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Building the United Front:

The Communist Movement in Vietnam, 1930-1954

It has been nearly half a century since the birth of the communist movement in Vietnam. The road has not always been an easy one: years of harrassment by French colonial authorities; two smarting defeats during the decade immediately preceding the Second World War; the long and frequently bloody war of resistance against the French after the Pacific War; the frustrating peace at Geneva in 1954 capped off by the arrival of the Americans to replace the French. Then, of course, two more inconclusive decades of struggle in an effort to seize the South. On the whole, however, the history of the communist movement in Vietnam has been a saga of success, a chronicle of the rise of a small and elitist revolutionary organization in French-controlled Indochina to a highly effective political movement capable of controlling half of the population of Vietnam and contesting seriously for control over the entire nation.

What is the secret of the extraordinary success of communism in Vietnam? Why has the communist movement been so successful in recent decades, not only against its internal rivals, but also against the fighting forces of two powerful Western nations? Questions such as these lie behind the search for the meaning of the present conflict in Vietnam, and a small but growing body of scholars is at work in an effort to find answers. At this point, scholarship on Vietnamese communism is still at a relatively primitive level (compared, for example, with the vast amount of materials available on communism in China), but the gaps in our knowledge are gradually being filled and we are now at the point where we can begin to draw some tentative conclusions.

The present paper cannot by any means attempt to provide conclusives answers to the questions above. Rather, it is an attempt to look at one aspect of the problem, to draw together some of the findings of recent scholarship in an effort to trace the historical development of the strategy which over the years has served to forge the communist movement into a highly effective revolutionary organization, perhaps the most effective political weapon of its kind in contemporary Southeast Asia. The approach

used here is unblushingly historical, for the strategy which has been used to such great effect against the Saigon government and its American ally in the last two decades did not emerge full-blown with the birth of the first Marxist-Leninist party in Vietnam. Like its ideological counterpart in China, the Vietnamese communist movement has developed its present revolutionary strategy only as a result of painful years of trial and error, of dizzy success and frustrating failure. And the movement today, in a very real sense, is a product of those forty-odd years of growth.

The present assessment is based on a variety of sources, in France, in the United States, and within the communist movement in Vietnam. The latter source is particularly useful, for historians of the D.R.V. appear to approach the task of understanding the history of the movement with a minimum of ideological dogmatism. Most important, however, have been the newly-released archival materials available at the old Ministry of Colonies in Paris, some of which (particularly reports by the French sûreté in Indochina) throw considerable light on communist activities during the vitally important period before the Second World War.¹ Unfortunately, the French archives are not open for the period after the war; nor has research on the period of the Franco-Vietminh conflict by communist historians in North Vietnam been as tenacious to get at the truth. Our picture of communist strategy during the post-war period, therefore, is in some respects more speculative. Hopefully, this problem will be remedied in the near future.

Planting the Seed of Marxism From a conceptual point of view, it might be said that Vietnamese communism was born in 1920, when Lenin enunciated his "Theses on the National and Colonial Questions" at the Second Congress of the Communist International in Moscow. For Lenin's famous theses were the first serious attempt by a European communist leader to adapt Marx's doctrine of class struggle to the predominantly agrarian, pre-capitalist societies in Asia. Until 1920, the Marxist doctrine of social revolution was generally seen to have relevance only to the capitalist West. With Lenin's theses, Marxism thereby developed broad world implications, for com-

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munist movements could now be formed and play a meaningful role in stimulating social change in Asian societies even before the advent of capitalism. The key to success, above all, lay in Lenin's concept of a "four-class alliance", by which the small Asian working class (led by its vanguard organization, the local communist party) could form alliances with other progressive and anti-imperialist classes (the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie, and the national bourgeoisie) against the common enemies of Asian feudalism and Western imperialism. Once this four-class alliance (or, in more practical terms, the bourgeois-led nationalist movements which had already come into existence in opposition to colonialism in Asia) had, with the active but independent cooperation of the communist party, overthrown the colonial regime, the "bourgeois-democratic" revolution would then "grow over" into a socialist revolution led by the proletariat and the communist party. At that point, power would be seized from the indigenous middle class.

Viewed in the abstract, Lenin's theses seemed like a fairly simple and straightforward approach to the creation of a communist movement in Asia. In practice, of course, the "four-class alliance" concept presented a number of difficult problems. What role should the communist party play in such an alliance? Should it insist on playing a leading role or accept the leadership of bourgeois elements? To what extent should it subordinate its own interests in the alliance? Precisely who were the "progressive" elements with whom the party could cooperate? Finally, and most important, at what stage should the party cease to cooperate with bourgeois elements in the alliance and attempt to seize power for itself? In the brief years before his death, Lenin provided some broad guidance, but many of these questions evaded precise definition. "Local conditions" would be the determining factor.

In any event, if Lenin's theses did not solve all the coming problems of Asian revolutionaries, they were the decisive first step in the formation of a strategy for communist movements in Asia. And Lenin's proposals had unleashed a chain of events which resulted half a decade later in the formation of the first truly Marxist political organization in Vietnam.

For it was as a result of reading a French-language version of the theses in Paris that the young Nguyen Ai Quoc (later to be known to the world as Ho Chi Minh) decided to accept Marxism as a tool for achieving the liberation of his Vietnamese countrymen, and thus in 1920 became a founding member of the French Communist Party. And it was through the medium of Nguyen Ai Quoc and a handful of fellow emigrés in France that communism would be first brought to Vietnam in the mid-1920s. News of the Bolshevik revolution and articles on Marxism had begun to filter into the Vietnamese press, despite the strenuous attempts of governmental authorities to prevent the importation of such subversive material. It was in 1925, however, that the first major step toward the building of a Vietnamese communist party took place. In that year, Nguyen Ai Quoc, who had spent over a year receiving training as a communist agent in Moscow, returned to South China as a member of Borodin's Comintern mission to the Chinese Kuomintang, with the assigned duty of forming the first communist movement in French Indochina.

Vietnam in 1925 was ripe for the new leadership that the young revolutionary hoped to provide. There had been an active resistance to French control in Vietnam for several decades, most recently in the anti-French scholar-patriot movement led by the intrepid nationalist Phan Boi Chau. By 1925, however, Phan's movement had run its course. French oppression, the death or imprisonment of many of its leaders, the innate weakness of the movement and, finally, the arrest of Phan himself by French police in 1925, all contributed to its decline in the mid-1920s.

The dispersal of Phan Boi Chau's movement did not mark the end of resistance to French rule in Vietnam. A new generation of Vietnamese - urban, middle class, increasingly Westernized in schooling and outlook, was beginning to form in the big cities. This new generation - and particularly the sons and daughter of the traditional mandarin elite - continued to sense its obligation to serve the proud heritage of Vietnam. In 1925, however, this inchoate sense of national identity lacked a concrete political focus. There were a few quasi-political parties like the moderate Saigon-based Constitutionalist Party under Bui Quang Chieu and its slightly more radical counterpart, the

Youth Party; in the Center and the North, ex-prisoners and student groups in the major urban centers made a few tentative efforts to organize. This nationalist effervescence lacked any real coherence, however. Factionalism, regionalism, and vacillation over strategy and tactics kept the various groups from finding common ground, and although the colonial authorities kept an eye on their activities, they presented no serious challenge to French rule.²

The Revolutionary Youth League The disorganized character of Vietnamese nationalism presented Nguyen Ai Quoc with a glowing opportunity to build a communist organization which would become the leading element in a vast anti-colonial movement dedicated to achieving national independence. By all indications, Nguyen attempted to follow Lenin's instructions to the letter. In early 1925 he began patiently to assemble his following - small groups of exiles in South China, remnants of Phan Boi Chau's old organization in Vietnam now left leaderless with the arrest of the old patriot - and in June he formed the first avowedly Marxist political organization in Vietnam - the Revolutionary Youth League (Viet Nam Thanh Nien Cach Menh Dong Chi Hoi). In recognition of the fact that most of the founding members had only a nodding acquaintance with Marxist-Leninist theory and practice, the new organization did not formally consider itself a communist party. Its goals were general, stressing patriotism and only the basics of Marxist theory. Its headquarters were located in South China, but it aimed at building up a dedicated membership from all progressive classes in all areas of Vietnam. Within two years it had become one of the largest and most cohesive secret political organizations in Vietnam.

Creating a Marxist revolutionary party in Vietnam was only half of the problem, of course. The broader and perhaps more difficult task was to mould an effective anti-colonial force out of the disparate nationalist groups in the three regions of Vietnam. Ironically, shortly after Nguyen Ai Quoc formed his League, the disarray in the nationalist movement began to evaporate as two new nationalist parties arose - one in the Center and the other in the North - and both for a time became active rivals of the League for support among patriotic groups in Vietnam. In Annam, ex-prisoners from Poulo

Condore and radical students from Hanoi coalesced to form a quasi-Marxist organization, the Revolutionary Party, which officially espoused Marxist aims but vacillated between revolution and reformism.³ In Tonkin, students and workers formed in 1927 a revolutionary party - the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang or VNQDD - in direct imitation of Sun Yat-sen's Kuomintang in China. Unlike the Revolutionary Party, the VNQDD leadership showed no interest in Marxism or social revolution.

From the evidence available it appears that the League did make sporadic approaches to its nationalist competitors with the ultimate aim of forming an alliance. Talks with the Revolutionary Party took place on several occasions, but although both shared a commitment to Marxist ideals, mutual suspicion, personal pique, and disagreement over strategy were too great to overcome. The radical members of the League distrusted the "reformist" character of the Revolutionary Party leadership, while the moderates in the latter disliked the League's tendency to violence. The history of the negotiations, which dragged on intermittently until 1930, more than anything else serve to disclose the degree of mutual suspicion within the nationalist movement as a whole, and the generally inflexible attitude of the League's Canton leadership.

Even greater problems plagued the negotiations with the VNQDD. The latter, although avowedly revolutionary, was suspicious of the communists, and approached the possibility of alliance with considerable mistrust. Tentative contacts took place on several occasions, but no serious negotiations ever took place, and scattered evidence indicates that the fault lay with both sides.⁴ Only with difficulty did the two parties avoid open conflict, and a bitter rivalry developed, particularly in the North, where the VNQDD was strongest. By the late 1920s, the VNQDD began to identify more closely with Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang regime in China, and became more openly suspicious of communism. From that point, hopes for an alliance faded.

League efforts to forge an alliance in Cochin China had mixed results. Many members of the smaller radical parties were ultimately brought into the League, but the most prominent party in the South - the Constitutionalists -

was considered insufficiently anti-imperialist to be a genuine prospect for an alliance.

In sum, the League came up empty in its early efforts to create a large anti-imperialist alliance under its direction. It was relatively successful in building up its own strength within Vietnam, and it is probable that by the late 1920s it had achieved a greater degree of influence than any of its major rivals, but it had not succeeded in the larger task of forging a nationalist alliance sufficiently powerful to threaten French rule in Indochina.⁵ The reasons for its partial failure were not entirely within its control, of course. Regional bonds often took priority over the national cause, and personal loyalties commonly took precedence over ideological beliefs. Such attitudes could not be expected to break down in the space of a few years, either within the League or among its rivals. Further, the League had some difficulty in building a mass base. Evidence available indicates that the composition of the party was strongly middle class in background. A surprising number came from traditional scholar-gentry families. While there was talk of broadening the proletarian base, of reaching out to the peasant masses, in these early years such statements represented the ideal more than the reality; like the early communist movement in China its members often found it hard to avoid an attitude of condescension toward the common people.

In any event, by late 1928 the League's failure to form a Leninist-style alliance became less important, for the Sixth Congress of the Comintern meeting in July had altered the policy on forming united fronts with nationalist groups in Asian societies. Smarting under the failure of the Leninist strategy in China, where Chiang Kai-shek had struck at his communist ally in April 1927, the Comintern issued a new world strategy for communist parties in colonial and semi-colonial societies which restricted the role of alliances with bourgeois nationalist parties. Assessing the world situation as rapidly reaching a period of crisis in the capitalist world, the Comintern suggested that alliances with bourgeois parties in Asian societies were dangerous since much of the middle class would ultimately pull back from revoluti

Rather, communists were to strive for the "united front from below", to strengthen the mass base by weaning mass support away from rival parties at the base level in preparation for the revolutionary "high wave" which was sure to come in the near future. The new policy appears to have had little effect on the strategy of the League, which had had little success with bourgeois parties in any case, except to make it doubly cautious on alliance with the VNQDD, now increasingly identified with the renegade Kuomintang in China. In one area the Comintern admonished the League to improve its work - to "Bolshelize" the party by moving into the factories in order to reduce the strongly middle class quality of the League's membership.

Split, Reunification and Revolt The year 1929 inaugurated a period of rapid change in the affairs of the communist movement in Vietnam. Ideological and regional strains had been evident in the organization during the first years of its existence and erupted into full-scale conflict in 1929. In May, the League was scheduled to hold its first party congress in Hong Kong, and each of the main regions in Vietnam was to send delegates. In North Vietnam dissatisfaction with League policies had been on the increase, and the regional leadership, under the prodding of Tran Van Cung, had come to feel that necessity for a tightening of the ideological quality and for the formation of a formal communist party. In early 1929, Tran Van Cung and his colleagues formed a communist cell in Tonkin and prepared to bring before the May congress a formal proposal to transform the League into a communist party.

The Tonkinese leadership had been able to win support from its regional constituency for the proposal, but was less successful in Hong Kong. Although many delegates at the Congress were allegedly sympathetic to the proposal, the League leadership under Lam Duc Thu was opposed to the idea for a variety of reasons, and the proposal was voted down. Angered at the rebuff, the North Vietnamese delegation resigned abruptly from the Congress and returned home, where it immediately formed an Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in the summer of 1929. The remaining delegates in Hong Kong, having earlier protested that the time was not ripe for forming a communist party,

soon agreed to move rapidly in that direction. Once it became evident that the rebellious ICP had won considerable support from the League at the mass level, the leadership of the League convened a meeting and hastily formed a rival Annamite Communist Party (ACP) in August. To compound the growing confusion, in the Center, the radical elements in the now-disintegrating Revolutionary Party renamed their own organization the Indochinese Communist League.

The details of the split and the negotiations need not detain us here. Suffice it to say that for several months the three competing organizations tried to discredit the Marxist-Leninist credentials of each of its rivals (the most usual criticism, following the fashion in Moscow, was Menshevik) in a series of charges and counter-charges. The Comintern, not surprisingly, was aghast at the sight of squabbling Marxist factions in Vietnam and angrily instructed the three groups to negotiate a settlement. When early attempts failed, the Comintern dispatched Nguyen Ai Quoc, who had been out of contact with party affairs since mid-1927, to return to South China and, as Comintern representative, obtain a settlement. In February of 1930, the now veteran communist convened a secret meeting of representatives of the rival factions in Hong Kong and achieved a rapid agreement on unification. To soothe angry egos, he avoided assessing the blame and called for a new party with a new name, the Vietnam Communist Party (within a year, the Comintern was to decree another name change -- back to Indochinese Communist Party). For the first but certainly not the last time, Nguyen Ai Quoc had demonstrated that unique ability to calm ruptured tempers and heal party splits, a quality that would be so important in guaranteeing the survival and continued development of the communist movement in Vietnam.

With the formation of an official communist party, the movement entered the second stage of its brief existence. Having in the eyes of the Comintern finally reached the stage of ideological maturity, it could not concentrate on the main task of building up its strength within Vietnam and preparing for the ultimate seizure of power from the French. In the context of the

world conditions at the time, it had entered its new existence at a propitious period in the history of the modern world. Since the Sixth Congress in 1928, the communist movement had claimed to discern the rise of a revolutionary high wave in the capitalist world, an assumption that attained added weight when the depression struck the Western world in 1929. In the view of Moscow, a high wave against world capitalism and imperialism, spurred by the economic depression, was fast approaching and would soon breakout in a number of countries around the world. Whether Indochina was such an area the Comintern was not specific, but all communist parties were expected to prepare for the possibility of local crisis conditions which would present an opportunity for a seizure of power.

As it turned out, the possibility was not long in coming in Vietnam, for 1930 indeed marked a temporary high wave in the level of anti-French discontent there. The first indication was an abortive revolt by the VNQDD at military camps scattered around the fringe of the Red River Delta in February. Indications are that the VNQDD leadership saw little hope for success, but was driven to action by desperation. The ICP, scarcely formed, did not rise in response, apparently in the belief that the situation was not ripe.⁶ Within weeks of the VNQDD uprising, however, indications of discontent arose elsewhere. Strikes at the Phu Rieng rubber plantation near Bien Hoa near Saigon were soon followed by work stoppages and riots at factories at Vinh in the Center and at Nam Dinh in the North. These incidents were economic in origin, and symbolized dissatisfaction with local working conditions more than the desire for a nation-wide revolt, but there is no doubt that local communist cadres, acting in accordance with Comintern instructions to raise the level of consciousness among all potential-ly revolutionary classes, were actively involved in stimulating the activity.

By mid-summer, discontent had extended to other areas throughout Vietnam and began to involve peasants - particularly in the Center where rural areas had been hard hit by high taxes, mandarin corruption, and flood conditions. In early September, full-scale revolt broke out in the central provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh and, under prodding by local communist

cadres, peasant rioters seized control at the district level and began to establish village "soviets" which drove the traditional leadership under cover and confiscated the land of the wealthy for distribution to the poor.⁷ The French reacted swiftly to the challenge with military counter-measures and severe repression against the local populace, and by early the next spring had begun to bring the situation back under control. The soviet movement finally collapsed in early summer, and the area lapsed back into sullen silence.

The famous Nghe-Tinh uprising of 1930-1931 has been correctly viewed as a significant point in the history of the communist movement in Vietnam. It was at once a glorious page in the history of the party and a serious setback in its quest for power. In one sense it seriously weakened the communist movement and, at least temporarily, undermined its influence in Vietnam. On the other hand, it provided a model for the later development of the Vietnamese revolution and, in the eyes of the party, a number of lessons for future behavior. For our purposes, the period raises a number of interesting questions concerning the developing strategy of the communist movement and the role of the Comintern in forming that strategy. In the first place, to what degree was the party - and the Comintern - responsible for the revolt? This is not altogether an easy question to answer, both because of the lack of evidence and as a matter of definition. A balanced view of the Nghe-Tinh soviets tends to support the view that the party leadership and the Comintern were only indirectly responsible for the uprising. Evidence from a variety of sources indicates that neither the Comintern nor the party leadership, newly formed, had called for an uprising. Indeed, when the soviets began to be formed, the top echelons of the party criticized the formation of the soviets as "premature", although it did direct party branches in other areas to give as much support as possible to the rebels in the Center.⁸ Presumably neither the party nor the Comintern believed that conditions in Vietnam had reached the stage where a nation-wide insurrection was appropriate, and the level of discontent in the Center probably surprised them. Primary responsibility for the revolt appears to lie at the provincial level of the party,

where the party committee, perhaps deliberately, decided to turn an essentially spontaneous series of incidents into a regional uprising.

On the other hand, the Comintern cannot be totally absolved of responsibility. It was the Sixth Congress' enthusiastic (and ultimately mistaken) assumption that the crest of a revolutionary wave was approaching which probably misled the local Vietnamese leadership into channeling the economic discontent into a major uprising. By calling for local communist parties to rely on their own estimate of local conditions, the Comintern was playing with fire. It was the ICP which got burnt.

Secondly, what effect did the revolt have on later communist strategy in Vietnam? Most obviously, the revolt taught the communists a vivid lesson that the Comintern had given only in an abstract sense: local crisis conditions were not sufficient to justify a major insurrection unless a revolutionary situation existed throughout the country. French archival sources show that revolutionary sentiment in 1930 was not nation-wide. Large areas of Vietnam were quiet - particularly in the cities and in the crowded Red River Delta. If the Nghe-Tinh soviet period taught anything, it demonstrated the need for strong centralized control over the decision-making process.⁹

Further, the revolt showed that the regional party leadership failed to respond to the rapidly -changing situation by formulating an effective revolutionary strategy. An essential political weapon in the anti-colonialist arsenal - a broad united front of all progressive classes against the common enemy - was only imperfectly realized during the period of the revolt. The party's central committee had decreed the formation of a nation-wide Anti-imperialist Front (following the somewhat restrained view of the post-1928 Comintern, it was to be very cautious in uniting with middle class elements), but the local leadership in the Center, fed by its own doctrinal prejudices and the pent-up resentment of the poor peasantry, permitted village revolutionaries to engage in an uncontrolled and sometimes frenzied attack on wealthy elements in the area of the uprising. While some collaborator elements in the region of the uprisings perhaps owed a "blood debt" to the people, later communist historians confess, the revolutionaries were carried away in an excess of anti-feudal bloodletting which needlessly alienated

moderate and potentially anti-French elements elsewhere in Vietnam. As the communists in the Center grew increasingly isolated, the French were able to concentrate their forces and gradually restore control. The party was not slow to realize ^{that} a more moderate social policy was required during the period of an uprising to avoid isolation from other elements in society.

There were, of course, promising aspects to the revolt. It was the most serious revolt against French rule in Indochina since the end of the previous century, and it demonstrated the degree to which the Vietnamese people, even in a relatively limited area, could be motivated to rise against colonial rule. And, for the first time peasants and workers showed a willingness to cooperate with each other in the common cause. Had the rebel leaders been in a position to defend their gains and establish a revolutionary foothold in Nghe-Tinh, the revolt might have been a useful first step leading to a nation-wide insurrection in the not-too-distant future. Here again, the experience of Nghe-Tinh taught the need for a revolutionary strategy which prepared for the possibility of defeat.

The Nghe-Tinh Soviet movement, then, was both a tragedy and an educational experience. It was ill-conceived, ill-led, ill-prepared, but it was a laboratory in which the party's strategy (or lack of it) was first tested. The strategy was found wanting, and the party would not soon again risk its gains in all ill-prepared revolt.

Retrenchment Whatever the long-term benefits of the events of 1930-1931 in Central Vietnam, there is no minimizing the immediate consequences to the young communist organization. In the course of the uprisings and its aftermath, the French sûreté made strenuous attempts to destroy the ICP. Hundreds of communists were arrested and several executed, including a number of party leaders. Communist figures estimate that nearly 90% of the active leadership of the party was eliminated by French police activity, and the party's organizational apparatus at all levels was badly decimated.

The early 1930s were thus necessarily a period of patient party rebuilding. With the internal apparatus nearly totally destroyed, the ICP was forced to find new talent for the challenging days ahead. Fortunately, the Comintern had been making an effort to train potential young leaders at the famous Uni-

iversity of the Toilers of the East (the Stalin School) in Moscow. Between 1925 and 1932, according to French police sources, 34 Vietnamese communists received training of from one to three years at the school. With the ICP badly in need of an infusion of new talent, the Comintern accelerated its training program in Moscow and began to send back graduates of the Stalin School to Vietnam in order to rebuild the party apparatus. By 1932 two temporary headquarters abroad - one in South China and the other in Thailand - had been set up to supervise the revival of the party from a safe distance beyond the border. A number of Stalin School graduates were seized by the French, but enough got through to provide a new leadership for the party. Foremost among the new crop of leaders were Le Hong Phong, an ex-student at the Aviation School in Leningrad who was put in charge of the ICP's South China bureau, and Tran Van Giau, a Stalin School graduate who led the party to a strong revival in Cochin China. Slowly but surely, the party began to revive, primarily at the local level and in the factories and villages of Cochin China.

The changing leadership of the party in the early 1930s was not reflected in party strategy, however. Until 1935, ICP programs and directives continued to reflect the current Comintern line - united front from below, concentration of the party's work in urban working class areas, and a conscious policy of subordinating the visibility of the peasantry within the party. By all indications, the party leadership attempted to follow Comintern policies and made no immediate attempt to imitate the move toward a new strategy taking place in China. To underline its own attitude, the Comintern in Moscow refused to admit any but worker candidates to the Stalin School.¹¹ As seen from Moscow, the road to revolution was still the Bolshevik road.

For four years, then, the ICP presented a low profile in Vietnam. This apparent inactivity was somewhat misleading, however, and did not delude the French intelligence services, who consistently warned Paris of the effectiveness of the party's rebuilding effort and their own growing inability to deal with the situation. The sûreté was not fantasizing in its worried assessment of the situation, for communist efforts were indeed beginning to pay

dividends, particularly in the South, where Tran Van Giau led a revitalized regional apparatus, while in Saigon overt party workers combined temporarily with Trotskyites in publishing the left-wing journal La Lutte and winning considerable support in Saigon municipal elections. Curiously, efforts in Annam and Tonkin had less success. Peasants in the Center were apparently cowed, if resentful, while communist organizers, for reasons which are not entirely clear, had little success in the delta region near Hanoi.

Encouraged by the improving situation, the new party leadership in South China began to plan for a national congress in 1934 to set forth a new political program for the ICP. Under the direction of Le Hong Phong, a preliminary meeting was held late in 1934, and a formal meeting took place the next March in the Portuguese colony of Macao.¹² With both Le Hong Phong and Nguyen Ai Quoc in Moscow attending the pivotal meeting of the Seventh Comintern Congress, which was clearly about to set forth a new world strategy for the communist movement, the March congress had a provisional air about it. In the absence of clear directives from Moscow, the Macao congress drew up a program not substantially changed from that of the previous four years. Shortly after the close of the congress, however, Le Hong Phong returned from Moscow with the "popular front" strategy adopted by the Seventh Comintern Congress. Fearing isolation as a result of the rise of fascism in Germany and Japan, Stalin directed the communist parties in the world movement to broaden their alliances. Once again, "united fronts from above" were to be formed with moderate bourgeois parties against the menace of fascism in Europe and Asia.

On seeing the disparity between the new Comintern policy and the party program formulated at the ICP's Macao congress, Le Hong Phong called a plenary meeting of the central committee and a new program was drawn up in accordance with the new popular front strategy. The rapid shift in world strategy must have been confusing to the leadership as well as to the rank and file of ICP membership, but from all indications it appears that the party accepted the new policy with relatively little grumbling. There are signs that some party members were disgruntled at the prospects of initiating cooperation with bourgeois nationalist groups, and a few secret workers expressed

their scorn of the "politicos" who worked openly among non-communist groups. On the whole, however, the party shifted to a popular front strategy with little open expression of discontent. As Nguyen Ai Quoc was to write from abroad, the new strategy had broad implications for ICP policy:

At the present time the CPI should not make excessive demands (independence, parliament, etc.) so as not to fall into a snare prepared by the Japanese fascists. The party must limit itself to demanding democratic rights, freedom of organization, assembly and press, general amnesty for political prisoners - struggle for the right of legal activities. To realize these goals the party must successfully form a wide national-democratic front which would unite not only the local population of Indochina, but progressive French forces, not only of the working class, but also representatives of the national bourgeoisie.¹³

One suspects that he, at any rate, was pleased at the new direction world communist strategy was taking.

The Period of the Popular Front The change to a new strategy in 1936 coincided with similar changes taking place in France, where a popular front government, including socialists and with the support of the French Communist Party, took office in 1936 and, as part of its program, promised to convene a study commission on conditions in French colonies. The proposed commission quickly became the focus of ICP efforts to form a popular front in Indochina. In the summer of 1936, the radical journalist Nguyen An Ninh, a sympathizer but not a formal member of the ICP, suggested in the pages of La Lutte that Vietnamese progressives should emulate the examples of nationalist groups in French Africa and form an Indochinese Congress (Dong Duong Dai Hoi) to gather the complaints of the Vietnamese people and pass them on to the proposed Colonial Commission when it made its trip to Indochina. Nguyen's suggestion was immediately supported by the ICP as a handy instrument to achieve broad nationalist cooperation against Japanese fascism as well as to raise the level of revolutionary consciousness among the mass of the population. Party journals called for the formation of hundreds of "action committees" (uy ban hanh dong) in villages and factories to

gather local complaints which would then be submitted to a central committee comprised of all nationalist factions which was then taking shape in Saigon. This national committee, comprising - at least in the early stages - moderate Constitutionalist such as Le Quang Liem and Nguyen Phan Long as well as radicals and members of the ICP, began to cooperate in drawing up the plans for the proposed congress. For the first time, a true Leninist-style united front seemed to be in the making in Vietnam.

It was through the Indochinese Congress movement, then, that the ICP attempted to put its new and broader united front policy in effect. Such activities had only limited results, however. In the Center and the North, political parties were illegal, and nationalist agitation in the late 1930s was of limited strength. With little scope for a broad front, the party's activity was restricted to attempts at informal cooperation with other groups within the regional consultative assemblies. In Cochin China, where political activity was permitted and a number of moderate nationalist groups were already in existence, the potential for popular front activity was greater. There the open members of the ICP attempted to forge a cohesive alliance of moderates and radicals to propagandize the government for reforms and the formal convening of the proposed Indochinese Congress. The net cast by the party was fairly wide - not only small radical parties and individuals like Nguyen An Ninh were cultivated, but even "progressive" elements in the Constitutionalist Party and (on an informal basis) even the Trotskyites in Saigon. For the first time the communist movement was beginning to conceive of the united front on a fairly broad scale.

Even in Cochin China, however, the party's popular front activities looked better on paper than in reality. The moderate Constitutionalist - foremost representative of the prosperous urban middle classes in Saigon - split over the issue of cooperating with the communists, and by early fall the more cautious elements under Le Quang Liem withdrew from the Congress movement, leaving only a mildly left-wing "rump" of the party under Nguyen Phan Long cooperating with the radicals. Even there, the degree of cooperation seems suspect: Nguyen Phan Long was led to cooperate more through his resentment

at fellow-Constitutionalist Bui Quang Chieu than through sincere conviction, while the ICP grumbled that Nguyen Phan Long did not really have his heart in the Congress movement.

As for the Trotskyites, whatever possibilities had existed for cooperation with the ICP melted during the course of the popular front period. For the former, in the words of party leader Ta Thu Thau, considered the front a "front populaire de trahison", a ruse and a trick used by capitalism to lure the proletariat away from revolution, and refused to participate in the front with the Stalinist ICP. On its part, the ICP, possibly under the influence of the Stalinist purge trials in Moscow, retreated from any further contact with the Trotskyites. By mid-1937, hostility between the two groups reached a high level, and the potential for cooperation dissolved. All in all, the celebrated "popular front" in Indochina achieved little in the way of practical results. Not all the blame should accrue to the ICP. The nationalist movement in the South was by now almost chronically factional. On the other hand, the ICP (according to later communist historians) was excessively rigid and inflexible in its attitude toward moderates. Nor had it begun to make a serious effort to build up the movement among the rural populace. ¹¹ As for the proposed "Indochinese Congress" itself, the government in Paris, under pressure from French colon groups in Vietnam, soon retracted on its original intention to send a commission to Indochina; it "studied the question" in Paris.

A fair assessment of the popular front period should not be entirely negative in tone, however. Although the ICP had only limited success in taking the lead in forming a broad united front for peace and progress, the period did serve a useful purpose in a number of respects, for it increased the party's visibility and prestige among the mass of the population. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the ICP was the most - and indeed, the only - effective political force speaking for the nationalist cause in the late 1930s. Moreover, it is clear in retrospect that the popular front period did serve to move the ICP one tentative step toward a new strategy which would be appropriate to conditions in Vietnam. For the first time,

the party was beginning to give a higher level of priority to the "national question" and to moderate its appeal for social revolution. At least in the early stages of the revolution, national independence had begun to take priority over radical social change. The stage was being set for post-war success.

World War and the Formation of the Vietminh The popular front in France died gradually in the years 1938 and 1939. The final blow which ended this early period in communist cooperation with the liberal democracies was the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in August 1939. The signing of the treaty had immediate consequences in Indochina, where the French authorities cracked down on the ICP's open activities and seized a number of its top leaders.

These events in late 1939 were to have momentous consequences for the history of the communist movement. Under the stimulus of French oppression, the party abandoned its urban base and its fundamentally urban strategy and retreated to the countryside where covert operations were somewhat easier to carry on. The movement to the villages marked the beginning of a new rural strategy for the party. Heretofore it had only given lip service to the concept of a proletarian-peasant alliance and to the concept of the peasantry as the "basic force" of the Vietnamese revolution. True enough, peasants had been a central force in the Nghe-Tinh uprising of 1930-1931, and later in the decade the party was relatively active in rural areas in the Mekong delta, the narrow coastal central plain, and the highlands of the Viet Bac. But, influenced by continued Comintern incentives to emphasize agitation among urban workers, the essentially urban bias of the party leadership and, in all probability, by the passivity of the Vietnamese peasantry, the ICP did not really devote top attention to building a firm base in the countryside.¹⁵

The French crackdown in late 1939 forced the ICP to change its urban-centered policy. As in 1931, the party leadership was stringently pursued and a number of leaders, including Le Hong Phong and new party secretary-general Nguyen Van Cu, were seized and executed. Those that remained went into

hiding, some fleeing across the border into South China to establish contacts with communist elements abroad. By 1940, a series of events began to accelerate the move to a new policy: 1) the decline of the Comintern and the consequent absence of policy leadership from Moscow. As a result of the Stalin purges in the late 1930s, much of the Comintern leadership had been destroyed; as for the Soviet leadership, it was preoccupied with events in Europe and showed little interest in Southeast Asia. The ICP, which for so long had loyally followed the Moscow line, was now left substantially to its own devices. 2) the Bac Son uprising in the early fall of 1940. When Japanese forces crossed the border briefly in September to accentuate their demands for concessions from the French colonial government, local montagnard tribesmen, possibly spurred on by local communist cadres, rose in revolt against the French administration in the area. Although technically speaking the revolt did not succeed, the rebel forces, composed primarily of local minority Tay tribesmen, among whom the ICP had been active for a decade, broke into guerilla bands and managed to preserve the bulk of their forces in retreat and began to build stable base areas in the upland provinces around Bac Son and Cao Bang. The French made strenuous efforts to root them out, but they survived and grew. For the first time, the ICP now had a secure revolutionary base area from which to launch a Maoist people's liberation war at the close of the Pacific conflict. 3) the return of Nguyen Ai Quoc to South China. Absent from Vietnamese affairs since June 1931 when he had been arrested in Hong Kong, Nguyen Ai Quoc had spent nearly a decade abroad, first in the Soviet Union and then in North China, where had worked with Chinese Communist forces under the leadership of Mao Tse-tung. In the summer of 1940, conscious that an opportunity favorable for the liberation of Vietnam would come out of the approaching world war, Nguyen Ai Quoc returned to South China and got in touch with ICP elements in the border area. From within Vietnam, young party leaders such as Vo Nguyen Giap and Pham Van Dong were sent north by the Central Committee to establish contact with the communist leader.

It seems probably that Nguyen Ai Quoc was under the influence of Maoist

guerilla tactics in China, and prepared to apply these tactics to Vietnamese conditions. Up until now, the party had not given serious thought to the necessity of elaborating a strategy for the seizure of power which would meet the unique requirements of the Vietnamese situation. The Soviet model of takeover - concentration of power in the cities, backed by the generalized support of the peasantry, with the ultimate seizure of power through an armed insurrection in the major population centers - was considered to be the natural process of takeover in Vietnam. Presumably the party was aware of the societal differences between Vietnam and Tsarist Russia, and also familiar with the Maoist revolutionary variant in China. But, by all evidence, the ICP leaders gave little thought to the implications of such facts for the Vietnamese revolution. Now, driven by circumstances, the party began to move cautiously toward the new strategy that it was to use with such success in the post-war period.

Considering the vital importance of the new trend in ICP thinking, it is curious that many of the details of the party's decision to adopt the new line are missing. As a result, scholars of the period are forced to piece together the story from the scattered evidence at hand. Nguyen Ai Quoc evidently returned too late to have been involved in the decision to launch the Bac Son uprising, but he was in a position to take advantage of its immediate consequences. With his probable consent, the remnants of the guerilla units involved in the fighting were instructed to form stable revolutionary base areas along the border. Here a Maoist-style revolutionary army would be recruited and trained for the future general uprising. Meanwhile, in South China, the external leadership, now once again firmly in the hands of Nguyen Ai Quoc, would attempt to gather together the scattered nationalist elements - including VNQDDs, ex-followers of Phan Boi Chau and others - who had fled there as Japanese forces had gradually taken over control in Vietnam. Out of this potpourri the ICP would forge a national united front under its own leadership. Then, when the time was ripe, the party would make its bid for power.

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As the ICP forces in the Viet Bac began to build up their strength, the broad outlines of a new political-military strategy were being ironed out. In late 1940, the ICP Central Committee within the country - isolated from contact with the exile leadership - had met in secret at a village near Hanoi and drew up a program calling for a broad anti-French and anti-Japanese alliance. By implication the plenum was moving in the same general direction as the leadership-in-exile under Nguyen Ai Quoc. The formal inauguration of the new strategy, however, was not unveiled until the famous Eighth Plenum, held at Pac Bo in the mountainous center of the Viet Bac in May of 1941. The new strategy was based on two foundations, the one political and the other military. On the political side, the party was to place the cause of national liberation as the matter of highest priority in the current phase of the Vietnamese revolution. The goal of social revolution was by no means abandoned, but it was to be postponed until the cause of national independence had been achieved. As a tool to win independence, a broad anti-imperialist and anti-fascist front was to be created. This united front, called, after much thought, the League for the Independence of Vietnam (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi or, for short, Vietminh), would attempt to unite under its banner all progressive forces in Vietnam - not only the four classes of Leninist-style alliances, but even patriotic landlord elements and progressive anti-fascist Frenchmen. In the eyes of the Vietminh, anyone opposed to the Japanese was welcome in the new alliance. This front was to be under the firm control of the ICP, but the latter's role was to be muted in order to win ^{the} support of vacillating elements. Its social goals were to kept general and sufficiently moderate to appeal to cautious urban elements, and the aim of national independence was to be given top priority.

The Vietminh front would hopefully provide the ICP with the broad base of support on a nation-wide basis which had been so patently lacking from its revolt in Nghe-Binh a decade earlier. In the eyes of party leaders, however, Lenin's warnings that political struggle alone would not suffice to overthrow

the class enemy were a propos, for the Japanese and French forces would never give up without a fight. Consequently, the final seizure of power would have to be achieved by means of an armed insurrection by revolutionary forces. And here the party strategists were beginning to fashion an approach which would meet the unique requirements of the local situation. In conformity with the mixed character of communist strength in Vietnam (i.e. in both rural and urban areas) the final uprising would involve a simultaneous insurrection both in the cities and in the countryside. Organized and paramilitary forces would be trained in the revolutionary base areas and gradually dispatched to other rural areas throughout the country to build up a nation-wide guerilla network at the village level. In the major urban centers, party cadres would prepare the revolutionary elements in the population for city demonstrations and riots to be timed with the outbreak of struggle throughout the countryside. These necessary urban revolutionary elements would be bolstered by peasant militia brought in from surrounding districts.

Preparing for Insurrection With the Eighth Plenum in 1941, the main lines of the ICP's war strategy had been laid out. For four years the party set to its self-assigned task of building up for the uprising to take place at the close of the war. From a military point of view, work went on at two levels, building up a small people's liberation army as a backbone for the local militia units at the village level. The political task was more complex, and perhaps also more difficult. As in previous years, it was easier to determine on a united front policy than to put it into effect. Several factors made the formation of such a broad nationalist alliance difficult: the severe repression of all political activities in Vietnam, which made any open party activities there virtually impossible; the refusal of some nationalist and French groups (including anti-fascist Gaullists) to join hands with the Vietminh; and, finally, the excessive dogmatism and sectarianism of party members which frequently hampered the prospects for sincere cooperation with other nationalist groups in Vietnam and in South China. With Nguyen Ai Quoc again in jail in 1943, the ICP groups in South China consistently alienated other nationalists with their high-handed

attitudes, and no real cooperation was achieved until after Nguyen Ai Quoc's release (now under the name of Ho Chi Minh) in 1944.

Still, the political work went on. Front work was pursued, mass associations (cuu quoc) were set among among youth, women, peasants, and workers, and by 1944 the framework of an alliance of communists with other nationalists groups began to emerge. One of Ho's major problem was to keep tight reign on enthusiasm in his own part until the proper moment for a general uprising had arrived. Shortly after his release, he discovered that some over-zealous elements in the Tonkin regional committee were planning to rove before the end of the war. Only a last minute intervention on his part managed to prevent it. In any event, military preparations began to take priority over political work as the war neared its end, and Ho Chi Minh managed to enforce his view that the time for insurrection would arrive in the interval between surrender of the Japanese and the arrival of allied (or French) forces in the area.

The decisive moment came closer in March 1945, when Japanese authorities in Vietnam, sensing impending defeat and growing hostility from local French authorities, presented an ultimatum to the local French administration. When the latter procrastinated, the Japanese arbitrarily overturned French rule and granted paper independence to a Vietnamese government under Emperor Bao Dai. For Ho Chi Minh, the Japanese coup d'etat simplified his own plans. Japanese occupation forces took control only in major population centers and made little attempt to take the reigns of authority in outlying areas, where the French administrative apparatus, now lacking central direction, still operated. The overthrow of the French central administration created a political vacuum in the rural areas that could be filled by local revolutionary forces in areas where the latter were sufficiently organized. Separate "liberated zones", areas where revolutionary power could be seized prior to a general uprising, could be established in advance of the war's end. Immediately following the Japanese coup, then, the party's Standing Committee met near Hanoi and issued a directive, "The Franco-Japanese Conflict and our Actions".

According to the directive, the period of greatest opportunity was fast approaching. The enemy had entered a period of crisis, with the war being lost, his ranks in confusion, a growing food problem leading to the threat of famine, unemployment in the cities, high taxes and confiscation of rice in the villages. All of this created a rising level of anti-Japanese sentiment in Vietnam, and an opportunity for the ICP forces to take power in local areas, where conditions were appropriate. Where such open revolutionary control could be established up to the district or provincial levels, people's committees should be selected to replace the existing authority; elsewhere, secret militia units and a skeleton administrative structure should be set up and prepared for activation when the order for a general uprising was given. In general, the party gave precedence to preparations in the rural areas, where the revolutionary strength tended to be stronger than in the cities. In practical terms, this implied that a Maoist-style rural strategy - with seizure of power first in rural areas, would be adopted, with village revolutionary forces moving thence to the cities to aid in the seizure of power there. By June of 1945, six provinces with a total population of one million - mostly in the Viet Bac - had come under the direct control of the Vietminh.

At the national level, also, preparations were underway to establish a provisional central republican government under Vietminh direction. On August 16, shortly after the Japanese surrender was announced abroad, the Vietminh called a national "People's Congress" at Tan Trao to establish a program and to select a National Liberation Committee which would serve as a provisional national government until elections could be held. The congress was strongly dominated by the communists, since the ICP had selected the delegates and had held a party congress at Tan Trao immediately prior to the convening of the People's Congress.¹⁶ At this party conference, it was decided that the period of maximum favorable opportunity (thoi co) had arrived. Japanese forces were on the verge of surrender, the French were in disarray, and allied forces from China and Great Britain had not yet arrived. This was the moment to launch the general uprising, and to

be in possession of the country when the allied occupation forces arrived to accept the surrender of Japanese military forces in Indochina. The ICP decision was submitted to the People's Congress which ratified it unanimously.

According to plan, uprisings were to take place simultaneously in all rural areas where revolutionary power was considered sufficiently strong - in all provinces of Tonkin, and in selected areas in the South and the Center - with the aim of taking power at the provincial as well as at the local level. At the same time, armed propaganda detachments were to spark major demonstrations in the big cities which would be supplemented by militia forces brought in from neighboring rural districts. Takeover in the major cities of Saigon, Hanoi, Hué and Haiphong was considered essential for success.¹⁷ The uprisings began in the last two weeks of August, beginning in the urban areas with the revolt in Hanoi on the 19th. During the preceding four days, rural districts throughout the North had seized power, including three important communes near Hanoi. On the 19th, massive demonstrations combining urban workers and revolutionary bourgeoisie, peasants from the environs, and led by trained armed propaganda detachments, took place in the center of Hanoi, and they had soon neutralized Japanese forces and seized all strategic locations in the city. Because of the difficulty of communicating rapidly with other armed units, other major urban centers did not coordinate their actions with the uprising in Hanoi, and Hue followed on the 23rd, and Saigon on the 25th. In each case, however, the uprisings were successful, and power fell to the revolutionaries.

Within less than two weeks, the Vietminh had seized power throughout most of Vietnam. Only a few areas - mostly in the rural areas in the South where sympathy with the communists was lacking - remained outside of revolutionary control. Japanese troops remained generally neutral throughout the period of the uprising, and a few handed over their weapons to the revolutionaries. The puppet Bao Dai government in Hué resigned and Bao Dai himself somewhat reluctantly abdicated, turning over authority to a delegation sent by the provisional government now installed in Hanoi. The "August

Revolution" had been a major success. In a relatively bloodless coup, the Vietminh had managed to seize de facto power in Vietnam.¹⁸ The degree of success is particularly striking in view of the weakened position of the ICP at the beginning of the war. The ingredients were ones which were becoming familiar to observers of the communist movement in Vietnam - organization, discipline, dedication, and a striking amount of political astuteness. As the Vietminh leadership had foreseen, the end of the war had created a political vacuum in Vietnam, and they had known how to fill it.

The Period of Negotiations As the ICP leadership was well aware, the Vietnamese revolution was not completed with the insurrection of August 1945. For the communists' main adversary - French colonialism - still had to be faced. The Vichy government, of course, had been discredited and the local French administration in Indochina had been deprived of power by the Japanese coup d'etat of March 1945. But the Free French movement under General Charles De Gaulle had indicated in 1944 its own determination to preserve a French presence in Indochina. Once the Allied expeditionary forces had arrived, the Free French could be expected to make their move to return in force to Indochina.

Furthermore, communist control in Vietnam was shaky at best. The Vietminh had taken power in the name of the nationalist-Vietminh alliance that had been formed in South China in 1944, but the National Liberation Committee appointed at Tan Trao on August 16 was strongly Vietminh-oriented, and the takeover itself had been almost entirely engineered by the communists. Non-communist nationalists such as the VNQDD and the Dong Minh Hoi in the North, and the moderates in the South, were not likely to stand idly by while the communists consolidated their power. Nor was the mass base of the new government in the rural and urban areas sufficiently firm to withstand a healthy degree of opposition. The Vietminh were generally welcomed by the populace as an effective political force symbolizing the desire of the Vietnamese people for social justice and political independence, but such generalized approval would not easily be translated into firm support in the event of a serious internal conflict among several indigenous forces.

The month of September thus inaugurated a period of intense political activity and almost unprecedented complexity. From the Vietminh point of view, the struggle had to be carried on at two levels-- against the returning French and the Allied expeditionary forces and the Japanese troops on the one hand, and against their Vietnamese rivals within the nationalist camp on the other. From a theoretical sense, the problem was clear: the Vietminh could not hope to face both adversaries at the same time. Militarily they were too weak to be able to defeat the French and its external allies while at the same time competing actively against their internal nationalist competitors. They were thus required to mobilize a maximum amount of support against one enemy at a time, without at the same time diluting their own authority to the extent of losing control of the movement, and the support of the more radical elements within the nationalist camp. Under such circumstances, of course, the united front technique was the best approach, and their first move during the autumn of 1945 was to mobilize support from all potentially anti-imperialist elements in the population against French and other outside forces. The nucleus of Vietminh strength would have to come from workers and peasants, but significant help was expected from the highly nationalist urban petty bourgeoisie, and even from the more patriotic elements among the wealthier classes. Some elements - Bui Quang Chieu in Saigon, Pham Quynh in Hue, Ta Thu Thau, the Trotskyite leader in Cochin China - were considered too far gone to save and (whether on central or local orders is not yet clear) were assassinated.

The simple statement of the problem above perhaps hardly indicates the delicacy of the problem. Social and economic conditions were harsh as the war ended, with famine rising in the rural areas and unemployment and economic crisis in the cities, and far-reaching governmental measures were called for to alleviate the suffering of the people. Yet the behavior of the provisional government in Hanoi would have to be sufficiently moderate to avoid unnecessarily alienating the moderate elements within the nationalist alliance, for if the latter were driven to support the French, or even to abstain from the coming conflict, the Vietminh's chances for victory would

be severely compromised.

The measures taken by the government indicate the care with which the Vietminh attempted to construct their anti-imperialist front. Social and political measures were announced to win mass support: the personal tax was abolished as well as the French-run monopolies, rent on land was limited to 25% of the harvest; worker legislation limited the work day to eight hours, and democratic rights were guaranteed, including equality of all regardless of age, sex, religion, or ethnic background. Finally, beginning steps were taken to establish democratically elected people's councils at all levels of government, and national elections were promised for the creation of a formal central government. In an attempt to solve the problem of hunger, rice stocks confiscated by the Japanese was distributed to the needy, and farmers were urged to grow other quick-producing crops to supplement the coming rice harvest. The government was careful to avoid the impression of moving toward radical measures, and no nationalization of property or land took place.

In retrospect, such measures can be seen as a respectable effort to win the zealous support of revolutionaries and at least the tolerance of moderate anti-imperialist elements in the population. In practice, of course, the innate suspicion of many moderates for the communists and the long-standing hostility between the ICP and such non-communist revolutionary elements as the VNQDD made any true reconciliation and cooperation extremely difficult, if not impossible. VNQDD and Dong Minh Hoi elements, led by Vu Hong Khanh, Nguyen Tuong Tam, and Nguyen Hai Than in South China, had reluctantly joined with the Vietminh in South China in 1944, but their suspicions of the communists ran deep, and such distrust was only exacerbated by the long-handed policy played by the Vietminh in the waning days of the war. Their own trump card lay with the Chinese expeditionary forces who were to occupy all of Indochina north of the 16th parallel as the war came to a close. As Chinese troops entered North Vietnam in the fall of 1945, VNQDD and Dong Minh Hoi leaders returned to Tonkin, began to seize control of areas taken by the Vietminh, and, certain of the backing of the Chinese, took a hard line in negotiations with the communists.

The ICP attempted to play a cautious game with its rivals: the broad policy was to isolate the leaders of rival groups and to win over their followers, but in delicate periods when negotiations with the French were taking place, the Vietminh leadership attempted to placate its rivals with minor concessions, by offering them high positions in the government, and so forth. Periodically they were forced to give ground to the nationalists - in late fall when Chinese troops were still present in force in the North, in March of the succeeding year when Ho Chi Minh signed the preliminary and very moderate Ho-Sainteny agreement which conceded a long-term French presence in Vietnam, later in 1946 when a Vietnamese delegation went to France in an attempt to negotiate at Fontainebleau a peaceful compromise on the issue of independence and French control. At the same time the Vietminh made rigorous efforts to keep the nationalists from a share in power and, when possible, took a hard line toward their rivals. By the fall of 1946, when occupation forces had been withdrawn and war with France appeared inevitable, the communists made little effort to disguise their unwillingness to share power. VNQDD elements were purged from the government, removed from the National Assembly, and occasionally assassinated. Eventually nationalist leaders like Vu Hong Khanh and Nguyen Hai Than fled to China and the Vietminh managed to help in the formation of a puppet VNQDD which joined the communist-dominated united front.

Generally, the Vietminh attempt to build a broad united front in the North was successful. Potentially hostile elements such as the Catholic hierarchy either supported the Vietminh or took a neutral stance. Even the Chinese occupation forces, who did not hide their basic sympathy with the nationalist parties, were led to tolerate the Vietminh control over the government. Eventually the Vietminh's essentially communist coloration became evident, however, and a new and wider front, the Lien Viet Front, was added in the hopes of gaining additional support from cautious moderates in the country. In addition, the ICP dissolved itself (maintaining, of course, its secret organization) in a gesture to reduce the suspicions of moderates that the resistance movement was entirely communist-controlled.

In the South, the situation was equally complicated and even more difficult. In the first place, the British expeditionary force under General Douglas Gracey was more openly sympathetic to the French and immediately released imprisoned French troops to cooperate in the effort to destroy Vietminh strength in Cochin China. In the second place, communist strength in Cochin China was measurably weaker than in Tonkin. French security measures in the months immediately following the disastrous 1940 uprising had decimated communist strength in the South, and although the party had recovered sufficiently by 1945 to play a major role in the August Revolution, it was not in a strong enough position - particularly in rural areas - to establish liberated zones. Finally, moderate nationalist groups, such as the Constitutionalist Party and pro-Japanese elements, religious minorities such as the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, and the anti-Stalinist Trotskyites were relatively well organized in the South, and were serious rivals to the communists for control over the Vietnamese nationalist movement.

Under the circumstances, it is perhaps surprising that the communists did as well as they did in the South in the weeks immediately following the end of the war. Communist strength during the takeover of the city of Saigon on August 25 had been based primarily on workers, peasants from the countryside, and the one-million strong Vanguard Youth movement under covert ICP member Pham Ngoc Thach. In the difficult negotiations with the non-communist nationalist groups in the Committee of the South, the Vietminh did relatively well, and briefly, because of rival confusion, had a controlling voice in that nationalist front body. Ultimately, however, the ICP found itself overmatched. French troops, aided by British expeditionary forces and the remnants of Japanese occupation troops in the South, drove the Vietminh out of Saigon and attempted to eliminate their strength even in the rural areas. As the French regained control, they began to organize non-communist and relatively pro-French elements to form an anti-communist front. In the complex political situation, various groups competed for control. Driven to near desperation by French harassment and slippage in their own ranks, the Southern leadership under Tran Van Giau and, later, Nguyen Binh, turned to terrorism and scorched-earth tactics, assassinating a number

of the leaders of rival groups. Troops were sent by the ICP from the North, but it was already too late, and although throughout most of 1946 the communists controlled much of the Cochinese countryside, the French were able to consolidate their own authority in Saigon and the major delta cities.

The long struggle of the communists to defend the gains of the August Revolution by political maneuvering came to an end in December 1946. While many of the details of communist policy are unknown to us, it seems evident that they postponed military confrontation as long as possible, in order to build up revolutionary strength. From mid-summer, however, it became apparent that French policy was hardening and that Paris was not seriously interested in a negotiated settlement. In control of much of the South, with token occupation forces in the Red River Delta in the North, the French apparently decided to force a military solution. At bay, the communists finally concluded that armed struggle was inevitable.

The War of Resistance, 1946-1954 The Vietminh was forced into a military confrontation with the French at a time when communist military strength was not yet up to an open struggle with the colonial regime. It seems clear enough that Ho had attempted to put off conflict as long as possible for this reason. Now that such a conflict was inevitable, the communists moved to put building up the military at the highest priority. As for the strategy to be followed, some aspects are still subject to controversy, but the broad outlines of communist policy during the War of Resistance are clear enough. In broad terms, they intended to utilize the basic elements of the strategy originally worked out in South China during the war: 1) in terms of military strategy, use of the Maoist guerilla war approach, relying on rural base areas to build up strength, division of revolutionary armed forces into main force, guerillas, and village militia. In accordance with the Maoist "three-stage" concept, communist activity would move from a predominantly defensive approach through a period of equilibrium and ultimately, when enemy strength and moral was sufficiently worn down, to a final stage of military confrontation in a general offensive in both rural and urban areas.

2) in the political sphere, adoption of a united front approach to win maximum nationalist support in the war effort. Such a policy would require, of course, that the "national" issue should take precedence over social revolution, and that Marxist slogans should be subordinated to the appeal to patriotism. In recognition of the role of the peasantry as the "basic force" of the revolution, the party would recruit primarily in the rural areas; on the other hand, workers and the patriotic middle classes in the cities could be useful in undermining stability in enemy-controlled areas, and, ultimately, would assist communist main forces in seizing the cities at the culmination of the war.

Time does not permit us to make a detailed analysis of communist policies during the eight-year War of Resistance. Nor, for lack of documentation, is it easy to determine the degree of communist success in building up the united front in the years leading up to Geneva. Certainly, support from the population was sufficient to sustain the movement during its difficult stage of retrenchment and build-up. And, throughout the entire period of the war, relatively few Vietnamese gave a firm commitment to the anti-communist forces during the war. On the other hand, it appears from the evidence that the communists were only partially successful in building support for their cause. In key areas, support for the Vietminh was marginal. Among the urban population, the communists had some success in winning over intellectuals, students, and some merchants. Relatively few, however, seem to have given active aid or left French-controlled areas to join the war effort. Even among the working population in Saigon, there was some decline in active support, particularly after 1950. Then, too, the communists had difficulties with the various ethnic and religious minorities - the Catholics, the overseas Chinese, the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai - and achieved minimum support from these groups during the bulk of the war.

Such spotty indications of weakness should not be interpreted as a sign that the united front was not working, of course. Vast numbers of non-communist Vietnamese throughout the country remained uncommitted during the war, and under the circumstances, this can be considered as a tribute to the astuteness

of communist political strategy. And, of course, the communist stronghold in the villages served them well, and provided them with the troop strength that permitted them to hold their own, and more, against the French. But the period shows the limited degree to which the communists could expect to win active support from moderate elements in society. The communists appear to have conceded this point in 1950-1951 when the composition of the government was narrowed and moved perceptibly to the Left. The party itself was revived with the new name of Vietnam Workers' Party, and the government initiated several moves in the direction of more radical land policies to win peasant support.

For a variety of reasons, then, it is difficult to analyze with precision the success of communist united front policies during the War of Resistance. The united front succeeded in undermining support for the enemy, but Vietminh strength itself was based primarily on communist support in the rural areas, and the final, partial victory in 1954 seems to be a tribute more to military than to political success. Such, at any rate, is the tentative conclusion here. A final assessment of this period must await further analysis.

Conclusions This paper has attempted to point out some salient features in the development of a revolutionary strategy by the communist movement in Vietnam. The major focus here has been on the formulation of a political strategy which, because it was sensitive to the real political and social problems in Vietnam, would facilitate a revolutionary seizure of power. In broad outline this evolution consisted of a gradual liberation of the party's strategy from a relatively mechanical imitation of the Bolshevik road to revolution to the elaboration of a more creative policy which was both closer to the Maoist experience in China and also consistent with the realities of Vietnamese colonial society. In the process the party also managed to realize a progressive reduction of some of the weaknesses which had plagued it earlier in its career - sectarianism, elitism, dilettantism, adventurism, and so forth.

In retrospect, it is clear that the decade from 1930 to 1940 was vital in moving the ICP toward maturity. The Soviets of Nghe-Tinh, the period

of the popular front, the Bac Son revolt all provided lessons which the party was not slow to take to heart. With the formation of the Vietminh movement in 1941, and its gradual expansion into the provisional government of 1945, the communist movement entered true maturity. Its major weaknesses had been brought under control and a reasonably well-oiled movement had come into existence, small in size but dedicated, disciplined, and rich in revolutionary experience. Its post-war reputation, and success, were no accident.

As all students of the area are aware, the Vietnamese experience after the war was unique in Southeast Asia. What circumstances led to such a striking success for the communist movement in Vietnam? This paper is not the place for an extended treatment of such a complex issue, but the foregoing analysis has touched on a number of issues which deserve brief mention here.

1) weak and divided nationalist rivals. One factor that assisted the the communist movement in Vietnam was the fortuitous weakness of its nationalist rivals. Lacking cohesion, a charismatic leader, an ideological or religious focus, the non-communist nationalist parties failed to provide a realistic alternative to the communists in Vietnam. Further discussion of this issue would carry us far beyond the scope of this paper. It is ironic, however, that a society with such a highly-developed sense of national identity displayed such a chronic inability to create a united nationalist movement under non-communist direction. Under such circumstances, the communists had little difficulty in becoming a central force in Vietnamese nationalism.

2) the role of the Comintern. The role of the Comintern in the Chinese revolution has been (quite properly) subjected to severe criticism in recent years. As this paper has attempted to demonstrate, the Comintern showed an equal absence of imagination in its policy toward French-controlled Vietnam during the years leading up to the Second World War, and it might be said that the Stalinist-orientation of Comintern policy in Vietnam put the ICP back in its rise to power. On the whole, however, such a primarily negative conclusion, while correct as far as it goes, would neglect the positive

role that the Comintern played in nursing the communist movement in Vietnam in its early years. For at a key point in the history of the party - the period of retrenchment after the defeat of the Nghe-Tinh Soviets - the Comintern gave the ICP major assistance in terms of leadership, training, and technical and tactical aid. The party's rapid recovery in the mid-1930s could simply not have occurred without the aid of the returned students from the Stalin School. Nor could the party have eliminated a number of its early weaknesses without the experienced advice of the Comintern in Moscow - and its liaison office in Shanghai. In effect, the Comintern played a useful role during the infancy and early adolescence of the party, until the latter was ready to go out on its own.

3) the personal role of Ho Chi Minh. The role of the individual in major world events has long been debated by historians. Few would maintain today that the major trends in human society can be seriously affected by the actions of individuals. Yet it is equally obvious that on occasions, individuals can exert significant influence on events in human societies, and the case of Ho Chi Minh seems one of those. We are unfortunately hindered in our understanding of the role of Ho Chi Minh in the Vietnamese communist movement by a paucity of hard information. Much of his activity remains shrouded in self-imposed mystery and conjecture. From the evidence at hand, however, it appears that on several occasions it was his intervention that was decisive in the continued growth and development of the communist movement in Vietnam - in smoothing over factionalism, in presiding over basic strategical changes, in recognizing when the proper moment had arrived for action. A full exposé of Ho's role in the Vietnamese revolutionary movement must await more precise information about his life and activities.¹⁹ Until that time, it can be said that Ho Chi Minh's leadership was a major factor in the success of the communist movement in Vietnam.

The points above are by no means the sole reasons for the success of Communism in Vietnam. Other factors have been amply pointed out in other studies of the period. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that the revolutionary strategy of the communist movement was, at the least, a conditional success. ~~disciplined movement of a labor line. Further, even, that we are a success~~

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Total victory had escaped their grasp. But the united front technique, and the Maoist concept of people's liberation war, had proved an effective weapon which the party would not fail, in later years, to turn on their new adversaries of the moment - the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem and the United States.

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Footnotes

1. This documentary material, dealing with the period between the two world wars, is located in the Archives Nationales de France, Section Outre-Mer, Rue Oudinot in Paris. Of particular interest are French sûreté files and reports labelled SLOTFOM (Service de Liaison avec les originaires de territoires de la France d'Outre-Mer) and held at Rue Oudinot. I am greatly indebted to Professor Milton Osborne for pointing out the existence of these files to me. Hereafter this source will be cited in this paper as SLOTFOM.

2. SLOTFOM, Series III, has a number of documents and reports dealing with nationalist activity in the mid-twenties. The general impression of factionalism and impotence is borne out by the material held in these files.

3. This party had a number of name changes during its brief career. The leaders of the party evidently felt that by changing their name they could eliminate the weaknesses that plagued them. The party is best known as the Tan Viet Cach Minh Dang (New Vietnamese Revolutionary Party).

4. There are scattered indications of abortive negotiations between the two groups throughout the literature on the period. All sources seem to agree that neither side took the possibility of sincere alliance seriously.

5. The growing importance of the Revolutionary Youth League is demonstrated by the fact that after 1929, French sûreté reports to Paris are preoccupied primarily with League (and, later Indochinese Communist Party) activities. For these reports, see SLOTFOM, Series III, carton 48.

6. Some local branches of the party allegedly wanted to strike in response, but the newly-formed party leadership forbade any action. SLOTFOM, Series III, Carton 48, Dossier entitled "Les Associations Anti-Francaise en Indochine et la propagande communiste", monthly report of February-March 1930.

7. For a communist study of the period, see Tran Huy Lieu, Les Soviets du Nghe Tinh (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Press, 1960). Two recent English-language studies of the period are Milton Osborne, "Continuity and Motivation in the Vietnamese Revolution: New Light from the 1930s", in Pacific Affairs (Spring 1974) and William J. Duiker, "The Red Soviets of Nghe-Tinh: An Early Communist Rebellion in Vietnam", in Journal of Southeast Asian Studies

(September 1973).

8. This issue is discussed in Duiker, "The Red Soviets....".

9. The trouble was, French harrassment made adequate liaison between the center and local levels exceedingly difficult, a problem that would arise periodically in the future.

10. Such criticisms can be found scattered throughout a series of articles on the period published in the Hanoi historical journal Nghien Cuu Lich Su (Historical Research) during the year 1961. Other comments of this nature can be found in Buoc Ngoat Vi Dai cua Lich Su Cach Mang Viet Nam (A Great Step Forward in the History of the Vietnamese Revolution) (Bureau on the Historical Research of the Party, no date), pp. 60-63; and Van Tao, "Tim Hieu Qua Trinh Hinh Thanh va Phat Trien cua Mat Tran Dan Toc Thong Nhat Viet Nam" (Search for the Process of Formation and Development of the Vietnamese National United Front), Nghien Cuu Lich Su, No. 1 (March 1959), p. 31.

11. The Comintern soon found that this presented problems of its own. Students from worker backgrounds often suffered either from laziness or incompetence.

12. French sources are doubtful that a formal meeting was held at all, because of police harrassment, and conjecture that the Macao leadership simply met the delegates individually as they arrived. SLOTFOM, Series III, Carton 54, Dossier 35, Note Periodique, Second Trimestre 1935, p. 66.

13. SLOTFOM, Series III, Carton 48, Dossier 44, monthly report of September 1936 has a detailed expose of united front tactics.

14. This, of course, was in part a consequence of the excessive urban orientation enforced by Comintern directives during the early 1930s.

15. This issue has excited some controversy in recent years. Jean Chesneaux, in his Tradition et Revolution au Vietnam (Paris: Anthropos, 1971), p. 220, contends that the shift to a rural strategy occurred only in the late 1930s. Tran Van Giau disagrees, and in an article in Nghien Cuu Lich Su, No. 142 (January-February 1972), p. 26, asserts that the party had been devoting considerable attention to the peasantry throughout

the 1930s. Without further evidence to the contrary, I am inclined to agree with Chesneaux' conclusions on this point.

16. Material on this conference is relatively scarce. For an informal, almost "folksy" recollection, see Tran Huy Lieu, "Di du Quoc Dan Dai Hoi o Tan Trao" (Attending the National Conference at Tan Trao), in Nghien Cuu Lich Su, No. 17 (August 1960).

17. A communist model of the process is located in Ho Hai, "Mot Vai Ky Kien ve moi Quan He giua Nong Thon va Thanh Thi Nuoc Ta trong Thoi Ky 1939-1945" (A few opinions on the relationship between the rural villages and the cities during the period 1939-1945), Nghien Cuu Lich Su, No. 52 (July 1963), pp. 15-16. See Truong Chinh, Primer for Revolt (New York: Praeger, 1963), p. 42.

18. Truong Chinh lists a number of weaknesses in his own study of the August Revolution, including failure to seize sufficient weapons from the Japanese, failure to seize the Bank of Indochina, and lack of decisiveness in seizing power in the South.

19. More material on this question must be released from Hanoi before a fuller understanding of Ho's role can be achieved. Unfortunately, North Vietnamese historians at this point are not seriously looking into Ho Chi Minh's career, at least so far as I have been able to determine.