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LECTURE 30 NATIONALISM AND INDEPENDENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA (1923-1947)

- I - Introduction: In the last three lectures we shall concentrate on the nationalist movements of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and on the coming of independence to their respective countries. Revolutionary nationalism in Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Malaya have been dealt with in previous lectures.
- II - The Failure of the Early Nationalist Groups of Vietnam. We have previously discussed the nature and origins of early nationalist groups in Vietnam. Briefly, these groups, such as that led by Phan Boi Chau, were reform-oriented rather than revolutionary. They were by and large willing to live within a colonial system which could be restructured to permit some degree of self-government, such as a constitutional monarchy within the French system. These men were primarily elitist in their origins and training. During the 1920's these men were overtaken by events and by French intransigence, which combined to defeat their hopes for reform. As a consequence, leadership of the Vietnamese nationalist movement passed into more radical hands.
- A - Last Attempts at Reform: In 1923 the Constitutionalist party was founded in Cochinchina by Vietnamese who were connected with the French administration. This group agitated for a liberalization of French rule which would permit more Vietnamese participation in government. Some of its founders apparently thought of the group as a counter to more radically oriented organizations.
- In 1926 another group of moderates asked permission from the French to associate themselves with the Constitutionalist party and to legally form their own party, the Viet Nam Tan Bo Dan Hoi (Vietnam People's Progressive party). The French refusal of this request, and their opposition to the program of the Constitutionalist party signaled the real end of the hopes of the moderate reformers. After this time the nationalist movement was represented by much more radical and younger men, who resorted increasingly

to secret organizations with revolutionary programs.

**B - Leftist Proto-Revolutionary Organizations:** The story of these early Vietnamese secret political organizations is a very complicated one, with a constantly changing balance of many different groups, some of which existed only for a very short time before evolving into other groups or dying out. We will attempt here to discuss only the more important groups that contributed to Vietnamese independence.

1 - Tan Viet Dach Menh Dang: One of the more important of these early groups was the Tan Viet Dach Menh Dang (The Revolutionary Association of Vietnam), founded in 1924 in Annam and Tongking. This group, like many of the early revolutionary groups, failed because it lacked a well-defined program for action. It was finally destroyed by the French in 1929.

2 - VNQDD: The strongest of the non-Communist revolutionary parties was to be the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (The Vietnamese Nationalist party). This group was apparently founded in Hanoi in 1927--although signs of its previous existence in Canton have led some authorities to ascribe an earlier date to its founding. The party was from the very beginning modeled on the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT), the revolutionary party led by Sun Yat-sen. At this time the KMT was very successful in China as a leftist nationalist group trying to re-unite a China wracked by war-lordism. It was in 1927 that the Northern Expedition, led by Chiang Kai-shek, was meeting with success.

Most of the members of the VNQDD were of middle-class origins, and they had perhaps had previous connection with such more moderate groups as the Revolutionary Association before joining the VNQDD. By 1929 the VNQDD felt sufficiently strong to engage in terrorism and assassinations. It was the French response to these acts that destroyed the Revolutionary Association. The VNQDD survived the French attack, and in 1930 it instigated an uprising at Yen Bay in Tongking which it hoped would spark a nationwide uprising against the French. Many of its leading cadres were killed in this unsuccessful attempt. The survivors fled to China, where they remained in close association with the Kuomintang. China was frequently to be a haven for Vietnamese revolutionaries, just as it had earlier been for more moderate reformers, such as Phan Boi Chau.

**C - Communist Revolutionary Organizations:** There were a number of groups with disparate programs and memberships which can be considered to be Communist. It would be a mistake to conceive of Communism in Vietnam as a well-ordered entity directed from the first from Moscow. It was rather the result of an evolution of many different strategies and groups which finally evolved into the group led by Ho Chi Minh. As in China, these men were attracted not so much by the involved complexities of Marxist doctrine but rather by pragmatism. Such Communist doctrines as the Leninist theory of imperialism seemed to them to explain the colonial situation as they saw it in Southeast Asia. An espousal of Communism also admitted one into an international fraternity of revolutionaries and provided a chance to learn useful organizational tactics. Even the currently anti-Communist Kuomintang of Chiang Kai-shek was notably unsuccessful until it accepted Russian aid in reorganizing along centralist lines.

1 - The Than Nien: Perhaps the first of the successful Communist-oriented groups was the Revolutionary League of the Youth of Vietnam (often referred to as the Than Nien). The Than Nien, founded in Canton in 1925, was very successful at absorbing other radically oriented groups, such as the Nguyen An Ninh Association and the New Vietnam Revolutionary party. Most of the members of these groups had also gone through earlier associations with less successful and more moderate groups. The Than Nien was expelled from Canton in 1929 by the Kuomintang, perhaps because of an affiliation with Chinese Communists. The program of the group emphasized mass action, and the group worked hard at agitation and propaganda among workers and peasants. From Canton the Than Nien went to Hong Kong, where it held a

Congress in 1929.

- 2 - The Than Nien Disintegrates: Like the Chinese Communist party during this period, the Than Nien was split by the question of its relation to less radical parties. Many members thought it impossible for it to work with non-Communist nationalist groups, and advocated the formation of a Vietnamese Communist party. At the congress, the failure of the group to reconcile these disparate views led to a split, which resulted in a number of Communist organizations, each claiming doctrinal purity and requesting recognition from the Third International as the true Vietnamese Communist party.

D - Evolution of the Vietnamese Communist Parties: This period is rendered even more complex by the character of Russian Communism at the time. Stalin had not yet solidified his control, and he was being strongly opposed by Trotsky. The two had deep differences in their approach to the problem of fomenting revolution. Hence local Communist movements were further split by the adherence of their members to either the Stalinist or the Trotskyite wing. In most countries the Trotskyite groups did not prove viable over the long run.

1 - Trotskyism in Vietnam: In Vietnam the Trotskyite groups quickly split even further, until they were represented by the International Communist League (or October Left Opposition), the Left Opposition and Indochina Communism. The Trotskyite groups were finally rooted out by the French and their members eventually absorbed by the Stalinists.

2 - Stalinism in Vietnam: The Stalinist groups were the two principal groups resulting from the split of the Than Nien: the Indochina Communist party and the Annam Communist party. A third group local to Annam, the Indochinese Communist Alliance, was also a contender for the mantle of legitimacy, which could be proffered only by the Third International. Ho Chi Minh (known at this time as Nguyen Ai Quoc) was the representative chosen by the Comintern to solve the problem. He was chosen because of his past ties with the Comintern, which had included work at the Soviet consulate in Canton as a liaison with Borodin, the Russian adviser to the Kuomintang, and a long period of work as a Comintern representative in forming Communist groups in other areas of Southeast Asia. He had, for example, been one of the founders of the original Than Nien in Canton. He worked out a compromise among the three groups which resulted in the formation of the Viet Nam Cong San Dang (Vietnam Communist party) in February of 1930. Late in the same year, the name was changed to the Indochinese Communist party, for reasons that are not fully clear, but perhaps because the Comintern demanded the formation of a party that embraced all the French colonial areas, whereas Ho Chi Minh favored a more nationalist-oriented Vietnamese party.

E - Communist Activities in the 1930's: With the founding of a unified Communist party, recognized and supported by Moscow, the Vietnamese Communists were able to step up revolutionary agitation in Vietnam. Communist agit-prop work resulted in a number of urban strikes and peasant uprisings. The Communist aim was the piecemeal destruction of the French colonial apparatus in Vietnam. By May of 1930 Annam was in open rebellion. The French response was in kind--massive reprisals unrestrained by law. Probably at least 10,000 nationalists of all political hues died, and many times that number were imprisoned or deported.

1 - The Party is Seriously Weakened: By April 1933 the party was all but extinct in all sections of Vietnam save the south. From about 1936 the party began to come back in Tongking and Annam through the use of numerous legal front groups, such as Socialist federations.

2 - International Considerations: The progress of Communism-nationalism in Vietnam was interrupted in 1941 when Hitler attacked Russia and Communist parties all over the world came temporarily into alliance with their colonial overlords so as to defeat German and Japanese fascism. The character of the Vietnamese nationalist movement was strongly influenced by events stemming from Japanese occupation of much of Southeast Asia.