolitical neutral stance.

Whatever the nature of their attitudes, all contributed in their ways to the rising contempt for authority.

D. THE RISE OF RADICAL MILITANCY AND MILITARISM:

Nationalism or more precisely, patriotism, had its earliest psychological effect on the youths and pro-Japanese activists. To be a citizen of independent Viet Nam was, to various degrees, linked to xenophobia. Anti-French feeling was freely expressed and in fact officially encouraged. The French Brazzaville and March 24, 1945 declarations — which were announced as the bases for the future French politics in Indochina — were mockingly denounced. Youths and the masses were asked to denounce the presence of any French spies, who were said to poison water-wells, raid and loot in several areas.⁴⁴ For the first time Viets became the hunters and the French the hunted.

Anti-Chinese feeling was also predominant. The patriotic songs and stage performances derived from the Vietnamese historic victories over the Chinese invaders in the past, whether or not encouraged by both the French and the Japanese in anticipating of a Chinese invasion of Tonkin after the Cairo Conference of November 1943,⁴⁵ inspired a deep suspicion and unconscious concerns about the Chinese hegemony.

⁴³*Dan Moi* (Hanoi), No. 9, 29 Aug. 1945.

⁴⁴*Thong Tin* (Hanoi), No. 11, 10 June 1945. Also see Direction Generale des Etudes et Recherches [DGER], *Bulletin de Renseignements*, 14 Sept. 1945, pp. 4-5; CAOM (Aix), INF, Carton 121, d. 1102.

⁴⁵In late 1943 or early 1944, Chiang Kai-shek reportedly ordered the Fourth Army Zone in Guangxi to prepare the invasion of Tonkin; Chen, *Vietnam and China*, p. 72.

Radical attitudes spread over all corners of the country. The newspapers talked about the heroic and *bushido* [*vo si dao*] ways of life. On the streets, people talked about revolution and the sacrifices needed to defend newly acquired independence. Meanwhile, war conditions and the famine also created and stimulated an adventurous and risky attitude. Peasants followed Viet Minh cadres to attack rice stocks and loot rich families. Workers in the cities stole Japanese equipment and supplies for the blackmarkets, disregarding harsh Japanese punishments, such as summary execution.

The most important development was the arming of various Viet groups, by the Americans, Chinese, Japanese or by themselves. Under French rule, and especially after 1940, possession of a weapon was a grave crime. All anti-French activists discovered that one of their worst difficulties was a lack of weapons, particularly guns and munitions. In none of the anti-French uprisings, with the exception of the pro-Japanese armed groups in Lang Son in late 1940, did the activities have over hundred guns. Prior to March 9, 1945, even the military workers or militiamen [*haiho*] under the Japanese command were inadequately armed.

Under Kim's tenure, the armament of pro-Japanese groups increased. All patriotic youth groups were armed and given military training. In the North, Vo Van Cam's youth group served as armed police. In the Central region, the *Advanced Front Youths* formed the nucleus of a future officer corps. In the South, which the Japanese Southern Army General Headquarters regarded as a late operational theater and where Viet-Nam's paddy graneries were located, the Japanese gave military training to various youth groups, which were to be converted into the *Vanguard Youth* Movement in May-July 1945. It was these armed groups that provided manpower for a fighting force of four People's Army Divisions

in Nam Bo in September 1945 when the French began to reconquer the region. Meanwhile, quite contrary to Gaullist allegations, most of the former graduates from Ducoroy's Youth Centers sided with the French.⁴⁶

Armed with weapons and fighting skills, a natural reaction for the Viets was to adopt a more radical and militant attitude. More important was the revival of the Vietnamese martial tradition. All political and armed groups came to accept the idea of letting guns settle ideological and personal conflicts. Even the modern or emancipated women became more aggressive. A Japanophile woman, Song Thu, reportedly assaulted the Director of a provincial education program for his subordination to the French colonialists.

As for the political parties, only the *Dai Viet* and *Quoc Dan Dang* [VNQDD or Vietnamese Nationalist] parties were armed by the Japanese. As mentioned earlier, they created several "war zones" and armed forces in Vinh Yen, Phuc Yen, Hai Phong, Hai Duong, Nam Dinh and, especially, in Ha Noi and its suburb Ha Dong.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, in China and northern Bac Bo, the Chinese and Americans had their own protégés. The Chinese formed several armed groups nominally under Nguyen Hai Than, head of the Viet Cach league, and Vu Hong Khanh, a leader of the Overseas branch of the *Quoc Dan Dang*. The Americans gave support to the Viet Minh and trained its

⁴⁶*Dan Moi* (Hanoi), Nos. 1, 6 June 1945, and 7, 18 July 1945. One of the best known graduates from the Phan Thiet Center was Mai Huu Xuan, the future Major-General in the Republic of [South] Viet Nam Army. In the 1950's, Xuan worked for the French Military Intelligence Service in Can Tho before assuming the post of Director of Secret Police in Saigon.

⁴⁷See, for instance, Pham Van Lieu, *Tra Ta Song Nui* [Give Back My Rivers and Mountains], 3 vols (Houston: Van Hoa, 2002-2003), vol. I., chapters 1-4. A French source indicates that Y commanded about 120 men in the region of Dong Van (Cao Bang); CAOM (Aix), HCIF, CP, carton 192. For further details, see *Ibid.*, AP, carton 3448, d. 5, and SHAT (Vincennes), 10H 78-80. Also see Chen, *Vietnam and China*, pp. 96-97.

cadres in sabotage operations. Meanwhile, since 1943, the British intelligence had secretly recruited a dozen of Viet Communist cadres from the French prison in Madagascar for commando trainings to carry out anti-Japanese missions inside Tonkin. Consequently, the mind and heart of the Viet people were not only divided along the foreign powers' national interests, but also torn apart along the political lines of different adversary groups in their race for powers.

II. THE RISE OF THE VIET MINH:

Generally speaking, the Japanese liquidation of French rule on March 9-10, 1945 brought about a windfall for all Vietnamese political parties. Ironically, a majority of them backed the wrong horse—Japan was losing the war. Only the parties or organizations with overseas connections had chance to seize power after Japan's defeat.

On the non-Communist side, both the *Viet Cach* and the *Nationalist Party [VNQDD]* increased their activities under the Chinese auspices. The Viet Cach was especially strong in Guangxi. On April 14, 1945, General Hsiao Wen [Tieu Van in Vietnamese] appointed a new six-member Action Committee of the Viet Cach, including Truong Trung Phung, Bo Xuan Luat, Le Tung Son, Vu Kim Thanh, Ho Chi Minh and Tang Ke Ban. Phung, Luat and Son were also appointed to the Standing Committee, with Phung as its Chairman. The next month, while the German surrender was ensuing in Europe, the Chinese began to dispatch the Viet Cach armed forces to the Sino-Viet border areas. The cadets of the Special Training Class in Paise [Bach Sac] were reportedly renamed "Action Brigade" and organized into three groups led by Phung, Luat and Son. Luat and his men

were entrusted to enter Tra Linh, and Son's group the Soc Giang region. Meanwhile, Phung and his men were to infiltrate the Bao Lac area. Phung and Colonel Luong Van Y, the chief of the former *Kien Quoc* Army, also successfully recruited about 1,000 Indochinese deserters who had followed the French crossing the Sino-Viet border in the regions of Dong Van and Trung Khanh Phu (the Seguin and Reul detachments). Besides the Action Brigade, Hsiao Wen created two armed units under Ho Duc Thanh, an ICP cadre, and Vu Kim Thanh, a rising revolutionary leader. In the summer of 1945, these two units carried out several minor attacks on the Vietnamese border towns, including Thanh's occupation of Mong Cay for several days in July. The *Viet Cach*, however, were deeply infiltrated by the Communists or their sympathizers. Phung himself was reportedly "sympathisant" to the Viet Minh and, later, in September 1945, both him and Luat were to lean toward the Viet Minh.

In Yunnan, where the *VNQDD* Overseas General Headquarters had established their cells along the Yunnan/Hai Phong railway for over a decade, General Lu Han gave support to *VNQDD* leaders, including Vu Hong Khanh, Nghiem Ke To and Nguyen Tuong Tam. In the spring of 1945, there was an attempt to form a coalition between the *Dai Viet* groups inside Viet-Nam and the overseas *VNQDD*. In April, Nguyen Tien Hy (1916-1992), a physician, reportedly led a delegation from Hanoi to China to discuss a possible alliance with Khanh and Tam.⁴⁸ These efforts resulted in the creation of the *Greater Viet Nationalist Party*, self-addressed as Vietnamese Guomindang in China and *Dai Viet* in Viet Nam. This merger appeared to receive support from the Chinese authorities in order to

⁴⁸“Renseignements politiques concernant l’Indochine (21 May 1945);” CAOM (Aix), AP, Carton 3448, d. 5. Dr. Hy’s group included twelve members (three doctors, three teachers, an engineer, one journalist, and four students). Hy was described by the French police as pro-Chinese and anti-French militant.

facilitate their projected invasion of Bac Bo. Chiang Kai-shek reportedly gave the Viet Guomintang representatives a formal reception in Chungking. In the fall of 1945, the *VNQDD*'s armed forces led by Vu Hong Khanh, were to follow General Lu Han's 93rd Army to enter Viet-Nam. Together with Nguyen Hai Than's *Viet Cach*, they waged a sort of civil war against the Viet Minh in 1945-1946.

The most popular organization at that time, however, was the Viet Minh Front. The Japanese purge of Decoux's administration and de Gaulle-aligned military forces in Indochina stimulated an unprecedented expansion of the Front.

A. AN *OSS* AGENT NAMED "LUCIUS":

Although prior to March 1945, Ho Chi Minh had approached the Americans to seek assistance and had factually been employed as a part-time agent by the American Office of War Information, the American field commanders' attitude toward him was skeptical. In February 1945, even after Ho's rescue of an American downed pilot, Lieutenant William Shaw, his direct commander, General Claire L. Chennault, refused to grant Ho an interview. The Japanese strike on March 9-10, 1945, however, brought about a sudden change in the American attitude toward the Viet Minh leader. This change resulted from the urgent need of the Americans for intelligence on the Japanese military situation in Indochina. The Japanese coup had cut off nearly all existing intelligence sources to China, previously provided to the Americans and Chinese by the French inside Indochina. *OSS* agents attached to General Sabattier's headquarters were also obliged to leave Indochina.⁴⁹

⁴⁹SHAT (Vincennes), 10H 78; Patti, *Why Viet-Nam*, pp. 75, 80.

On March 17, 1945, an OSS officer attached to the American Air Ground Aid Section [AGAS] in China, Charles Fenn, was authorized to contact Ho. Three days later, they met again and agreed upon a working relation, by which Ho was to provide the Americans with information on the Japanese in return of supplies and medicine. Ho was then given the code name *Lucius* and sent back to Indochina with two American-employed operators. In order to encourage his new agent, Fenn arranged a meeting between Ho and the "Great Old Man" (General Chennault) at Ho's request. At this meeting in March 1945, Ho only asked for and obtained the General's autographed picture. He then left Kunming for Jingxi [Tinh Tay], on an American plane, preparing to return to Indochina. Before his departure, Ho asked for and obtained from Fenn six Colt-45 automatic pistols, which were to become "Chennault's special gifts" for his lieutenants. About two weeks later, on April 16, two American-employed operators were escorted into Ho's secret base in Cao Bang.⁵⁰ However, Ho prolonged his sojourn in China for several weeks in order to have a hand on the Viet Cach affairs. Meanwhile on April 27, the new OSS chief responsible for Indochina, Captain Archimedes L.A. Patti, flew to Jingxi to discuss with Ho a new basis of collaboration. Reportedly impressed with Ho's "sincerity" and "indifference" to the OSS fund, Patti ignored Ho's Communist background and continued to employ him along with the French agents, known as the "MM.5" under Jean "Sainteny" [i.e. Roger], a son-in-law of former Minister of Colonies Albert Sarraut.⁵¹

⁵⁰Charles Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biographical Introduction* (London: Studio Visa, 1973), pp. 76-80 [henceforth, *Ho Chi Minh*].

⁵¹Patti, *Why Viet-Nam*, pp. 83-87, 104-105; Sainteny, *Paix manquee*, pp. 21, 37-43.

Keenly perceiving American suspicion of his International Communist background, Ho waged a psychological campaign to disguise his true identity. In private discussions as well as in written documents, Ho tried to portray himself and his followers as true patriots who had been categorically and unjustly classified by French police as "Communists." Ho's acts impressed at least one AGAS officer, a certain Phelan, well known for his anti-Communism, who cabled to his superior after his contacts with the Viet Minh leaders that they were "merely patriots [who] deserve[d] full trust and support."⁵² In his first report to Patti (whose evaluation of Ho's work was that "for a starter it was not bad"), Ho enclosed two pamphlets authored by the *National Party of Viet-Nam*. Although acknowledging that even "in the English version, [Ho's Communist] party line came through loud and clear," Patti had to go along with Ho and his Viet Minh Front.⁵³ One reason was that during this period, the Americans urgently needed intelligence to prepare for the *CARBONADO* operation—an overland campaign along the Gulin [Kweilin]-Liuzhou-Nanning line to hook up with American troops from the Philippines whose landing was planned for sometime between September and November 1945. In July, Patti decided to send his "Deer" team headed by Major Allison K. Thomas to Ho's new headquarters at Kim Lung, Tuyen Quang province (i.e., Tan Trao).⁵⁴ There, the OSS agents trained about 200 Viet Minh soldiers in commando tactics and armed them with

⁵²Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh*, pp. 81-82.

⁵³Patti, *Why Viet-Nam*, p. 102.

⁵⁴Thomas' report in US Senate, *Causes, Origins, and Lessons of the Vietnam War, Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, 92nd Congress, 2nd Session, May 1972* (Washington: GPO, 1973), pp. 243-280. Also see Dam Quang Trung, "Tung co mot doi quan hon hop Viet-My tien vao Ha Noi" [Once there was a joint Vietnamese-American force entering Hanoi];" *Tuoi tre* (Saigon), 29 Aug 1993, No. 34-93 (514), p. 5. According to General Trung (1921-1995), six American OSS men were parachuted to Kim Lung in the night of July 15-16, 1945; two of them, including Major Thomas, were trapped on the sole banyan tree at the foothill.

the latest model guns (Carbine). The Americans also constructed an air-strip at Ho's secret base.

Unlike other Vietnamese political parties at that time, the Viet Minh clearly had an upper hand. Chennault's autographed picture, American weapons and equipment and the presence of Major Thomas' "Deer" Team at Kim Lung justified Ho's self-proclaimed "alliance" with the United States—*nuoc My* in Vietnamese, the most powerful nation in the world and also the "arsenal of democracy." This psychological weapon partly crippled the pro-Japanese groups and antagonized the pro-Chinese leaders. Nguyen Hai Than and his lieutenants assiduously denounced Ho's Communist background, but their complaints were pointedly ignored. The Americans wanted to obtain needed intelligence, regardless of the political backgrounds of their informants. Moreover, during this period, the wartime alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union was still intact. Ironically, not all reports by Lucius were reliable, especially regarding his political adversaries.⁵⁵

⁵⁵There was a clear similarity between the Communist and OSS views about Ho and the Viet Minh at that time. On July 20, 1945, for instance, Thomas reported that "Mr. [Ho], the Chief, has had his wife and children taken away from him by the French and his lands burned," and that the Viet Minh was "not Communist or Communist controlled or Communist led." *Ibid.*, p. 249. Ho, according to his official account, was never married. Newly declassified French, Chinese and Russian archival materials, however, strongly discard this propaganda line. In 1926-1927, thanks to Lam Duc Thu's matchmaking, Ho was married to a Chinese Communist nurse, Tang Tuyet Minh, and fathered her daughter while learning the Guangdong dialect. In the early 1930's, Ho also reportedly had a "personal secretary" who self-proclaimed as his "revolutionary wife" named Nguyen Thi Vinh (alias Co [Ms] Duy, Fan Lan and Minh Khai). For details, see Chinh Dao, *Nhan vat chi* (1997), pp. 490-493, 380; CAOM (Aix), SPCE 347, 348; and "Ly lich Fan Lan," RC 495, 201, 35; quoted by Sophie Quinn-Judge, "Women in the early Vietnamese communist movement: sex, lies, and liberation," *South East Asia Research*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 251, 257n42, [henceforth, "Women."] cited in note 227 in Chapter I. According to Tran Trong Kim, in the early 1940's, Ho took another revolutionary wife, Do Thi Lac, the owner of the Lac Quan restaurant in Kunming, and fathered her daughter; *Idem.*, *Gio bui*, p. 75. It is also rumored that Ho, in the late 1950's, fathered a son of Nong Thi Xuan, his young Nung concubine (*ho ly* = sexual assistant), who was allegedly killed in Hanoi by Minister of Secret Police Tran Quoc Hoan, and their surviving son was then adopted by Vu Ky, one of Ho's eight close guards; Vu Thu Hien, *Dem giua ban ngay* [Darkness In the Daylight] (Santa Ana: Van Nghe, 1998). Vu Ky, however, was completely mute on this point in his 1991 memoirs. Ho's womenizing habit has also given birth to the journalistic anecdote that he was also the true father of the present Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), Nong Duc Manh. Recently, Manh had to declare that Ho was not his true father, and that his father had the family name of Nong, and his mother was descended from a Chinese family named Hoang. in Lang Son.

B. THE VIET MINH FRONT IN VIET NAM:

Ho Chi Minh and his close associates stationed at Kim Lung constituted only the "foreign affairs" section of the Viet-Minh Front. Its true power was in the hand of Dang Xuan Khu, Secretary General of the ICP.

After March 9, 1945, the ICP Standing Bureau convened an enlarged conference at Dinh Ca (Bac Ninh province), about twenty kilometers north of Ha Noi. On March 12, a day after Nguyen Phuoc Dien's declaration of independence, the ICP Standing Bureau issued what was later characterized as the "historic directive," entitled "Our Action When the Japanese and French Are Shooting At One Another."⁵⁶ In this directive, two major decisions were made by the ICP leaders. First, the ICP goal was now reduced to "chase the Japanese out of the country" because they had become the "principal enemy, the *immediate enemy*, the only [enemy] of the Indochinese peoples." Consequently, the new party line would be "To establish the revolutionary power of the Indochinese peoples" to wage a struggle against the Japanese authority and "the ghost government of the pro-Japanese traitors." In order to achieve this goal, the ICP instructed its members to halt all anti-French slogans and action because "progressive Frenchmen" might enter into an alliance with them to fight the Japanese. This was a significant change in the ICP general strategy, because as late as January 28, 1945, Khu himself had asserted that de Gaulle's ambition would be more dangerous than the Japanese Pan-Asianism [*Lien A*].⁵⁷ Thereafter,

⁵⁶Literally, "*Nhat Phap ban nhau va hanh dong cua ta*;" DRVN, *Brisons nos fers: Documents officiels sur la revolution d'Aout 1945* (Hanoi: 1959), pp. 7-19 [henceforth, *Brisons nos fers*].

⁵⁷*Co Giai Phong*, No. 10; reprinted in *Ngon Co Giai Phong*, pp. 59-61.

Viet Minh guerrillas opened contact with French forces retreating from Indochina and even attempted to form an anti-Japanese alliance in Lang Son.⁵⁸

The second decision was no less significant. Considering that prevailing conditions were in favor of preparations for a revolution, to be carried out when the Allied landings in Indochina took place, ICP leaders insisted on exploitation of "the hatred caused by the famine [in order to] agitate the masses and drive them toward the struggle," including organizing the manifestations demanding rice and foodstuffs or attacking on the paddy stocks of the imperialists. They also instructed their cadres to implement four "immediate tasks" concerning propaganda, struggle, organization and political and military instruction.

In the following months, the Viet Minh cadres successfully carried out these urgent tasks outlined in the March 12, 1945 directive. They were particularly successful in the propaganda campaigns, establishment of secret bases in the Liberated Zone, organization of the Liberation Army and mobilizing mass support during their attacks on the paddy stocks in Bac Bo.

1. Propaganda:

It was not a coincidence that "Propaganda" was listed as the first "immediate task" for the ICP in the March 12 directive. Three days after issuance of the directive, on March 15, the ICP diffused a large number of leaflets entitled "Proclamation of the Viet Minh Front." In this "Proclamation," the Viet Minh announced that it was to fight the Japanese to liberate Indochina. The Japanese, the Viet Minh insisted, will be defeated not only because Allied troops — i.e. the Americans, Chinese and British — were to enter

⁵⁸Giap, *Khong the nao quen*, pp. 178-179; Colonel Reul's report in SHAT (Vincennes), 10H 78. The Viet Minh representative was Nguyen Van Co, Le Tung Son's new alias.

Indochina, but also because a revolution was to erupt in Japan in the very near future to dig the Japanese militarists' graves. It went on to urge all social classes to refuse to collaborate with the Japanese and to organize strikes, boycotts, and destruction of Japanese military barracks, communications lines and rice and paddy stocks.⁵⁹

This "Proclamation" was only one of many thrusts in the Viet Minh's "white propaganda." In the following months, by rumors or handbills or secret periodical organs (particular the *Cuu Quoc* [National Salvation], *Doc Lap* [Independence], *Co Giai Phong* [Liberation Flag]), and *Thanh Nien* [Male Youths]) Viet Minh propagandists constantly challenged both the Japanese and Kim's government.

Their propagandists concurrently carried out psychological warfare in the fields of conversion of the (civilian) enemy [*dich van*], conversion of enemy's troops [*binh van*] and mass mobilization [*dan van*]. These tactics varied from canvassing to amorous seduction, from intimidation to assassination. Its armed propaganda teams, given the mission of collecting information and sabotage, were dispatched to various cities and towns. Their most peaceful work was the sudden appearance of agitators in markets, classrooms, schoolyards, and manufacturing plants in which they delivered short speeches denouncing the existing authorities, announced the coming arrival of the Allied troops and preached the inevitable seizure of power by the Viet Minh at the end of the war. Their most violent strategy was liquidation of "traitors" by death squads. In Hanoi alone, ICP death squads reportedly shot to death five pro-Japanese "reactionaries" between June 18 and mid-July 1945.⁶⁰ According to Vietnamese Communist accounts, from March to August 1945, their

⁵⁹DRVN, *Brisons nos fers*, pp. 20-23.

⁶⁰*CMTT*, vol. I, p. 20.

death squads "chopped off the traitors' heads," "liquidated the Dai Viet reactionaries" and "punished communal chiefs" in nearly all provinces in Bac Bo and northern Trung Bo.⁶¹

2. Secret Bases and Liberated Zone:

Prior to March 9, 1945, the Viet Minh's strength was modest at best. However, one of its advantages in comparison to other parties was its capacity for building secret bases in the mountainous areas of Cao Bang and Thai Nguyen. After March 9, thanks to a working relation with American intelligence services, the secret bases of the Viet Minh multiplied in northern Bac Bo. Ho's own headquarters expanded from a "mere hut in the entrance by a waterfall" in mid-April to "four huts, each twelve feet square, set four feet off the ground on bamboo stakes" in June.⁶² The American-made radio sets, weapons, supplies and, especially, medicine swiftly transformed areas ridden by tropical viruses and illnesses into relatively acceptable military camps. The American medics once saved Ho's life from a severe complication of chronic malaria.⁶³

In June 1945, as French troops had all retreated from northern Bac Bo and Laos into China, Japanese troops ceased their mopping-up operations. Meanwhile, tensions between Ho and Hsiao-wen, the head of the Viet Cach office at the Fourth Army General Headquarters, were on the rise—Hsiao-wen even threatened to liquidate the Viet Minh for Ho's secret dealing with the Americans. Ho decided to leave his first base in the border area, moving southward and establishing his headquarters at Kim Lung, in Tuyen Quang province. This move, besides its advantage for supplying better information on the

⁶¹*CMTT*, vol. I, pp. 77, 92, 124, 201-202, etc.

⁶²Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh*, pp. 79, 81.

⁶³In 1977, Giap asserts that Ho was cured by the traditional Vietnamese herbs; *Khong the nao quen*, pp. 92-93.

Japanese to the Americans and avoiding Hsiao-wen's attacks, reflected Ho's growing strength. That month, his forces expanded their control over the mountainous areas of the six northern provinces in Bac Bo (Bac Kan, Cao Bang, Ha Giang, Lang Son, Thai Nguyen and Tuyen Quang) and remote parts of other four highland provinces (Bac Giang, Yen Bai, Phu Tho and Vinh Yen).

Within this Liberated Zone, the nucleus of a future provisional government was established, under the command of Vo Nguyen Giap, a rising revolutionary general. Many People's Revolutionary Committees were also established from communal level up to district and provincial levels. Kim's officials were isolated and lost all control of areas outside the major district towns and their immediate surroundings.

In the Liberated Zone, whose population consisted chiefly of non-Vietnamese minorities, the ICP announced its ten major programs:⁶⁴

- a. To eliminate Japanese forces, liquidate traitors, punish hooligans.
- b. To confiscate the properties of the aggressors and the traitors to make them common property or distribute them to the poor.
- c. To proclaim universal suffrage and other democratic freedoms.
- d. To arm the masses, urge them to support the guerrillas and join the Liberation Army.
- e. To organize land reclamation, encourage production and achieve a self-supporting economy.
- f. To limit working hours, establish social insurance and organize relief work.

⁶⁴DRVN, *Brisons nos fers*, pp. 59-65.

g. To redistribute communal land, reduce land rent and interest on debts, and order a moratorium on debts.

h. To abolish taxes and corvees, study the creation of a single tax system limited to a light progressive income tax.

i. To combat illiteracy, provide military training and general political education.

j. To ensure equality among various nationalities and between men and women.

This was undoubtedly a radical policy, including such strange ideas as "universal suffrage," "democratic freedoms," "redistribution of land," or "equality among various nationalities and between men and women." In fact, the ICP cadres were not very fond of theoretical matters and concentrated only on several special "revolutionary" measures, including liquidation of alleged traitors and confiscation of their properties.

Besides the Liberated Zone in Bac Bo, the ICP leaders organized various smaller bases in northern Trung Bo (Thanh Hoa), central Trung Bo (Quang Ngai) and Nam Bo (My Tho, Dong Thap Muoi and Long Xuyen). The communications between these bases and their leaders were severely limited. Their leaders also did not all completely support the ICP March 12, 1945 directive, which was more suitable for conditions in Bac Bo than in the two other regions. In the South, for instance, some insisted on the continuation of the struggle against both the French and the Japanese. Others believed that it was time to side with the Japanese to chase the French out of the country. It was not until after the

August Revolution that the ICP Central Committee gradually established general control over its branches in Trung Bo and Nam Bo.⁶⁵

3. The Liberation Army:

In mid-April, after Ho Chi Minh and the American AGAS had reached a working relation, the ICP Standing Committee called for a "Bac Ky Military Conference" at Hiep Hoa (Bac Giang) under the chairmanship of Dang Xuan Khu. At this conference, reportedly from April 15 to 20, the ICP formed a Revolutionary Military Committee under Vo Nguyen Giap, Tran Dang Ninh and Chu Van Tan. This was the first high-level military command unifying all Viet-Minh military forces, to be renamed Liberation Army. The Conference also decided to divide the country into seven "war zones" (four in the north, two in the center and one in the south). Each war zone commander was responsible for enrolling his local self-defense units and recruiting cadets for special political and military training. The best recruits were sent to Kim Lung for higher level training, conducted by the Americans, Chinese Communists and the ICP leaders. In June, a number of students and youths in the big cities and towns were also brought to the Liberated Zone for indoctrination and military training.⁶⁶ At one time, Ho's headquarters at Kim Lung gave shelter to two different American intelligence teams. Hundreds of Viet Minh troops were taught sabotage techniques and armed with American weapons. They were to be a valuable asset to Ho and his lieutenants in the days to come.

⁶⁵Hoang Quoc Viet, *Chang duong nong bong [The Hot Burning Journey]* (Hanoi; 1985), pp. 174-186 [henceforth, *Chang duong*].

⁶⁶DRVN, *Brisons nos fers*, pp. 25-48; Do Duc Duc, "Len chien khu" [Go Up to the War Zone]; *Doc Lap*, No. 2, 7 Sept 1945, and *passim*.

After failing to recruit the Viet Minh to their side, the Japanese opened a campaign against the *Etsumei* [i.e., Viet Minh] in June and July, but then abandoned their campaign to concentrate on redistributing troops and building defense bases on the Tran Ninh plateau in Laos.⁶⁷ By mid-July, the Viet Minh was free to act.

To collect information in the coastal area, in May 1945, the ICP entrusted Nguyen Phuong Thao (1910-1951)—alias Nguyen Binh, one of the best revolutionary generals, if not the best—to organize the Fourth War Zone, encompassing a part of Hai Duong and the coastal regions north of Hai Phong. With the assistance of the Chinese "bandits," Nguyen Binh and his men mounted attacks on several district towns and posts manned by Vietnamese guards in Tran Trong Kim's service.⁶⁸

The creation of the Liberation Army was not without difficulties. The most serious one was the shortage of weapons. Only a few regular units of the Liberation Army were well-armed. A majority of soldiers and militiamen possessed only "white arms" such as swords, sticks, arrows, hammers, or lances. In the Fourth War Zone (Dong Trieu, Hai Duong province), for instance, there were no more than twenty-six guns, including a machine gun stolen from a Japanese ship. The ICP leaders encouraged their followers to acquire their own weapons in any way possible. The ICP leaders also made its own direct efforts—such as to buy them in the blackmarkets, steal or ambush the Vietnamese guards to capture guns and munitions— but with limited results. American supplies, thus,

⁶⁷*JM* 25, pp. 33-34 and Appendix I.

⁶⁸Tran Cung, "Khoi nghia o De tu Chien khu" [Uprising in the Fourth War Zone]; *NCLS* (Hanoi), vol. 126 (Sept 1969), pp. 44-57. In June 1945, however, the Viet Minh denied "this rumor;" *Thong Tin*, No. 11, 10 June 1945.

constituted one of the most important sources of weaponry for the Viet Minh and partially contributed to its stunning triumph in August 1945.⁶⁹

4. Fighting the Famine:

The famine of At Dau was undoubtedly the best opportunity for the ICP, under the label of Viet Minh, to improve its reputation and mobilize the masses. Unlike Kim's ministers and officials, nearly all members of the ICP were personally affected by the famine. Food shortages in the secret bases, liberated zone and ICP local cells were very serious. The Viet Minh could barely supply enough foodstuffs to its armed forces and the "self-emancipated cadres" [*thoat ly*, i.e., those who had left their families for revolutionary careers].⁷⁰ Creatively, the Viet Minh leaders decided to incite the hungry peasants to attack paddy and rice stocks, ranging from the possessions of rich landowners, French settlers, alleged "traitors" and "reactionaries," to the public stocks heavily guarded by the Japanese. This was an extremely skillful tactic because it not only provided supplies for the Viet Minh but also carried the ICP cadres into the heart of the masses. In such attacks, the ICP shock teams reportedly did more talking than fighting, thus avoiding casualties. Thereafter, however, as organizers, the cadres reportedly distributed rice to the agitators and never forgot to reserve for themselves and the revolution a lion's share.

Actually, the peasants received very little in those attacks on paddy stocks. The fact that peasants in the region controlled by the Viet Minh, or in the areas where these attacks were organized, continued to die of starvation proved that this was probably not the

⁶⁹An American source indicates that before August 19, 1945, the Allies were believed to having air-dropped to the Viet Minh approximately 4,600 arms; McAlister, *Vietnam*, p. 229.

⁷⁰All Communist accounts reflect the Viet Minh's shortages of rice supply during this period. In May 1945, for instance, before attacking a government's post, the Viet Minh soldiers received only a ration of a bowl of rice and two slices of pork; Tran Cung, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51.

solution. However, the Viet Minh's leadership in these attacks, spreading through 15 provinces in Bac Bo and northern Trung Bo, provided it with the image of a revolutionary force on the side of the peasants and the poor. Moreover, during these attacks, the Viet Minh cadres developed a sort of fighting camaraderie with the peasants, enabling them to organize or expand their local cells.

Without this breakthrough—considering the peasants' indifference to "political" issues and traditional habit of respecting the laws—the Viet Minh certainly could not have triumphed as easily as it did in August 1945.

III. THE AUGUST REVOLUTION:

By June and July 1945, the Viet Minh had become the archrival of Tran Trong Kim's government.

Politically, thanks to both Ho's American "ally" and the ICP death squads, the Viet Minh Front frightened all its opponents. Under the banner of the Viet Minh Front, the ICP members increased from several hundred men in March 1945 to about 5,000 in August. Its affiliates among the educated and intellectuals included the *Viet-Nam Democratic Party*, led by Duong Duc Hien (a former student leader in Hanoi) and Vu Dinh Hoe (publisher and editor of the magazine *Thanh Nghi* [Frank Discussion]),⁷¹ and the Cultural Association

⁷¹The *Viet Nam Democratic Party* came into existence in 1944, assembling a number of intellectuals and students. For its ideological goals and programs, see *Doc Lap [Independence]* (Hanoi) No. 1, 4 Sept 1945; Vu Dinh Hoe, *Hồi Ký* (Hanoi: 2004), pp. 701-789. It was apparently unrelated to the ICP-inspired *Democratic Party* in Nam Bo, founded by Ta Ba Tong, etc. See Nguyen Van Tran, *Viet cho Me va Quoc hoi [Writing to Mother and the National Assembly]* (Santa Ana, CA: Van Nghe, 1995), p. 118 [henceforth, *Tran, Me & Quoc hoi*].

for National Salvation.⁷² These two affiliates strongly grew under Kim's rule, concentrating on what was later known as “mobilizing the intellectuals” [*tri van*] and propaganda campaigns. In the cities, the ICP organized various groups for national salvation among the workers, women, youths, teenagers, children and elderly citizens. In the countryside there was, beside similar national salvation groups, an Association of Peasants for National Salvation.

As the Japanese defeat became imminent, the "neutral" sectors began to shift toward the Viet Minh. Landowners and rich families agreed to purchase Viet Minh "revolutionary bonds." Urbanites averted their eyes as their children joined the Viet Minh. Viet Minh organs, notably the *National Salvation* and *Liberation Flag*, drew an increasing audience. Even officials of Kim's government were either neutralized or converted by the Viet Minh. In some provinces, notably Bac Giang, many district chiefs left their offices or closed their eyes to avoid the Viet Minh's death squads. Others entered into secret contact with the Viet Minh and agreed to act as front men.⁷³ The most anti-Communist provincial chief, Cung Dinh Van in Thai Nguyen, was replaced by the order of Phan Ke Toai, the Imperial Commissioner of Bac Bo, on the grounds of his Francophile past and brutality.⁷⁴

⁷²The Cultural Association for National Salvation was in fact a psychological warfare organ of the Viet Minh. The leading figures included Nguyen Hong, Cu Huy Can, Nguyen Dinh Thi and Nguyen Huu Dang.

⁷³*CMTT*, vol. I, pp. 79, 124, 134, 167, 169, 205-206, 209, 252, etc. Also see Thanh Dam, “Nghien cuu ve tung lop trung gian trong thoi ky cach mang thang Tam” [A Study on the Issue of the Neutral Strata During the August Revolution]; *NCLS* (Hanoi), vol. 163 (July-Aug 1975), pp. 7-27.

⁷⁴Cung Dinh Van was hated for his cruel technics in interrogating his victims during the oppression of the VNQDD members and suspects in 1929-1930. Ngo Dinh Khoi (d. 1945) and Ngo Dinh Diem were also hated and frightened for their inhumane torturing techniques. Diem, for instance, reportedly loved to use a burning candle to heat his victim's anus in extracting confession. Khoi liked to force the suspects to kneel on a piece of peel-skin of the jack-fruit during the interrogation. The Communists once hired a Chinese gunner to assassinate Diem, but Diem was only wounded and miraculously survived. See Letter of Aug 24, 1944, Bishop Thuc to Decoux; CAOM (Aix), PA 14, carton 2; reprinted in Chinh Dao, *55 Ngay & 55 Dem*:

Toai was in fact a Viet Minh sympathizer. Flanked by his own son, an ICP member, and other underground Communists (or, Communist sympathizers, at least) like Hoang Minh Giam (born 1903) and Nguyen Manh Ha (born 1913), Toai even asked to see an official representative of the Viet Minh. On August 12, a member of the ICP Regional Committee of Bac Bo met with Toai and probably completed his conversion.⁷⁵

Down to the local and communal levels, the Viet Minh cadres, combining terrorism with intimidation, either killed or converted a majority of local notables and officials in the northern provinces of Bac Bo. In several regions the Viet Minh cadres set up *de facto* People's Committees with their own militiamen. In Trung Bo, the first shift of attitude among the intellectuals was reflected in the dissolution of the *New Viet-Nam Party* in July, which had been organized several months earlier to support Kim's government and provisioned as the only political party in Viet-Nam. The Viet Minh virtually took control of Thanh Hoa and a portion of Quang Ngai. Worse, Pham Khac Hoe, King Bao Dai's Imperial Cabinet Chief, began to look toward Ho Chi Minh as his "Saint of Nam Dan village," and was instructed by the ICP cadres to discredit Kim's government and convince Bao Dai to abdicate. Through the Nghe An provincial mutual assistance association, ICP cadres also converted Minister of Interior Tran Dinh Nam to their side. However, in southern Trung Bo and Nam Bo, the Viet Minh was relatively weak. All important ICP leaders, like Tran Van Giau, Nguyen Van Nguyen, Duong Bach Mai—partly due to the disruption of communications with the northern comrades—maintained their connections

Cuoc sup do cua VNCH [55 Days & Nights: The Collapse of the Republic of Viet-Nam], 5th rev. ed. (Houston: Van Hoa, 1999), p. 14)

⁷⁵*CMTT*, vol. I, p. 34.

with the Japanese. Giau left his secret base in the Plain of Reeds for Saigon to revitalize the ICP apparatus and convert the young patriotic intellectuals to the Viet Minh side. They infiltrated various youth groups and even collaborated with the Trotskyites and former convicted gangsters. His best crop of recruits included Pham Ngoc Thach, Huynh Tan Phat, Huynh Van Tieng, Luu Huu Phuoc, Ho Ta Khanh, Kha Vang Can, etc. Thanks to this new “united front,” the ICP also obtained an important quantity of weapons, weakened the security system and had a number of its cadres liberated from the French prisons. Thang, the future Communist general Tran Van Tra, and Bui Van Du were two of those ICP lucky cadres released from prison by Huynh Van Phuong, who served as Deputy Director of Secret Service.⁷⁶ Giau, however, was constantly challenged by another branch of ICP cadres who bitterly criticized him for collaboration with the Japanese and Trotskyites. Not until August 1945, could these dissidents, including Nguyen Thi Thap (1908-1996), renew contact with the ICP headquarters in the north.

So, it is safe to conclude that during Kim’s tenure, the Viet Minh in the South was, numerically at least, inferior to the non-Communist groups. The pro-Japanese groups, especially Ho Van Nga's *Viet-Nam Independence Party*, Nguyen Hoa Hiep's *Vietnamese-Japanese Self-Defense Group*, Dinh Khac Thiet's *Martial Arts' Group*, and the armed groups of various religious sects, created their own war zones and factually dominated the political stage.

A. THE ORDERS FOR GENERAL INSURRECTION:

⁷⁶Huynh Van Tieng, p.113. Giau’s elimination from the Central Committee at the First Convention in 1935 may be the main reason for the schism within the ICP Southern leadership.

On August 12, two days after the Japanese offer to surrender, a "National Convention" of ICP delegates was convened at Kim Lung to discuss necessary steps in response to new developments. It was then decided that the time was ripe for a general insurrection. The next day, Vo Nguyen Giap issued Military Order No. 1, calling on Viet Minh troops and cadres to seize power before the arrival of Allied troops.

On August 16, a "National Congress of the People" at Kim Lung elected Ho Chi Minh President of the People's National Committee for National Liberation. A new ten-point policy was also endorsed. Besides a number of familiar programs previously adopted in the Liberated Zone, this new policy insisted on two new points: to seize power and build up a Democratic Republic of Viet Nam, and to maintain good relations with the Allies.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, on August 15, although the training of the Viet Minh troops by the OSS agents had not been completed, the Viet Minh leaders decided to take over the provincial town of Thai Nguyen militarily "to set up more comfortable quarters there and await developments."⁷⁸ The next day, Giap and Major Thomas, Chief of the OSS "Deer" Team, advanced to Thai Nguyen. Ho and his lieutenants miscalculated both Japan's attitude and Kim's resistance. As it turned out, the Japanese continued to defend their posts in Thai Nguyen and not until August 28 did they peacefully yield the town to the Viet Minh. Meanwhile, Kim's government collapsed without a fight after the ICP Municipal Committee of Ha Noi successfully took over the city on August 19.

B. THE SEIZURE OF HA NOI:

⁷⁷DRVN, *Brisons nos fers*, pp. 80-81.

⁷⁸Thomas' report; *Hearings*, pp. 259-263.

As mentioned earlier, on August 12, Imperial Commissioner Toai secretly met with Nguyen Khang, a member of the ICP Regional Committee of "Bac Ky" responsible for Ha Noi. It is unknown what agreements were reached between them at this meeting. Four days later, Toai again invited Khang to his palace for a conference along with Nguyen Xuan Chu and Pham Huu Chuong, two pro-Japanese leaders. Toai, Chu and Chuong reportedly invited the Viet Minh Front to participate in the government, but Khang insisted on the resignation of both Toai and Kim's government to facilitate the Viet Minh's takeover.⁷⁹ Toai agreed with Khang's proposal, cabling to Hue his resignation. Meanwhile, Chu sought Kim's authorization to form a National Salvation Front and was entrusted by Kim to organize a Political Directorate of Bac Bo to replace Toai.⁸⁰ Although the Directorate consisted of five members—Toai, the former Imperial Commissioner; Lai, Mayor of Ha Noi; Nguyen Tuong Long, a Dai Viet leader; Dang Thai Mai, a Communist sympathizer, the future father-in-law of Vo Nguyen Giap; and, Chu himself—Chu was the sole active member. Long was hospitalized; Lai was occupied by his Mayorial office; and, Toai and Mai were conspicuously absent.⁸¹ Even so, Kim's supporters organized a meeting of the General Association of Civil Servants in Ha Noi on August 17 to celebrate the unification of Viet Nam and to support Kim and Chu.

Informed about the new development, Khang and the ICP Municipal Committee of Ha Noi decided to strike back. On the evening of August 16, they formed an Insurrectional Committee of Ha Noi with Khang as its Chairman. The ICP strength in the city—thanks

⁷⁹*CMTT*, vol. I, pp. 34-37.

⁸⁰Nguyen Xuan Chu, *Hoi ky Nguyen Xuan Chu [Memoirs of Nguyen Xuan Chu]* (Houston, TX: Van Hoa, 1996), pp. 279-280. Cited henceforth, Chu, *Hoi ky*.

⁸¹*CMTT*, vol. I, pp. 34-37.

to the intervention of Hoang Minh Giam, and other underground Communists, and probably Toai himself—was reinforced with several hundred men previously arrested by the Japanese in May and June 1945.⁸² Encouraged by the Japanese attitude and new reinforcement, Khang made a bold decision to take control the civil servants' meeting the next day and to introduce the still largely secret Viet Minh Front to the inhabitants of Ha Noi.

On the Friday afternoon of August 17, to the astonishment and frustration of supporters of Kim and Chu, the Viet Minh death squads, armed propaganda teams and local militiamen under the general command of Khang broke in to turn the civil servants' meeting into a march supporting the Viet Minh. Even policemen and guards joined the Viet Minh parade. This stunning success led Khang and other ICP leaders to gamble further: to seize power in Ha Noi. They asked for permission to organize another meeting on August 18, was probably the longest and most painful day for the non-Viet Minh activists in Ha Noi. Communications between their headquarters and their armed groups were blocked by the Viet Minh death squads. Completely isolate, they could only talk about tentative plans to crush the Viet Minh. Meanwhile, Chu could not maintain control of his guards and policemen. Most of them simply disappeared because it was a weekend. Others were converted to the Viet Minh or neutralized by the Viet Minh death squads. Toai's cabinet chief also leaned toward the Viet Minh, refusing to carry out Chu's orders.

During these crucial hours, Khang and his lieutenants prepared for the takeover. Early on the morning of August 19, ICP members led various groups of demonstrators from the adjacent areas into the city. By late morning the Viet Minh forces had been

⁸²Chu, *Hoi ky*, p. 281.

assembled before the Opera House downtown. Armed with red flags, sticks, swords, and banners they divided into two columns: One column marched toward the Imperial Delegate's Palace, where Chu was protected by about 50 guards [*Bao An*]. His position untenable, Chu surrendered and was temporarily detained in the outskirts of Ha Noi. The second column headed toward the Ha Noi Garrison, where hundreds of well-armed guards were stationed. The commanding captain, who also was the military commander of Bac Bo, greeted the demonstrators by opening the gate and the armory.⁸³ By late that day, the Viet Minh Municipal Revolutionary Council had taken control of Ha Noi, save for the Japanese garrisons, the *Indochina Bank* and the former Governor General's palace.

The next day, August 20, the people's Provisional Revolutionary Committee of Ha Noi was proclaimed in front of thousands of demonstrators. The city was reddened with Viet Minh flags and revolutionary banners calling for complete independence for Viet Nam and denouncing French imperialism. Within the next four days, most ICP leaders, including Giap and Ho, made their way into Ha Noi. While purges were carried out by the ICP "Honorable squads" (i.e., death squads), on August 24 the *National Salvation* appeared publicly in Ha Noi, announcing that a Provisional Government had been formed, including "Ho Chi Minh, Tran Huy Lieu, Vo Nguyen Giap, Nguyen Luong Bang, Chu Van Tan, Duong Duc Hien, Cu Huy Can, Nguyen Dinh Thi, Pham Ngoc Thach, Nguyen Huu Dang and many other gentlemen [vi]."⁸⁴ The same issue of *National Salvation* also announced

⁸³*Ibid.*, pp. 280-297. According to Chu, the man who convinced the Bao An commander to support the Viet Minh was Dr. Truong Dinh Tri, who was to become Ho's Minister of Health in March 1946. About a year later, Tri served as President of the French-created Council for Pacification of the People [*Hoi Dong An Dan*] in North Viet Nam, and he was then assassinated by the Viet Minh death squad on October 10, 1947; *Ibid.*, pp. 282-283.

⁸⁴*Cuu Quoc*, No. 31, 24 Aug. 1945.

that various important figures and patriotic associations had demanded Nguyen Phuoc Dien's abdication.

C. OTHER PROVINCES:

Like a chain reaction, the seizure of Ha Noi stimulated the swift collapse of Tran Trong Kim's administration in all corners of the country.

In Bac Bo, 20 out of 28 provincial towns and cities fell under the nominal control of the Viet Minh between August 18 and August 25, 1945. The only strong resistance from Kim's forces took place in Ha Dong. The garrison commander, Master-Sergeant Duong, decided to strike back. A violent clash flared up on August 21, in which Duong's troops opened fire at the demonstrators, causing 47 killed, and 30 wounded. It was not until August 25 that the Viet Minh successfully arranged a truce with the provincial chief, Ho Dac Diem, and Duong himself. The same day, the People's Revolutionary Committee of Ha Dong came into existence.⁸⁵ Similar clashes also took place in other towns dominated by the Dai Viet forces, including Phu Lang Thuong (Bac Giang), Cao Bang, Ha Giang, Kien An, Lai Chau, Lang Son, Son La and Vinh Yen. During this chaotic period, some advanced units of the Chinese occupation forces crossed the border on August 26 and gradually took over control of several border towns, especially Lang Son, Cao Bang, Mong Cay and Lao Kai.

In Trung Bo, Ha Tinh, Thanh Hoa and Nghe An quickly went over to the revolutionary movement between August 18 and 23. The capital of Thuan Hoa [Hue] was practically under the Viet Minh by August 23, when the Revolutionary Committee of

⁸⁵*CMTT*, vol. I, pp. 345-346. Duong was later killed by the Viet Minh.

"Trung Ky" and the Revolutionary Committee of Hue were presented to a mass meeting at the city soccer field. At this meeting, Pham Khac Hoe, Nguyen Phuoc Dien's office director, handed to the Chairman of the "Revolutionary Committee of Trung Ky," the Stalinist poet To Huu, the king's written agreement to abdicate. Two days later, Nguyen Phuoc Dien officially issued two proclamations (addressed to the Royal Family and to the population) announcing his intention to step down in order to place the people's happiness and national interest above his own. The same day, the People's Revolutionary Committee of Hue was announced. On August 30, Nguyen Phuoc Dien's official abdication ceremony took place, in which after receiving the king's royal insignia, on behalf of the Viet Minh, Nguyen Luong Bang recognized "Nguyen Vinh Thuy" as the First Citizen of Viet Nam. The ex-king was then transported to Ha Noi on September 2 to become Ho's shadow Supreme Advisor.⁸⁶

In Nam Bo, it was not until August 23, two days after Japanese troops' official cease-fire, that the ICP leaders made the first move. That day, while Sai Gon and other provincial cities celebrated the National Independence and National Unification, and welcomed the new Imperial Commissioner Nguyen Van Sam, the ICP leaders used Tan An, a small town southwest of Sai Gon, as the proving ground of the Viet Minh. The next day, the *National Unified Front* suddenly changed its attitude, agreeing to collaborate with the Viet Minh. This was partly because the French threat had become imminent and partly because of being paralyzed by the Viet Minh's seizure of power in Ha Noi and Thuan Hoa. Also, Nguyen Van "Bay" Tran, Director of the Viet Minh secret services, reportedly helped

⁸⁶In his memoirs, written by two French writers, "Bao Dai" dated his abdication ceremony on August 25, 1945.

to forge such a coalition by spreading rumors that the Allies will not tolerate any Japanese collaborators or their associates. Early on the morning of August 25, Huynh Tan Phat and his friends erected a huge wooden tower in front of the Sai Gon City Park, listing the names of eleven members of the Viet Minh-led Provisional Executive Committee of Nam Bo.⁸⁷

That afternoon, “Bay” Tran and his men transported to Sai Gon thousands of demonstrators from adjacent towns, especially Tan An, Gia Dinh, and Bien Hoa, to celebrate Independence and National Unification. That evening, Imperial Commissioner Sam, who had just come back from Hue after a turbulent journey along Road 1 three days earlier, handed power over to the ICP cadres.⁸⁸ Ho’s special envoy, Hoang Quoc Viet—better known by his true name, Ha Ba Cang (born 1904), or his alias Cang *The Lamé*—also arrived on time to help consolidate the Viet Minh power. Cang reorganized the Provisional Executive Committee, holding most ICP cadres behind the scene, promoting some prominent neutral figures to the Executive Committee seats, while eliminating all other alleged Trotskyite and reactionary members. Among the victims was Attorney Huynh Van Phuong—Huynh Tan Phat’s paternal uncle, the Deputy Director of secret police in Sai Gon. Phuong was accused of being a Trotskyite and liquidated, despite the fact that he had

⁸⁷The Executive Committee originally included: Tran Van Giau (born 1911), President; Duong Bach Mai, Nguyen Van Tao, Huynh Van Tieng, Ngo Tan Nhon and Pham Ngoc Thach. Also see Nguyen Van Tran, *Me va Quoc hoi*, pp. 124-126. It should be noted that Huynh Tan Phat, affiliated with the *Democratic Party* at that time. Although Phat was never officially admitted to the ICP, he worked closely with Giau from 1945 on and was honorably given the Labor Party membership after the collapse of the American-backed Republic of [South] Viet-Nam in 1975. For his vita, see KLTQG 3 [Center for National Archives III] (Ha Noi), Quoc Hoi [National Congress], Ho so [File] 5.a?. He was to become Viet Minh’s Director of Information in Nam Bo in the early 1950’s, Secretary General of the *People’s Front for the Liberation of South Viet Nam [PFLSVN]* in the 1960’s, and then Premier of the Provisional Government of South Viet Nam from 1969 to 1976. Bui Thi Nga et al., *Lam dep cuoc doi* [Making the Life Prettier] (Saigon: 1993), pp. 23-24, 102-103. In our existing literature, the *PFLSVN* has often been mistranslated as “Front for the National Liberation of South Viet Nam” or FNL, for brief.

⁸⁸Tran later claimed that he alone managed the takeover of Sai Gon; *Idem.*, *Me va Quoc hoi*, pp. 122-123.

not only fired all former secret police agents employed by the French, but also released some ICP cadres (e.g., the future General Tran Van Tra) and provided his nephew's friends with a large quantity of weapons.⁸⁹ Within a week, all towns and cities in the south were under Viet Minh authority.

Thus, within a fortnight the Viet Minh controlled nearly all the country, save for several towns near the Sino-Viet border, where pro-Chinese Vietnamese forces seized power in late August.

IV. THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT OF DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF VIET-NAM:

On August 28, 1945—a day after being informed of the division of occupation zones in Indochina and the pending arrival of British and Chinese troops—Ho and his lieutenants decided to announce their provisional government.⁹⁰ Ho, appearing for this purpose as a member of the *National Party*, became President of the Provisional Government. Compared to the first list that appeared in the *National Salvation* four days earlier, in this new government three ICP members—Nguyen Luong Bang, Nguyen Dinh Thi and Nguyen Huu Dang—were dropped. However, the Communist "gentlemen" held all important posts, including Foreign Affairs (Ho), Interior (Giap), Propaganda (Tran Huy Lieu), Finance (Pham Van Dong), National Defense (Chu Van Tan), Labor (Le Van Hien), and Public Health (Thach). The French-typed Communist Nguyen Manh Ha was given

⁸⁹For details, see Hoang Quoc Viet, *Chang duong nong bong [The Heated Journey]* (Hanoi: Lao Dong, 1985), pp. 245 (Cang thot), 286-287 (reorganization).

⁹⁰*Cuu Quoc*, 31 Aug. 1945; *Dan Chu*, 31 Aug. 1945.

the Ministry of Economy.⁹¹ Two other important ministries, youth and education, were given to the ICP-affiliated *Viet-Nam Democratic Party* (Duong Duc Hien and Vu Dinh Hoe). The government included only two neutral figures, Nguyen Van To and Vu Trong Khanh; they held, nominally at least, the ministries of social assistance and justice, respectively.

Among the two ministers without portfolio, Cu Huy Can, a poet, was listed as a member of the Cultural Association for National Salvation. The appointment of the other, Nguyen Van Xuan—a naturalized French citizen and an active Lieutenant-Colonel in the French Army⁹²—was an additional example of the Viet Minh's "creativity." Colonel Xuan was actually very active in creating an anti-Communist government, first, the autonomous Republic of Cochinchina (1946-1948) and, later, Bao Dai's State of Viet Nam (1949-1955). Later, the ICP propaganda claims that there was in fact an ICP member named Nguyen Van Xuan. During the last twenty years, however, I could not reveal any traces of this ICP member in the French archives or memoirs of his comrades. The original name of this ICP member was listed as "Nguyen Ngoc Xuan."⁹³

The Viet Minh propaganda organs were also quite creative in announcing the political backgrounds of the new ministers. Only Lieu (Propaganda) and Hien (Labor) were listed as ICP members. Giap was given membership in the Cultural Association for

⁹¹In an interview in Paris in 1983, Mr. Ha told me that he was *not* a Communist. Ha, however, kept close relationships with both Hanoi and Beijing during the Vietnam wars (1945-1954, 1959-1975).

⁹²For his vita, see GGI, *Souverains*, 1943, p. 105; Chinh Dao, *Nhan Vat Chi [Biographies]*, rev. edition (Houston: Van Hoa, 1997), pp. 410-411.

⁹³Center for National Archives III (Ha Noi), Quoc Hoi, File 5.a

National Salvation. Dong (Finance), Thach (Public Health), Dao Trong Kim (Public Works), and Khanh (Justice) were reportedly "without a party."

Among the twelve true ministers, six were professional and active revolutionaries (Lieu, Giap, Tan, Can, Hien, and Dong), all of whom had spent some time in prison. Three of them (Dong, Giap, and Tan) had gone into exile. The other six were either underground Communists (Thach) or members of progressive groups. There were three youth leaders: Hien (Duong), a former student leader in Ha Noi; Ha, a Catholic youth leader in Hai Phong; and, Thach, a leader of the Vanguard Male Youth in Sai Gon.

Not all these ministers were physically present in Ha Noi. Thach (Public Health) stayed in Sai Gon, and Xuan (without portfolio) went underground, with French protection. More important, perhaps, was the fact that this list of ministers was aimed more at showing "national unity" than at constituting a true ruling group. The true power, in fact, was in the hands of Khu (future Truong Chinh), the man behind the scene who was to be listed as the secretary of the Marxist Study Association since November 1945. On the surface, Giap (Interior), Tan (Defense) and Lieu (Propaganda, and officially, Vice-President of the Liberation Government) ran the show. Meanwhile, Ho spent all his effort and energy on foreign affairs, soliciting international recognition of Vietnamese independence and internationalizing the Vietnamese cause.

It is unknown whether the maintenance of a clandestine power center behind the banners of the Viet Minh and the Provisional Government of Viet Nam was a deliberate strategy or a forced decision to mollify the masses and to deceive the Allied Powers. For whatever reason, this quickly became the most effective policy considering the swift change of political conditions in Viet Nam. Eventually, in September 1945, it was to

become official for ICP cadres to be partially withdrawn from the local administrative committees in order to preserve the essential strength of the party.⁹⁴ Several months later, it also enabled Ho, under strong pressure from both the Chinese and his Vietnamese adversaries, to formally dissolve the ICP on November 11, 1945 in preparation for a national election which would establish legitimacy for his government.

A. THE REVOLUTIONARY PROJECTS:

1. Revolutionary Authority:

It is undeniable that the Provisional Government of Democratic Republic of Vietnam [DRVN] brought about a swift change in all aspects of society and over all corners of the country. It started with the rise to power of the poorest and least esteemed people in the former society—the propertyless peasants [*cung dinh*] and former "bandits" or "rebels" (as the French called them).

The limited ICP membership, about 5,000 men in August 1945, certainly could not govern all 23,031 villages and 72 provincial towns and cities of Viet Nam.⁹⁵ Most of them were also concentrated in the cities and provincial or district towns. As a result, the ICP had to form coalitions among members of the ICP, the *Democratic Party*, and other National Salvation organizations. A number of former officials were also invited to join the Viet Minh local authority.⁹⁶

⁹⁴See "Cuon so tay cua chien si" [Soldiers' Notebook], *Co Giai Phong*, No. 19, 23 Sept 1945.

⁹⁵*ASI, 1943-1946*, pp. 27-28.

⁹⁶The typical examples were Le Van Hoach (Can Tho), Tran Van Huong (Vinh Long), etc. Hoach was to become second Premier of the Autonomous Republic of Cochinchina (1947); and Huong became a prominent figure in South Viet Nam between 1954 and 1975. His eldest son, however, joined the Viet Minh.

The lack of ICP cadres immediately resulted in an administrative crisis. Corruption and abuse of power were widespread. *Liberation Flag*, the official organ of the ICP, sharply criticized the appearance of new "revolutionary mandarins" in many localities, who "held their pistols in their hands when giving orders" and took advantage of revolutionary power to settle old scores.⁹⁷ In the name of "revolution," these revolutionary mandarins took all matters into their own hands, from arresting suspected spies to confiscating traitors' properties. They were so eager to defend the revolution that even Giap, the Minister of the Interior, was temporarily halted in Quang Ngai while en route to the South in late 1945 for a security check. When Giap and his companion presented a pass bearing the signature and seal of the Chairman of the People's Committee of Trung Bo [Central Viet-Nam], the local guards, still spent a long time to work out where the "village of Trung Bo" was.⁹⁸

In the industrial plants, revolutionary workers did not wait long to harass the non-revolutionary ones along with newly created administrative committees, which often included the former owners or their relatives. On September 20, the *Liberation Flag* had to warn these revolutionaries.⁹⁹

Misunderstanding democracy, many workers want to exclude the specialist workers [from the administrative committees] of the manufacturing plants. You should be aware of the fact that they are not easily replaced.

The Workers' Committees elected by you cannot replace the executive committees of your plants that include the specialist workers.

⁹⁷*Co Giai Phong*, Nos. 17, 17 Sept 1945, and 18, 20 Sept 1945.

⁹⁸Giap, *Khong the nao quen*, p. 128.

⁹⁹*Co Giai Phong*, No. 18, 20 Sept 1945.

The general situation was so chaotic that the ICP had to warn the new revolutionary mandarins that "a new revolutionary wind" would wipe out them as it did the former mandarins.¹⁰⁰ However, despite its excesses and inevitable abuses of power, the revolutionary regime successfully undermined the former administrative structure, which had been somewhat weakened during Tran Trong Kim's tenure. In the following years, the *ICP* carried out its threat to blow up a new revolutionary wind to consolidate its control, opening Vietnamese society into an era of unprecedented change.

2. National Unity:

Another significant project of the Viet Minh was to consolidate "national unity." However, in contrast to Kim's conception of national unity, the Viet Minh's definition had a different tone: The new regime only demanded unity for Viet Minh-affiliated patriots and revolutionaries. Two special groups were specifically excluded from its project of national unity—the *Viet gian* [Viet traitors] and the *phan dong* [reactionaries] or *phan cach mang* [anti-revolutionaries].

The ICP leaders appeared to be flexible in their distinction between these two groups. A Ha Noi periodical in September 1945 printed an article calling for a precise definition of the word *Viet gian*. The entire text of the article was deleted by the Viet Minh censors, but the magazine kept the article's headline. As a result, the magazine was closed down and the author of the article was arrested as a "reactionary."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, No. 17, 17 Sept 1945.

¹⁰¹*Dan Moi*, No. 10, 5 Sept 1945, p. 4.

Generally speaking, the *Viet gian/phan dong* labels were awarded to three different groups. High on the list were the former collaborators and adamantly anti-Communist mandarins. As the revolution spread the first "Viet gian" to be arrested or killed included Pham Le Bong (former President of the People's Council of Tonkin), Pham Quynh (former Interior Minister of Bao Dai), Ngo Dinh Khoi (a Catholic leader and former provincial governor, along with his son who served as Special Secretary of the Japanese Consulate in Hue), Bui Quang Chieu (a leader of the Constitutionalist Party), Le Quang Liem, alias Bay (also a Constitutionalist, who had known Nguyen Ai Quoc in Paris in 1919-1920).¹⁰²

The second group of traitors/reactionaries consisted of members of *Dai Viet* and *VNQDD* parties and pro-Japanese organizations. On September 20, the list of important traitors arrested by the revolutionary regime was augmented to include Vo Van Cam (Patriotic Youths), Pham Huu Chuong (*Dai Viet*), Nguyen Trac, Nguyen The Nghiep (*VNQDD*), Nguyen Ngoc Son and his wife, Le Thi Thang (*VNQDD*), Dao Chu Khai, Nguyen Van Tao, Sergeant Hoan, Khanh Van, Nguyen The Vinh and "numerous others." After providing this list, *Liberation Flag* commented:¹⁰³

These Viet traitors were active and effective servants of either the Japanese or the French. The French imperialists continue to propagate the libel that there was a Japanese hand behind our government. However, the firm policy of our government, aimed at purging the Viets who had betrayed their nation, completely undermines the French propaganda campaign of lies and deceptions.

¹⁰²*Cuu Quoc*, No. 32, 27 Aug. 1945; *CMTT*, vol. I, pp. 279-80.

¹⁰³*Co Giai Phong*, No. 18, 20 Sept 1945.

About a decade later, an official account of the Revolution said that the traitors/reactionaries in the *Dai Viet* and *VNQDD* had¹⁰⁴

attempted to fight against revolution by deliberately making the people look to the wrong enemy. They violently denounced the French imperialists in order to direct the masses' hostility against a fallen enemy, while neglecting the real enemy [i.e., the Japanese].

As a matter of fact, the *Dai Viet* and the *VNQDD* represented the two strongest challengers to Ho's authority. They were also allied with the pro-Chinese Viet activists in China who were to return to Viet Nam in the very near future to disarm the Japanese. Ho and his lieutenants, therefore, concentrated on liquidating them as soon as possible. They ordered Viet Minh forces to attack various *Dai Viet* bases, especially in the provinces of Phuc Yen and Son Tay.¹⁰⁵ Meanwhile, three days after his call for national unity, Vo Nguyen Giap issued an order dissolving the *Dai Viet* parties, effective September 5, 1945.¹⁰⁶ A week later, on September 12, Giap outlawed Vo Van Cam's *Patriotic Youths* and Le Ngoc Vu's *Youths for National Reconstruction*.¹⁰⁷

The third group of traitors/reactionaries consisted of the Trotskyites. Ta Thu Thau was arrested while en route from Hue to Saigon and executed in Quang Ngai. The Saigon-based Trotskyist organ *Independence [Doc Lap]* was closed down. Prominent Trotskyites

¹⁰⁴*CMTT*, vol. I, p. 22.

¹⁰⁵See, for instance, *Cuu Quoc*, 12 Sept 1945.

¹⁰⁶The two parties named were *Great Viet National Socialist Party [Dai Viet Quoc Gia Xa Hoi Dang]* and *Great Viet Nationalist Party [Dai Viet Quoc Dan Dang]*; Decree No. 8, *Cuu Quoc*, 9 Sept 1945.

¹⁰⁷Decree No. 30; *Dan Chu*, 19 Sept 1945.

like Phan Van Hum, Phan Van Chanh and Tran Van Thach were captured and later killed.¹⁰⁸

Even religious leaders, especially those of the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects, could not escape the Viet Minh terror. On September 9, taking advantage of Hoa Hao demonstration in Can Tho, the Viet Minh counterattacked, arresting over 300 Hoa Hao followers. Three of them, including Huynh Phu So's brother and a son of Nam Lua Tran Van Soai, one of the most powerful Hoa Hao warlords, were then executed.¹⁰⁹ In Saigon, Giau and Cang also organized a raid of Huynh Phu So's headquarters. So, himself, barely escaped while his close associate, Luong Trong Tuong, fell into Viet Minh hands.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, leaders of some of the smaller Cao Dai congregations, such as Le Kim Ty of the Antecedent God congregation, were also purged.

During this period, thousands of followers of non-Viet Minh organizations and parties were assassinated, kidnapped or "reeducated" or "reformulated." Worse, in order to legitimize their purge, the Viet Minh leaders simply adopted a familiar French colonial procedure: that was to falsely prosecute their opponents of ordinary crimes such as theft, rape, or disturbance of law and order. Undoubtedly, the Viet Minh secret police and local People's Committees also took advantage of prevailing conditions to profiteer. Numerous innocent peasants were victimized. When asked about these oppressive campaigns in a

¹⁰⁸*CMTT*, vol. II, p. 319; Phuong Lan, *Nha cach mang Ta Thu Thau, 1906-1945 [The Revolutionary Ta Thu Thau, 1906-1945]* (Saigon: Khai Tri: 196?), pp. 273, 436-441. It is noteworthy that Tran Van Giau may be wrongly blamed for the liquidation of the Trotskyites. Recently declassified Comintern archival documents confirm that Linov Con had been orally instructed to terminate Trotskyism since 1938. Report of July 31, 1939, Linov Con to the Eastern Bureau; .

¹⁰⁹Lacroix 1949; *VNNB*, I-A, p. 260.

¹¹⁰Lacroix 1949; Nguyen Ky Nam, *Hoi ky [Memoirs]* (Saigon: Tan Dan Chu, 1963), vol. II, p. 212; Nguyen Long Thanh Nam, *Phat Giao Hoa Hao [Hoa Hao Buddhism]* (Santa Fe Spring, CA: Duoc Tu Bi, 1991), pp. 373-376.

press conference on the morning of September 10, 1945, Propaganda Minister Lieu maintained that these arrests were by no means oppressive in nature. In reality, he insisted, "all detainees were, after careful investigation, found guilty of menacing the people's revolutionary regime."¹¹¹ Five days later, Ho signed a decree that authorizes the revolutionary authorities "to arrest or isolate in concentration camps [*an tri*] those who are judged to endanger the DRVN."¹¹²

In any case, the *ICP* official line was always very clear: revolution and violence had to go hand in hand. As late as the end of September 1945, when the French reconquest was underway, *Liberation Flag* insisted:¹¹³

We cannot fail to call attention to the softness of heart of a number of Viet Minh cadres. They misunderstood the Front's policy. They endorsed the policy of "forgiving" [*xi xoa*] all the enormous crimes of the Viet traitors who had betrayed their nation and the professional agitators [*khieu khich*]. They assumed that in doing so [we] would enlarge the Front, "avoid sectarianism," "unify the people," "recruit talented men" [and] "settle down on domestic affairs in order to confront the foreigners," etc.

We also call attention to the fact these soft-hearted people brought into the Front the elements who had more than once oppressed their compatriots and licked the shoe-heels of the Japanese and the French. Then we see that they proposed the Dai Viet and Trotskyite members into such committees.

The revolutionary experience shows that if we enlarge the Front to include the Viet traitors we will make the Front more complex and weaken its patriotic strength. Union with

¹¹¹*Cuu Quoc*, 12 Sept 1945.

¹¹²*Co Giai Phong*, No. 18, 20 Sept 1945; *Dan Chu [Democracy]* (Hai Phong), 20 Sept 1945.

¹¹³*Co Giai Phong*, No. 21, 30 Sept 1945.

the Viet traitors resembles the practice of raising bees in the sleeve of one's robe. This causes internal division. Talented men are precious, indeed, but do not use those who have committed crimes against their compatriots, regardless their talents. Finally, we must rise our arms as high as possible in order to strike the leading Viet traitors with all our strength, and seek to draw their followers to the revolutionary side. This should be the most effective way to "settle domestic affairs" and to "avoid sectarianism."

3. Mass mobilization:

Clearly perceiving coming dangers in the near future, embodied in French return in the South and Chinese occupation in the North, the Viet Minh acted quickly to mobilize the masses and organize them into combat units.

The Viet Minh motto now was swiftly changed to struggle against the French, no longer the Japanese—who had somewhat supported the Viet Minh's seizure of power. Thanks to Kim's anti-French campaigns, Ho captured the popular imagination when asked the Ha Noi populace to take his famous *four-no* oath on the afternoon of September 2. His armed propaganda teams and propaganda ministry intensified their anti-French campaign. Immediately after the return of the French to Sai Gon on September 12, Ho's men harped on the theme of French lies, aimed at counter-attacking the French disclosure of Ho's secret message in July 1945, in which he asked for the status of a self-governing Viet-Nam within the French Union and on the basis of the French declaration of March 24, 1945.¹¹⁴ The anti-French propaganda was to last until late October, when Ho started a secret talk with Jean Sainteny, the new French Commissioner of North and North Central Viet Nam.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, No. 19, 23 Sept 1945.

The Viet Minh's military preparation was more important. On October 14, 1945 the Military Administrative School was opened in Ha Noi to receive over 300 cadets.¹¹⁵ Five days later, the School of Vietnamese Youth Leaders was formed in Ha Noi. Ho and his close associates, such as Giap and Dong, made appearances in the 15-day long training programs, aimed at indoctrinating the youths and providing them with some military skills.¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, the Liberation Army was renamed Vietnamese Army for National Protection [*Viet-Nam Ve Quoc Doan*].¹¹⁷ Youngsters and veterans were encouraged to join the newly reorganized army. Everywhere, the recruitment and training of militiamen was given high priority.

Meanwhile, due to the Viet Minh's new anti-French stance—officially and strategically, at least—the Front successfully regained support among various armed groups. In Nam Bo, where the French reconquest had begun, the Vietnamese were able to organize four People's Army Divisions, with a strength of about 80,000 men.¹¹⁸ Although the warlords continued to maintain their domains, the new military commander of Nam Bo, General Nguyen Binh, managed to have at least nominal control over all armed forces.

4. Other Projects:

Besides these immediate, major programs, the Viet Minh also implemented various revolutionary measures. Workers began their eight-hour working schedules and

¹¹⁵In April 1946, this institution was renamed the Tran Quoc Tuan Army School, unrelated to the nationalist Tran Quoc Tuan Army School [*Truong Luc quan Tran Quoc Tuan*] in Yen Bay.

¹¹⁶*Dan Quyen* [People's Right] (Hanoi), No. 4, 28 Oct 1945.

¹¹⁷See *Chien Thang* [Victory] (Hanoi), the official organ of the Ve Quoc Doan.

¹¹⁸*Doc Lap*, No. 7, 25 Sept 1945.

participated in the management of the manufacturing plants. Women were given equal rights and encouraged to participate in all social activities. The most unpopular taxes were abolished. Elementary education became compulsory and a very large literary program was launched. The use of alcohol and opium was forbidden. Meanwhile a national election for representatives of the National Assembly was announced.

Swept along by the revolutionary fever, these projects brought about the complete collapse of many sectors of the traditional society and significantly altered others. Their significance and far-flung effects were not less important than the political and military aspects of the revolution. What should be noted here is that in the years to come, exacerbated by war conditions and foreign intervention, these projects unleashed destructive forces which gradually eliminated the whole French-created social structure and its reformist remnants. It was not until a decade later that the revolutionary fever of 1945 could be used in reconstructing a part of the Vietnamese society.

V. REFLECTION ON THE "AUGUST REVOLUTION":

Examining the period between March and August 1945, a history student would have to pause a moment to ponder two major and related questions: "Why did Ho Chi Minh, not the non-Viet Minh groups, win in August 1945?" and "Whether the August Revolution was a revolution [*cach mang*] in its own right or simply a coup de force [*dao chinh*]?" It is certainly not easy to find a simple answer to each of these two questions.

A. WHY DID HO WIN?

The Viet Minh's triumph in August 1945 was a phenomenon in which both a "favorable situation" [*hoan canh thuan loi*] and the *ICP* leaders' ability to exploit these favorable factors were decisive.

One of the most favorable conditions was the sudden end of the war, resulting in a time gap in Viet-Nam: Between August 15 and September 12, 1945, the Allied occupation forces were not ready to move in while the Japanese were in disarray, preoccupied with their own security in a sea of restless and politicized Viets.

Although writers and Western eyewitnesses—especially the British and French authorities—vehemently accused the Japanese of sponsoring a puppet Vietnamese government or of remaining neutral, the reality in August 1945 was not as simple as such sweeping remarks. After the explosion of two atomic bombs and the Soviet Union's invasion of Manchuria, the Japanese military authorities in Indochina had much more to be concerned about than the local Viet affairs. At the higher echelons, the Japanese were preoccupied with procedure of surrender and their immediate future. As early as August 10, reports of Tokyo's request for a cease fire had reached the Southern Army General Headquarters in Da Lat. Five days later, after the Imperial Rescript for unconditional surrender had been publicized, Marshal Terauchi convened a meeting at his General Headquarters and ordered his subordinates to obey its provisions. On August 17, Terauchi ordered the 38th Army to cease-fire on the morning of August 21. On August 24—after receiving Allied demands to proceed promptly with the surrender—Terauchi moved the whole 38th Army north of the 16th parallel, probably to avoid possible French reprisals. In the following days, Japanese representatives flew to Rangoon (August 26) and Kunming

(September 2) to meet the British and Chinese authorities and receive Allied instructions for the surrender of the Japanese forces.¹¹⁹

During this chaotic period, local Japanese commanders reacted independently to the situation. Some proposed support for Bao Dai and Kim's government.¹²⁰ Others—in Lang Son, Phu Tho, Bac Giang [Phu Lang Thuong], Vinh Yen, Ha Dong and, especially, Thai Nguyen where *OSS* agents had led a Viet Minh attack on the Japanese garrison—the Japanese commanders stoutly defended their positions.¹²¹ Still others displayed sympathy for the Viet Minh, releasing *ICP* cadres and Viet Minh sympathizers from prisons,¹²² providing local Viet Minh cadres with weapon,¹²³ and even serving in the Viet Minh itself.¹²⁴ The Japanese even allowed the Viet Minh to take over the Hanoi radio station, one of the most powerful propaganda weapons.

The Japanese attitude toward the French were also dictated by local situation and personal decisions. Near Hai Phong, the Japanese arrested Pierre Messmer, the Free French Delegate, after his team had parachuted in near the coast and jailed them in Hai

¹¹⁹*JM 24*, p. [95] (last page); *JM 25*, pp. 34-35.

¹²⁰Bao Dai, *Le Dragon*, p. 117; Kim, *Gio bui*, pp. 93-94; Chu, *Hoi ky*, p. 286.

¹²¹Nitz, "Independence Without Nationalists?," p. 131.

¹²²*CMTT*, vol. I, pp. 108-111, 158-162, 211-213, 195-196, 344-346, and 63-80.

¹²³Kim, *Gio bui*, pp. 82-83; *CMTT*, vol. I, pp. 34-37.

¹²⁴According to a French source, by December 1945, there were 80 Japanese deserters served in the Viet Minh forces in Nam Bo. On April 15, 1946, there were 537 Japanese deserters in Indochina. See SHAT (Vincennes), 10H 4363. According to Nitz, seventy-one out of those deserters returned to Japan in 1954-1955; Nitz, "Independence Without Nationalists?," p. 131. As a matter of fact, Japanese deserters served in various Viet organizations. Some of them trained the Dai Viet cadres in Yen Bay (Tran Quoc Tuan Army School) before they were executed by Vu Hong Khanh in late 1946; Pham Van Lieu, *Tra ta song nui*, vol. I, pp. 150-151. Some served in the Southern religious sects. Others were employed by the Viet Minh. Still others served as French intermediaries to persuade the non-Communists leaving the Viet Minh.

Phong.¹²⁵ In Ha Noi, however, they followed instructions from Captain Patti, the OSS Chief north of the 16th parallel, and simply placed Sainteny's French intelligence team under house arrest at the former Governor-General's palace.¹²⁶ In Trung Bo, the Japanese also detained Nguyen Phuoc Dien's former aide-de-camp who was air dropped near Hue on August 28.¹²⁷ However, in Nam Bo, due to the British orders, the Japanese were more "friendly" to the French. On August 24, they brought Colonel Jean Cedile, the Free French Delegate for South Indochina, from Tay Ninh to Sai Gon in order to contact the French community and facilitate the French return.¹²⁸

In brief, the Japanese—besides their confusion and frustration—were more concerned about their immediate security than they were about local affairs in Viet Nam. They were refrained from taking reprisals for the accidental deaths of their troops during post-surrender street demonstration.¹²⁹ Their passive attitude was succinctly summed up in Marshal Terauchi's conversation with Giau, the ICP leader, in Sai Gon in August 1945: "Do whatever you like."¹³⁰

¹²⁵Sainteny, *Paix manquee*, p. 88; Chinh Dao, *Viet Nam Nien Bieu, 1939-1945 [Viet-Nam Chronicle, 1939-1975]*, 5 vols. (Houston: Van Hoa, 1996-2003), vol. I-A: 1939-1946, pp. 242, 248 [henceforth, VNNB, I-A].

¹²⁶*Ibid.*

¹²⁷CAOM (Aix), INF, Carton 133, d. 1207; VNNB, I-A, p. 252.

¹²⁸Cedile was air dropped to Tay Ninh on Aug 22, 1945. Seven days later, he was appointed as Deputy Delegate for southern Indochina; *JOFI* (Saigon), I, (15 Nov 1945), p.8. For his activities in Saigon, see CAOM (Aix), Conseiller Politique [CP], Carton 247.

¹²⁹Nitz, "Independence Without Nationalists?," p. 131.

¹³⁰Literarily, "*Faites ce que vous voudrez, moi, de toutes manieres, je serai pendu*" or "Do whatever you like, by all means I shall be hanged." Cited in Pierre Brocheux, "L'Occasion favorable," p. 166.

In 1945, however, the French preferred to see the Viet Minh as Japanese puppets for obvious reasons: the passion for cleaning up the "Jap Rats' Nest" was at high tide; meanwhile, as in the case of "German pilots" allegedly flying Japanese *Zeros* in Hongkong or at Pearl Harbor, the French refused to believe that the Viets knew how to fight with modern weapons. Consequently, the French and British identified all Viet corpses with Japanese-made uniforms, weapons and equipment as Japanese deserters.

In any case most Japanese—who had no desire for combat after their surrender—were preoccupied with possible Allied retribution. Under the prevailing conditions, they did not want to create new enemy, because for months, it had been clear that the *Etsumei* [Viet Minh] was supported by the *OSS* in China. Viet Minh propaganda loudly and effectively exaggerated its "alliance" with the Allies in fighting the Japanese Fascists. It was probably not until well after August 22 that most Japanese learned something about the Allied views on the Viet Minh. While in Rangoon the British made clear that they supported the re-establishment of French domination in Viet-Nam, American field commanders and diplomats in China and Ha Noi were as confused as the Japanese themselves regarding the Viet Minh. Meanwhile, on the spot the *OSS* agents actively supported their "friend of the forest," the Viet Minh. Major Thomas and his "Deer" team accompanied a Viet Minh attachment in an attack on the Japanese garrison in Thai Nguyen. Although in Hanoi Captain Patti acted as an authority on the issues of Allied prisoners [POWs], he displayed a close working relations with the Viet Minh leaders—he was even present at a parade of Viet Minh troops in Ha Noi. In Sai Gon, Lt.-Colonel A. Peter Dewey openly contacted the Viet Minh leaders, and at a time served as a mediator between the Viet Minh and the British authorities. Considering the Japanese position at that time, they

certainly did not have the energy to challenge the *OSS*-backed Viet Minh.¹³¹ In late 1945, the Japanese prisoners-of-war—after receiving a formal British order to crush the Viet Minh—showed that they were not as sympathetic to the Viet Minh as the British and French authorities had assiduously accused them of being.

The Chinese tolerance was also very significant for the survival of Ho's regime. Indeed, had the Chinese decided to exterminate Ho's DRVN in September 1945, the future of Viet Nam would have been different. Instead, the Chinese generals—though avoiding any formal relations with the DRVN—tactfully granted Ho a form of autonomy within the Chinese Military Administration above the 16th parallel. In addition, prior to the Chinese withdrawal—with or without the American intervention—the Chinese forced the French to sign an accord with Ho's government, thus providing the DRVN with some degree of political legitimacy. Although Ho was to fight a long war to defend this legitimacy against French duplicity and colonial ambitions, Chinese tolerance was no less important than Japanese passivity and *OSS* support.

The weaknesses of Kim's government also decisively affected the power struggle in Viet Nam during the days of August. Although both Kim and Ho came from the Nghe-Tinh area—the revolutionary cradle of modern Viet Nam—they were completely divergent figures. A teacher and an accomplished scholar who had trained numerous Viet intelligentsia, Kim lacked political charisma. Described in 1907 by his mentor as "a thinker" and later by many French writers as the most "balanced" scholar in integrating the Oriental and Occidental cultures, Kim was a sort of neo-Confucianist and had evident

¹³¹In 1974, after nearly three decades denouncing American imperialism and cruelty [ac], Giap referred to Patti's sympathy to the Viet Minh as an act of "unknown reasons;" *Khong the nao quen*, pp. 20-21 (2001:18).

monarchist tendencies. Like most educated men of his generation, Kim was deeply influenced by the popular Confucian image of gentlemen [*quan tu*] who must start with the process of self-enlightenment [*tu than*] in order to manage his family [*te gia*], to administer the nation [*tri quoc*] and pacify the world [*binh thien ha*]. Underlining this image is the concept of building virtue as a moral power, using one self as the moral mirror for the ignorant mass, the little people [*tieu dan*] who need to be educated and enlightened by a few sages. Such a gentleman, however, could be a good teacher only in a French-patronized society, not a leader of a nation engulfed by tidal waves of political changes involved nearly all great powers. In fact, Kim was accidentally forced into a political role only in late 1943 and had been apolitical up until that time.

In contrast, his archrival in August 1945, Ho Chi Minh, was an experienced professional revolutionary. After failing to secure a chance to become “useful to both France and Annam,” the assistant cook on board the *Admiral Latouche-Treville* traveled extensively abroad and, finally, was admitted to *agitprop* training schools in Moscow in 1923-1924. In the following two decades, he was busy organizing clandestine organizations for the *Comintern*, or providing intelligence services first to the Chinese and then the American *OSS*. He was a man of action well-versed in Marxist-Leninist revolutionary rhetoric and tactics. The differences between Kim and Ho were like those between the sun and the moon. With his charisma and street smartness, together with his western concept of power—which was to seize it and exercise it—Ho simply outmaneuvered Kim and was comfortably suited to the turbulent situation in the 1940's.

The contrast between these two is even clearer if one examines their close relationship. Kim was surrounded by a group of professionals respected in their own fields.

However, their political backgrounds were limited to services on French-created councils or committees (and conditioned by the French colonial culture). The most politicized among them, Ho Ta Khanh—viewed as "a radical" by his colleagues—was a self-proclaimed "anarchist" whose clique included a few talkative intellectuals. As it turned out, Khanh and members of the *Van Lang* group became pawns in the hands of an underground Communist cadre, Pham Ngoc Thach. As for the others, besides their level of education and powerful family ties, their political knowledge was not only shallow but self-serving. They had only a vague notion of "independence" or "freedom" and were plagued by theoretical problems while being ignorant of the practical aspects of politics. Intelligent as they were, such men like Phan Anh, the Minister of Youth, or Hoang Xuan Han, Minister of Education, had not had the opportunity to acquire administrative experience. Personal envy and ideological conflict soon tore them apart. They were unable to work together as a team in coping with the chaotic situation. In contrast, Ho's lieutenants were disciplined men of action. Their struggles for survival in French police stations, prison cells, mountain caves, jungle huts or miserable slums in foreign countries molded them into "steel men," the ablest agitators. Each of them was also boiling with personal bitterness, hatred and a desire for revenge against established society and the Catholic-dominated upper strata. As outlaws, their main goal was to destroy the whole existing law and order and everything related to it and created a wholly new Viet Nam. More important, they were tied tightly together by a common ideology and party apparatus. Although in 1945 the ICP was not as united as one might assume, it was still far and away the best organized party in Viet Nam at that time.

In theory at least in August 1945 Kim had the upper hand with an actual government in power. Three factors, however, made his strength a disadvantage. First, Kim inherited a government born out of the wreckage of a kingdom dominated by foreigners, which was plagued by abuses of power and corruption and profoundly hated by the masses. After coming to power, Kim refused to alienate the upper strata by carrying out serious administrative reform. Although he dismissed a number of bad administrators, these dismissals did not strengthen his position as he might have expected. Moreover, even if Kim and the Japanese had wanted to replace all the bad or mediocre mandarins, they lacked enough able men to replace them.

Second, the lesser officials had suffered economic hardship throughout the war years. The *Meigo* brought about an opportunity for promotion but economic pressures continued to grow. The civil servants gradually returned to normal habits of non-commitment and self-preservation not unique to Viet Nam.

Third and more menacing were the French and Viet Minh. The French threatened to punish all those who betrayed the mother country while promising better treatment of the Viets in the future. The Viet Minh not only denounced the Japanese "puppets" but also infiltrated Kim's administration. In Bac Bo, the Imperial Commissioner was virtually a Viet Minh sympathizer. In Trung Bo, Nguyen Phuoc Dien's Office Director leaned toward the Viet Minh and was instructed to discredit Kim within a broader scheme to force the King's abdication. In Nam Bo, underground Communists like Pham Ngoc Thach and Pham Van Bach worked closely with both the Japanese and other Vietnamese administrators.

When the Japanese surrender was announced, thus, the collapse of Kim's administration was inevitable. In contrast, the Viet Minh organization was managed

efficiently by the ICP, a well-disciplined party. Although regionalism and strategic viewpoints divided the ICP leadership in the 1940's, the ICP Central Committee had the final word on all matters. Moreover, ICP cadres were zealous and energetic in exploiting any chance to destroy the existing society and administration. Meanwhile, it should be repeated, underground ICP cadres and Viet Minh sympathizers infiltrated nearly all Kim's administrative offices and private organizations and worked to mobilize the civil servants and the masses. They often did their on-the-job training quite well.

No less important was the ratio of military forces. Kim's government did not even have a token Defense Minister. Beginning in June and July 1945, the Japanese allowed Kim to organize the Security Guards [*Bao An*] but their number was small. More importantly, Kim could not completely control this armed force and there is evidence that they had been deeply infiltrated by the Viet Minh as in the case of other youth organizations. Kim's only military strength, thus, was the Japanese themselves. The surrender of Japan's war machine inevitably brought with it the collapse of Kim's government. Meanwhile, although the Viet Minh armed force was modest at best in August 1945—it consisted of several hundred elite commandos trained by American *OSS* agents and a few thousand militiamen, ICP cadres and Viet Minh followers around the country—each of them held a revolutionary torch which ignited whatever it touched. As it turned out, the Viet Minh "Honorable Squads" and secret police dominated the political stage in the cities and urban centers. There is, however, no record telling how many of the Viet Minh cadres trained by the Americans, British and Chinese became members or leaders of these political death squads.

Psychological warfare was another Viet Minh advantage. In August 1945, for instance, Viet Minh propagandists harped on the theme that the United Nations Security Council recognized Ho's regime. In order to mobilize the masses, and at the same time raise funds to bribe the Chinese, Viet Minh propagandists alarmed public opinion with a possible famine in late 1945. Their tactic was so effective that even years later foreign scholars were still misguided by its half-truths. This error results from the overconfidence in the DRVN's propaganda and a lack of knowledge of the world rice distribution at that time. It is undeniable that there was a grain deficit in late 1945, but it had very little to do with the previous famine in late 1944 and the spring of 1945. One of the reasons of this grain deficit was the Autumn flood which destroyed about 50 percent of the seasonal harvest. More important, however, was the presence of over 150,000 Chinese troops in northern Indochina, together with their families. The Chinese occupying forces, for their own reasons, did not bring with them foodstuffs and confiscated all rice stocks in Hai Phong which might have been used to relieve the rice shortage. Furthermore, the Chinese demanded Ho to provide 5,000 tons of rice each month, nearly doubled the average consumption. Ho's DRVN, as the main rice supplier for the Chinese in exchange for his "independence" within the Chinese military administration, certainly had to "take a very dynamic, innovative effort" not to "avert further mass starvation" but to make up for the "grain deficit" caused by the Chinese. Fortunately, the Chinese and French authorities thereafter agreed to transport rice from the South to the North for Chinese consumption—one of the ground-breaking arrangements during the turbulent Sino-French negotiations regarding the French return to North Indochina. Also, it is noteworthy that Ho and his lieutenants at that time were attempting to seek legitimacy of their regime at all costs and

by all means. Besides messages to the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union and China, Ho's DRVN appealed to the UNRRA's assistance for a double purpose: to obtain some material aid from the UNRRA and to receive *de facto* recognition by an international organization sponsored by the Americans, because by that time no formal recognition whatsoever had been given to the DRVN. Added to these, coming to power with a nearly bankrupted economy, mollifying the people with "tax reforms" and bribing the Chinese generals for political tolerance, Ho badly needed money and all sort of private contributions. Ho and his aides creatively levied informal taxes via the Independence Fund, the Gold Week, the Cultural Week, etc. To stir up the threat of another terrible famine, thereafter, was also a means to collect as much as possible contributions from the Viets, especially those living abroad. Above all, however, was the Viet Minh's propaganda regarding the French "starvation policy" in Indochina—a valid charge. To put it simply, although "everyone knew at that time" that there was a potential "grain deficit" in late 1945, it was more psychological and political than real. It should be added that in late 1945, the international organ Combined Food Board [CFB] governed the rice distribution in the world. Faced with the menace of a second famine in Bac Bo, the CFB prohibited Indochina's export of rice to Europe and allowed the French to use surplus rice in the South to save the northerners from starvation. The French High Commissioner, however, delayed the shipment of Southern rice to Bac Bo to strangle Ho economically and to pressure the Chinese.¹³²

¹³²For details, see CAOM (Aix), Services économiques [SE], Generalites, carton 14; and AP, carton 3441 (d'Argenlieu's rice diplomacy); Philip D. Sprouse's telegram of October 9, 1945; reprinted in US Department of Defense, *U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, 12 books in 8 vols. (Washington: GPO, 1971), Bk I, C-77 ("grain deficit" in late 1945) and C-87 (*de facto* recognition) [henceforth, *US-Vietnam Relations*];

Non-Viet Minh activists could only bitterly interpret the initials "V.M." (stood for Viet Minh) as *Vem*, i.e. "liars." This accusation, of course could neither weaken Ho's credibility nor change the reality: Ho and his ICP cadres appear to have been the best at that time. Ho's charismatic leadership, his able and zealous lieutenants and cadres who were bound together by ideological ties and party apparatus, and his armed forces, together with the Allied support, provided Ho with a clear upper hand in the struggle for power in August 1945.

B. REVOLUTION OR "*COUP DE FORCE*?"

Although it is now generally agreed that the Viet Minh's triumph in August 1945 was a revolution, the term was not unanimously accepted in Viet Nam at that time. Some writers referred to the Communist-led insurrection as *cuop chinh quyen* [stealing the authority] or *dao chinh* [coup de force]. These terms angered Dang Xuan Khu, the ICP Secretary General, leading him to write an article entitled "*Cach Mang hay Dao chinh?*" [Revolution or Coup de Force] in the *Liberation Flag* on September 12, 1945. Although his arguments—probably hastily written—were less than convincing in defending the term "revolution," Khu correctly pointed out that though the ICP-led seizure of power was certainly more than a *coup de force*, it was still an incomplete revolution [in the Marxist sense].¹³³

At first glance, the ICP's victory was indeed a *coup de force*: The Viet Minh prevailed over an elite-centered Vietnamese government under the banner of the victorious allies. In a sense, like de Gaulle in France, Ho simply overthrew a Fascist-aligned

¹³³*Co Giai Phong*, Nos. 16, 12 Sept 1945.

Vietnamese government. With this in mind, in September and October 1945, Ho insisted that he had seized power from the Japanese and their puppets, and painstakingly enclosed a copy of King Nguyen Phuoc Dien's Proclamation of Abdication in his message to the Truman Administration.¹³⁴

The Allies, of course, ignored Ho's case for international legality and recognized French sovereignty over Indochina. In the north, the Chinese Occupying authorities only approved Ho's de facto authority—or "independence" — provided that Ho continued to provide them with good service and respected the Chinese Military Administration north of the 16th parallel. They authorized passes for government vehicles and permission for street demonstrations and gatherings, and squeezed whatever Ho could collect from the masses via the fund raising campaigns. They arranged a coalition government between the ICP and pro-Chinese leaders, including Nguyen Hai Than and Nguyen Tuong Tam and forced Ho to dissolve the ICP prior to the establishment of the January 1, 1946 Provisional Coalition Government. They even arrested Ho for hours to investigate on the death of a Frenchman.¹³⁵

Meanwhile, in the South, the British occupation was simply a shield covering up the French reconquest. The Anglo-French alliance, with forced service from rearmed Japanese prisoners-of-war, attempted to destroy Ho's authority. It was not until March

¹³⁴Letter of 22 Oct. 1945, Ho Chi Minh to Truman; *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, Bk 1, C-80. Also see Ho's declaration of independence on September 2, 1945; and Ho's Order No. 5 (5 Sept 1945) in *Cuu Quoc*, 13 Sept 1945.

¹³⁵According to Vo Nguyen Giap, Ho was interrogated for a whole day in November 1945; Giap, *Khong the nao quen*, pp. 107-108 (2001:96-98). The French report that the incident took place on February 7, 1946—about three weeks after the assassination of Beylin, the local Director of the *Indochina Bank*; CAOM (Aix), INF, Carton 126, d. 1125; Chinh Dao, *VNNB, I-A: 1939-1946*, p. 304. It is not clear whether Ho was arrested twice, or Giap's memory was not sharp.

1946—thanks to a complicated arrangement among the powers—that the French representative in Hanoi agreed to sign a temporary Convention with Ho and, thus, provided him with a certain degree of legitimacy.¹³⁶

Ho's triumph, however, also marked the peak of the revolutionary tide which had flowed in Viet Nam under Kim's regime. The Japanese purge of French rule in March 1945 initiated a true revolution in the country, embodied in a general process of *Vietnamization*. Politically, the rise of Kim's government undermined the French-created administration, bringing the Viets to the highest offices of the bureaucracy. Socially, the Viet elite and notables had reached the social apex where the French had seated themselves for eight decades. Culturally, Kim's projects—with or without Japanese approval and support—stimulated a break from the French-patronized set of values. The destruction of French statues in the parks, the renaming of regions, cities, and streets, the use of the Vietnamese language in offices and examinations, and the ardent anti-French tone in publications, newspapers, and radio channels deeply affected the urbanites and, especially, the youths. In August 1945, when Ho arrived in Hanoi, he enjoyed at least for a short time an independent and unified Viet Nam. Had Kim not been in power as the result of the Japanese purge of the French, Ho would have had a difficult time to stand high at the Flag Pole Square on September 2, 1945 as the liberator and president of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam.

No less significant was a social revolution which swept over the countryside. Aggravated by the famine of At Dau and economic hardship, as well as the breakdown of

¹³⁶SHAT (Vincennes), 10H [141 & 143]; Sainteny, *Paix manquee*, pp. 180-184. See Vu, "Social and Cultural Change" (1984), Chapters XII and XIII.

social order during the time gap between the Japanese surrender and the arrival of the Allied occupying forces, Ho and his ICP launched a revolution, replacing the upper strata by the less esteemed elements of the former society. Some Communist projects—such as confiscation of industrial plants and lands from the reactionaries and counter-revolutionaries, compulsory education, equality between men and women and between Viets and non-Viet ethnic minorities as well as popular suffrage—brought about a new tide of revolution from below which wiped out the incomplete revolution from above initiated by Kim's government.

The August Revolution, it should be noted, was far from being a revolution of the proletariat. In 1945, *Cong San* [Pooling Property], the Vietnamese translation of communism, was unpopular. One of Ho's bodyguards, of Tay origin, bluntly asked him how the Viet Minh League could also consist of *cong san*.¹³⁷ Ho's effort to disguise his Communist affiliation also strongly attests to the unpopularity of Marxist-Leninism among the Viets at that time. Nevertheless, the Viet Minh seizure of power in August 1945 brought the ICP to center of Vietnamese politics. This was a great achievement for the Communist cadres: they were to have the whole administrative structure and the national war of resistance against the French to consolidate the ICP and to impose Marxist-Leninism upon the society and its people.

In brief, although it is customary to call Ho's seizure of power in August "the August revolution," this was simply the most violent phase of a broader revolution which had begun as early as March 1945 under a different regime. In retrospect, Kim's

¹³⁷An Quan, *Theo Bac di chien dich [In Company of the Uncle in the Military Campaigns]* (Hanoi: Van hoc giai phong, 1976), p. 21.

government contributed greatly to the rise of Ho and his ICP. Ironically, Kim's government had usually been dismissed as a Japanese puppet which achieved only token independence and paper reforms. Certainly, these allegations have been mainly stemmed from political biases of official chroniclers in Viet Nam and their sympathizers. It has, however, come the proper time to return to the historical actors their historical environment.

It may be true, as Vo Nguyen Giap wrote in his 1974 memoirs, that in August 1945 the Viet Minh "pulled down the tarnished-yellow flags—a product of the brief Japanese occupation—as though plucking away wormy leaves." However, Kim's achievements will not "sink into oblivion, without leaving a trace."¹³⁸ The existence of Kim's government alone greatly facilitated Ho's seizure of power.

An irony of history, as state a Vietnamese proverb, is that "the winner becomes a king, while the loser a bandit" [*duoc lam vua thua lam giac*].

¹³⁸Giap, *Khong the nao quen*, p. 22 (2001:19).