Nationalism in the Aims and Motivations of the Vietnamese Communist Movement

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Introduction

In Vietnam, it has always been ‘commendable to resist and expel foreigners.’ From times long before the beginnings of French aggression in 1858 until the unification of Communist Vietnam in 1975, the Vietnamese people harboured an extraordinarily strong patriotic drive; the predominant view of Western commentators on the motivation of the 20th Century revolutionary movement gives this patriotism overwhelming importance: ‘it is impossible to deny the strength of nationalism as the primary springboard of the Vietnamese revolution.’

Despite this, the government formed by Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969) after the Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) on the 2nd September 1945, the group that was to represent majority Vietnamese opinion until and after 1975, was spearheaded by the Vietminh (League for Vietnam’s Independence) – a movement that did not define itself as Nationalist, but rather as an expressly Communist group.

This, in the context of the day, is relatively unsurprising. When the people of Vietnam looked for leadership, this was the obvious group to choose – the only movement prepared and willing to step in (other, more nationalist resistance groups had prematurely flourished and failed, as shall be discussed). In the Vietnam that found itself suddenly free at the close of the Second World War, no other lobby was ready, no group presented itself nationally as the Communists were and did. The Liberation Army that seized control of town after town was the military arm of the Viet Minh, formed in 1944 under Vo Nguyen Giap (b. 1912), an element of a movement that published its manifesto in February 1930, that had begun preparation and ideological training in the late 1920's in Guangzhou under Ho Chi Minh. Given the long preparation carried out by the Vietminh, the progression to the declaration of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a Communist nation with Ho at its head was a natural one.

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1 Truong Buu Lam Resistance, Rebellion, Revolution: Popular Movements in Vietnamese History (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984) p. 21
3 Meaning ‘Ho the enlightened one,’ the final name used by and the name now used to mean the individual born Nguyen Sing Cung or Nguyen Tat Thanh, at times also known as Nguyen Ai Quoc, meaning Nguyen the Patriot, and by other names)
Whilst that development seems logical given the conditions of the day, the manner in which those conditions were reached (or manipulated) has been the subject of intense debate. Was that natural progression one in which the ideologists of Communist revolution “‘captured’” the Nationalist movement,4 exploited a nationalistic fervour to produce the desired revolt, using the front of the Viet Minh to take ‘the opportunity to blend their esoteric dogmas with the more easily understood nationalist cause of resistance”?5 This is a perception held by many modern historians and is based upon that of prominent contemporary Western observers, who saw Communists ‘attempting to impose their counterfeit revolution on the legitimate and natural revolution of rising expectations – Communists are the parasites of the modernization process.6

It was in this context that the US became involved in Vietnam – in the belief that their opponents were not representative of the desires of most Vietnamese, that the Viet Minh was an unnaturally Communist movement in a state that might desire national freedom, but wasn’t necessarily inclined towards a social revolution. America believed that its role in Vietnam was not only to oppose the spread of Communism and defend those that came under it unwillingly, but also to awaken those that were being fooled into accepting a doctrine that they would objectively hold undesirable.

This attitude was and is encouraged by examination of advice given to Asian revolutionaries by their Soviet counterparts; Grigori Zinoviev (1833-1936) – later to die by Stalin’s order – argued in 1922 that ‘Communists should co-operate with the rising nationalists in Asia, gain the leadership of their movement, and then cast aside the genuine national leaders.7 After all, ‘by itself, the tiny Indochina Communist Party... could never have hoped to attract the support of politically engaged Vietnamese,’8 let alone the hearts and minds of the nation at large.

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8 Woodside, Alexander op. cit.
This is the essence of the currently accepted analysis of the revolutionary Vietnamese setting – that the Communist lobby exploited a majority furious with the abuses of French rule, sliding Communism into a dominant position of Vietnamese life as they called their revolt the ‘national democratic revolution.’ As Macdonald has it, ‘the majority of people had not fought for a communist government, but to be rid of the colonial occupying power.’ Such a perception, as shall be discussed, is representative of the Western reading of the whole Southeast Asian region of the day.

The Vietnamese people were accustomed to the use of violence to protect their independence; perennial opposition to expansionist China meant that ‘few peoples in Asia had been compelled to fight longer and harder to retain their identity as a separate and independent state than the Vietnamese.’ Whilst the ability and commitment of the Vietcong in resistance to outside power has been recognised, the strong sense of Vietnamese identity in and of itself has never really been acknowledged beyond the most simplistic of terms by external observers, perhaps because of the difficulty of comprehending how such an emotion can form when looking at the odd shape of the nation on a map.

Such a lack of awareness allows Vietnam specialists such as Yale’s Kim Ninh to assert that ‘what has long been dominant in the Vietnamese self-assessment is the extent to which it is not Chinese (and to a lesser extent not French)’ rather than entering into a more significant analysis of how a national identity, whilst certainly influenced by feelings of encirclement and domination, also developed a separate, distinct sense of self.

9 Le Duan Selected Writings (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977) p. 294 and passim
This, whilst a sense that has only relatively recently manifested itself in territorial demands – in the 17th century, for example, ‘the Lê emperor in Vietnam and the Lao king agreed that every inhabitant in the upper Mekong valley who lived in a house built on stilts owed allegiance to Laos, while those whose homes had earth floors owed allegiance to Vietnam’ – is a longstanding emotion and sense, in and of itself. Given an understanding of that sense or merely an awareness of its existence, the willingness of the Vietnamese to combat the most powerful nation on Earth, though certainly impressive, needs little explanation; this work has attempted to explore a more difficult question – why they chose the dogma that served them.

Macdonald’s observation that ‘the majority of people had not fought for a communist government, but to be rid of the colonial occupying power’ is in truth the presentation of a false dichotomy. The fact that a group within a broad movement participates for different reasons from another group does not necessarily imply exploitation or pretense. Neither does the fact that one has a strong political ideology such as socialism forbid the possession of any other political inclination, such as patriotism. The concept of a socialist exploitation of Vietnamese nationalism will be opposed here: a discussion of the disputed importance of nationalism to the Vietnamese Communist movement in resistance, and of Communism to the nationalist movement, will form the subject of this essay. The unity of Vietnam under Communist government in 1975 seems a fitting end to the period to be considered. Much of interest – the politics behind partition, or the Communist-led conduct of war with America, for example – can be considered only briefly; fortunately, these are issues considered in great depth elsewhere. The central issue to this work shall be the development of the Communist movement in French Indochina, and the thesis herein shall be that nationalism and Marxist-Leninism occupied a symbiotic relationship in the motivation of the Communist movement and its chief practitioners in the nation once again known as Vietnam.

13 ‘Introduction’ pp1-6 in David Joel Steinberg (ed.) In Search of Southeast Asia: a Modern History (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1987) revised ed. p. 5
Chapter One: The Significant Revolt

We are told that ‘the Vietnamese revolution is of particular significance because it was the first to take place in a colony of a European power.’ An American might disagree, as might a Brazilian; the overstated assumption of uniqueness points to a fascination felt amongst many scholars with the ‘significance’ of this revolution in particular. On why Vietnam’s 20th century revolution was so revolutionary, Pelzer-White offers a dictum on determining a true revolution; it must be one effecting ‘a fundamental change to the social, political or economic system.’ The American Revolution (as a pre-Vietnam example) would seem to satisfy all of these criteria. Perhaps the distinction is that America's revolution was a nationalist movement throwing off a colonial power. But, as outlined in the introduction, nationalism was at the heart of Vietnam's long struggle: ‘the French controlled through the Sûreté... while Vietnamese of all walks of life and political persuasion planned and plotted, like Emperor Tu Duc, to throw them into the sea.’ In truth, though the observers quoted here don’t say so, the significance of the Vietnamese revolution lies in the symbiotic unification of Communism and nationalism that occurred within the movement that led it.

If the majority’s motivation for revolution was nationalism, then it would seem obvious that the ideology of that revolution – Communism – was fundamentally affected by nationalism. More than that: depended on it, required it, was seen by many (or most) as secondary to it. One feels uncomfortable in so simply identifying individuals involved in a complex situation. Agents on the world stage often possess multiple agendas, multiple identities – motivations that are difficult to tease out, one from another. Nationalists can also be Communists, and vice versa. But just as one approaches an individual event with a particular relevant aspect of one’s identity more important than others, in ideological terms one agenda must necessarily be more important than another for an individual at any given time: if this consistently in the same position, then it is fair to think of that individual in general terms as ‘nationalist’, ‘Communist’ etc. Motivation, if identifiable, can determine group – with this acknowledgement, the logic of that equation is exercised here.

16 Warner, Denis The Last Confucian: Vietnam, Southeast Asia and the West (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964) p. 37
The Viet Minh Revolutionary Committees that swiftly formed across Vietnam during the shadow days of Japanese rule in 1945 were the result of the Communist Party’s unique position as a ‘determined minority’\textsuperscript{17} that could claim to speak for the republican government-in-exile in China (though it only actually had one member in that government) and most importantly, a well organised and trained organisation. Whilst Communist movements were developing across Southeast Asia, in Indochina there was little swelling of public opinion in the favour of Communism \textit{per se}, just in favour of Vietnamese government. Generating support for this cause was easy, given the overbearing nature of French colonial rule; one of the explicit supplementary reasons Ho offered for opposing the French was their domination of every element of everyday life in comparison with the relatively hands-off nature of British rule in India.

Whilst the drive for Vietnamese self-government in general found supporters easily, fostering Marxism-Leninism in Indochina in particular was more difficult. Communism was not a natural Vietnamese ideology, was not one supported or underpinned by a widespread intellectual position in the country. Some suspected this European-bred doctrine, just as they instinctively suspected Europeans. Whilst Communists in Vietnam have always portrayed their movement as popular from its inception, the truth is – as the lobby that maintains exploitation was key to Communist success never ceases to point out – rather different. Importantly, this initially unfavourable environment hardly rules out Communism becoming more popularly accepted in later stages of Vietnamese development. Still, instead of growing through a swelling sense of communal interest, as in Russia, Communist dogma was initially developed in Vietnam through its dependence on nationalism.

Therefore observers like Khanh believe that Vietnamese Communism – often thought of as the ‘purest’ of the Communist movements, by Marxist standards – is divided into two discrete elements:

an anti-imperialist movement integral with Vietnamese patriotic traditions, and a Communist movement affiliated with, and deeply affected by, developments in the international Communist movement.\textsuperscript{18}

This perception of a 'graft' of the indigenous and the imported to create the

\textsuperscript{17} Buttinger, Joseph \textit{Vietnam: A Political History} (London: Andre Deutsch, 1969) p. 208
\textsuperscript{18} Khanh, Huynh Kim \textit{Vietnamese Communism 1924-1945} (New York: Cornell University Press, 1982) p. 20
revolutionary movement is both supported and undermined by Pelzer-White, who agrees with the division, but doesn’t see the latter half of the anti-French movement as primarily Communist either. She sees the ‘alliance’ as being one between a peasantry that wanted to throw off all burdens and an intellectual lobby that was primarily ‘anticolonial’ – the fact that ‘this alliance occurred under the banner of the Communist Party’\(^9\) seems almost incidental.

Some see other issues in post-revolutionary Vietnam as being more pressing than ideology altogether. Thayer concerns himself with the impact of geographic history on the development of the new state, on ‘the influence of regionalism.’\(^{20}\) More subtly, Jeshurun writes that ‘in Vietnam a majority movement attempted to absorb minorities within its fold after the seizure of state power.’\(^{21}\) The majority in question was certainly not a Communist lobby, though the communist faction tacitly controlled the freedom movement: ‘a patriotic-nationalist umbrella organization... with the handle of the umbrella held firmly in concealed communist hands.’\(^{22}\)

The discussion here is about the ability of the racial majority, Vietnamese nationals, to accommodate minority groups in the new Nationalist environment. Whilst ‘in facing the French, Vietnam was virtually free of divided ethnic loyalties,’\(^{23}\) the same was not true in the post-DRV declaration environment, in the temporary absence of the common enemy: after nationalism, *ethnicity* is more important than ideology in Jeshurun’s analysis of the Vietnamese society that formed in what it believed to be its post-liberation period. In any case, the idea of an ideological ‘graft’ certainly isn’t denied.

So the idea of Communist manipulation of nationalist feeling in pre-revolutionary Vietnam is open to challenge. Perhaps nationalism subverted communism to its needs, rather than vice versa – a convenient ideological framework to suit the pragmatic aims of the majority. Though not essential, revolution is made infinitely easier by majority support, support Ho realised Communism alone could not generate in Vietnam. Nationalism served that purpose. But revolution is made more coherent by ideology, and the chances of the incoming regime remaining in place are higher if the people are indoctrinated in a binding

\(^{19}\) Pelzer-White, Christine *op. cit* p. 79
\(^{22}\) Ruane, Kevin *War and Revolution in Vietnam, 1930-75* (London: University College London Press, 1998) p. 8
philosophy than with a directionless nationalist uprising. That role was played by Communism.

The use of historical Vietnamese nationalist narratives in the construction of the ideology of resistance seems to support this. The 1930’s resistance was presented as another step in the nationalist ethos that produced the Van Than (Scholars’ Resistance) and Can Vuong (Loyalty to the King) movements (1885-97), and the anti-Chinese and Mongol rebellions before that – glamorous images such as that of the Trung sisters, 1st century anti-Chinese leaders in Vietnam, were deployed; a ‘combined ideal of romantic love and patriotism... frequently expressed in patriotic literature since 1945.’24 Similarly, as Karnow notes, third century anti-Chinese fighter Trieu Au – the ‘Vietnamese equivalent of Joan of Arc’25 – was another nationalist icon. Importantly, though individual images were useful, each one of the revolutionary precedents (Scholars’, Can Vuong, Chinese, Mongol) were led – at least initially – by the intellectual lobby of the day, a desirable precedent for the Communist movement.

The motivation of that lobby was perhaps most acutely examined in the immediate post-war period, when the leadership of the newly proclaimed DRV travelled to Paris to enter into negotiations with the French government on the nature of the future Indochinese political environment. Before these negotiations, based on the Ho-Sainteny accords, could even get underway, news arrived from Vietnam that Admiral d’Argeville (1889-1964), France’s High Commissioner in Indochina, had declared Cochinchina an autonomous republic: whilst the hard-line former monk had never quite been an obedient servant of Paris, but the French government’s refusal to condemn his action was enough to be considered a sign of tacit support.

This posed a tremendous dilemma for Ho’s administration, faced with the possibility of semi-autonomous Vietnamese rule in the rest of Vietnam, with Cochinchina remaining under strict French rule. As Short has it, as Communists, ‘they might have accepted a smaller but communist state that could conceivably have been free of the French [but] it was as nationalists that the Vietminh argued their case for dissoluble national unity.’26

By the time of US involvement in the region, culminating in the undeclared Vietnam War, dual motivations were in play for the nationalist/communist movement and the objectives of the two ideologies had grown to be almost entirely the same. This brief passage

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of negotiation and hopes for negotiation in 1946 is important because it is one of the few occasions in which the two causes can be identifiably split, where the gain of one might be achieved by the forfeiting of the aims of the other. Alternative occasions, such as the debate after Geneva in April-July 1955 on whether to concentrate on building a Socialist platform in the DRV or on the war in the South, tended to be questions of timing more than essential motivation.

Again, singular motivation for individuals in determining policy is harder than it might seem to identify – by the time of the post-Geneva debate for example, issues of personal competition between men such as Le Duan (1908-1986) and Truong Chinh (born Dang Xuan Khu, 1907-1988) were also factors. But this immediate post-war period was a time of enormous difficulty for the Communists as a whole, facing the forces of the Allies in the South and the Chinese in the North, both of which refused to recognise the Provisional Government. That the Chinese focussed their ragtag army’s efforts in a tremendous institutionalised looting spree (stealing opium, most of the North’s railway tracks, all bathroom fittings in Haiphong) allowed Ho Chi Minh to bring about the return of Vietminh control in the north from the Chinese appointees there, with the help of the French – but this was still a dark hour for the Vietminh.

Enormous economic concessions had had to be made to the Chinese in order to secure withdrawal, an agreement that Indochina’s perennially threatening northern neighbour might renege upon at any moment. Harsh French control in the rest of the nation was tightening in a reflexive action against the increasing spirit of support for the nationalist movement. In such a position, it must have been tremendously tempting for the Viet Minh to grasp the chance of a Communist north, and hope for the return of Cochinchina to a larger Communist Vietnam at a later date.

However, even given their dilemma, the Vietminh granted no such concession. Whilst the Vietnamese delegation was in Paris, the Fourth Republic was in political turmoil, Ho and his colleagues attempted to negotiate with one group and then another. When it emerged, the new government formed under Bidault (1899-1983), was a centre-right coalition as unwilling to grant concessions as its predecessor. Nationalism in France now stood in the way of Vietnamese independence, with all wings of French politics convinced that the post-war restoration of glory was to be obtained through the resurgence of empire. Still, Ho preferred to continue negotiating – perhaps because, as the official Communist line has it, he was desperate for peace, perhaps because he preferred a temporary extension of the
French presence rather than the possibility of a long Chinese dominance. His judgment was almost certainly affected by a mistaken belief, garnered during his time in Paris, that the Communists would win out in France, and that the colonial master would therefore ultimately be a friendly power.28

In any case, the French would not concede the only measure that would appease the nationalists – full independence – and the Vietnamese Communists, perhaps sensing an advantage in the popular mood despite the dire straits of the current political environment, would not negotiate on the possibility of separation. The modus vivendi Ho eventually negotiated (remaining in Paris alone to do so, after the return of the rest of the delegation), which recognised an independent Republic of Vietnam within the French Union, wasn’t enough to halt the growing movement towards war, which broke out in autumn 1946. Vo Nguyen Giap led the hard-line Communists in a wave of assassinations that made full-scale conflict inevitable (the argument is yet to be finished as to whether Ho’s presence in France during this time, and consequent lack of implication in the 1946 outbreak, was an agreed ploy).

The possibility of ideological victory in at least part of their nation did not sway the Vietminh leadership to allowing the French control elsewhere – ergo, Short et al say, they were more nationalist that Communist. This, like the contrary belief that the exploitative Communists had no nationalist leanings, is far from true. Obviously, the interests of Communism in Vietnam would be better served by a united Vietnam in which it could be practised than in a rump-state cut away from a great deal of the nation’s population, and in particular from Saigon’s large working class (elements of which were allegedly instrumental in Tran Do’s information gathering for the Viet Minh in the war against the Americans).29 Furthermore, the budding Communist movement in Cochinchina, encouraged for so long by the Northern Communists and with results finally emerging, would be cut adrift by such a move, and undoubtedly stamped out by the French, whose regime there was already hard-line.

Instead of accepting this bargain, the Vietnamese Communists hoped that a new guerilla war would unite the whole of the country under Communist rule, and a truer rule than the French-monitored control in the offer being hinted at by the French authorities. Most importantly though, the decision not to permit separation lies in the history of the

Vietnamese Communist movement as developed *with and within* a nationalist agenda, not as distinct ideologies, where its members possessed a set of beliefs that encompassed so much that describing them as either ‘Nationalist’ or ‘Communist’ is to be misleading – as we shall discover.
Chapter Two: Phan Boi Chau and the non-Communist rebels

For those seeking to discover or display a preference in the Vietminh leadership’s agenda, perhaps the existence of a strong anti-colonial body in Vietnam outside the Communist movement, and the leadership’s rejection of that body, would act as a sign of Communist dominance. The Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (Vietnamese Nationalist Party, VNQDD\textsuperscript{30}) never enjoyed the membership of Ho Chi Minh, even though

the party had many things in common with Thanh Nien... it advocated both national liberation and a social revolution. The party’s official motto was also the same as Thanh Nien’s: ‘First make a national revolution; then make a world revolution’ (Truoc lam dan toc cah mang, sau lam the gioi cach mang).\textsuperscript{31}

But the party wasn’t formed until 1927, by which time Ho’s Viet Nam Thanh Nien Cach Mang Dong Chi Hoi (Vietnam Association of Young Revolutionaries, known as Thanh Nien, or ‘youth’) was already active, with Ho unchallenged at its head. In effect, this new group sprang up as a rival to Ho’s power structure rather than an organisation whose ideology he might fairly judge. That the group was nationalist is rather secondary to the power politics of the day: that Ho was opposed to it from its very beginning doesn’t necessitate opposition to its cause.

However, it is difficult to perceive the young Ho as primarily Nationalist, given the betrayal of Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940) – ‘a national hero in both North and South Vietnam’ – in 1925: by ‘Comintern Agent Ho Chi Minh.’\textsuperscript{32} This is, of course, heavily disputed. All at least agree that the rebel, an old friend of Ho’s father Nguyen Sinh Sac with whom Ho had been acquainted since childhood,\textsuperscript{33} was picked up by the Sûreté at the railway station in Shanghai on 30\textsuperscript{th} June 1925, after Ho had invited his fellow Ngha An revolutionary to a meeting in the city. Furthermore though, Ho had contacted the French and arranged the capture.

\textsuperscript{30} This should not be confused with Phan Boi Chau’s earlier organisation of the same name, founded in Canton in 1924.
\textsuperscript{31} Khanh, Huynh Kim Vietnamese Communism 1924-1945 (New York: Cornell University Press, 1982) p. 92
\textsuperscript{32} Turner, Robert F. op. cit. p. 9
\textsuperscript{33} Duiker, William J. op. cit. p. 25
Whilst Marr et al only go so far as to say that this version of events ‘may’ be true,\textsuperscript{34} and some pro-Ho commentators such as Duiker, Ruane and Khanh mention it not at all, both Honey and Turner give solid arguments for Phan’s fall into French hands having its origins in Ho’s actions. From them, we know that Ho offered several reasons for this betrayal – the reaction of ‘shock and resentment’ it would cause in Vietnam (it did), the uses the Communist movement could put the reward money to (a debated figure, perhaps 100,000 piasters) – but, by far the most important, ‘Phan Boi Chau was a Nationalist, not a Communist, and would prove to be a rival to the Communists in their plan to take control of the Vietnamese anti-French resistance movement.’\textsuperscript{35}

Phan may well have been condemned purely for his nationalism – his attempt to establish ‘an anti-imperial coalition’\textsuperscript{36} with the Kuomintang (KMT) or conversely his willingness to enlist the help of Imperial Japan against the French,\textsuperscript{37} would paint him not only as nationalist but dangerous to the interests of Communism. That he had ‘flirted with revolutionary monarchism’\textsuperscript{38} in the belief that the monarchy could act as a unifying symbol reinforced such a belief: in obtaining independence, he was willing to abide by the traditional Vietnamese power structures that the Communist movement was expressly opposed to in ideological terms.

Indeed, Phan – a passionate historian-classicist – never displayed any affinity with Communism, feeling more comfortable with the restoration of the pre-French Vietnamese societal model as an ideal. Furthermore, his chosen path of resistance was one that was explicitly uninvolved with the masses on a practical level – his was an intellectual agenda, led by a socially elitist group (most, ironically, French-speaking) steeped in Confucian philosophy and theory, separated from the masses on a level as basic as the ability to read:

\begin{quote}
like all leaders who believe that political action is the duty, if not actually the privilege, of a trained minority, Chau grossly underestimated the ability of the Vietnamese peasant to see his
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34} Marr, David G. \textit{Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) p. 260
\textsuperscript{37} 50 Years of Activities of the Communist Party of Vietnam (Hanoi: Foreign languages publishing House, 1980) p. 18
economic and political interests and to fight for them if properly lead. 39

So an overt belief in traditional societal structure, coupled with an ideological exclusivity in his nationalism, might have been the sole reasons for the engineering of his fall.

In truth though, multiple agendas were probably in action during this episode. Not least, the thought that Ho would destroy one of his strongest rivals for the leadership of the revolutionary movement (though Phan’s death sentence was commuted to imprisonment due to public pressure, he was never to be released and died in captivity in Hue in 1941). Supporting the suggestion of a ‘power struggle’ motivation on Ho’s part, the membership of the Viet Nam Quang Phue Hoi (or Duy Tan Hoi, ‘Vietnam Restoration Society’), Phan’s organisation, was heavily poached by Ho’s Thanh Nien after 1925. Still, for those that seek to portray Ho el al as Communists hijacking nationalist sentiment, the stated importance of the nationalist issue – one must be more Communist than nationalist – is imperative: Ho was prepared to end the work of ‘a Vietnamese patriot of the first order’ 40 whose credentials by Communist standards are poor.

This is far from uncommon in Communist development, and was one of the features of the Vietnamese independence movement that was pointed to by contemporary observers as proof of the Viet Minh’s predominantly Communist nature. In his consideration of the relationship between nationalism and Communism, J. Edgar Hoover (1895-1972) pointed out in 1962 that ‘Communist parties... are continuously working to undermine non-Communist governments.’ 41

Such a position is not just restricted to attacks upon nationalist movements in power. Ho also ‘worked actively in the late 1920’s to undermine Nationalist opposition’ 42 from the VNQDD. The party – extremely strong during it’s short existence, 1927-30 – sent its most promising recruits to the Whampoa Military Academy (the Kuomintang School of Political and Military Science) about twelve miles from Canton: ‘in the days of the uneasy KMT-CCP alliance, Vietnamese revolutionaries were welcomed amongst the ranks of the elite Chinese officers trained there.’ 43

When they arrived however, these young VNQDD men would be approached by the

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40 Marr, David G. (ed) op. cit. p. 3
41 Hoover, J. Edgar op. cit. p. 12
42 Turner, Robert F. op. cit. p. 11
43 Khanh, Huynh Kim op. cit. p. 77
Communists and invited to join Thanh Nien. Those that accepted swiftly became important in Communist resistance and were to become central to Ho’s Leninist movement in Vietnam: those that refused were betrayed to the French as Nationalists, and would be taken by the Sûreté, never to return to Vietnam. Again, alongside issues of personal power in the independence movement, being Communist seems more important than just opposition to the French.

Through this type of manipulation, the nationalist agenda was coerced into accommodating Communism – indeed, accepting its leadership – in a common movement. However, these tricks and tactics were simply the methods of facilitating the move of the dynamic, organised Communist movement to assume leadership of the revolution. For more fundamentally, the cause of the popular shift away from Phan Boi Chau’s position (though he personally remained popular until his death) and other non-Communist rebels also lies in past failures of the traditional Vietnamese structure to overthrow the French colonialists, and their consequent diminishment in the popular mind. Phan’s efforts were directed to appeal to literate Vietnamese whose general impulse was not to rebel, but to gain government positions – such an intellectual movement held little prospect of success. The Indochinese nationalists that both preceded and succeeded him were unsuccessful, for different reasons.

Truong Dinh (1820 or 1821-1863, also known as Truong Cong Dinh or Quan Dinh) led a strong guerilla movement in Southern Vietnam, recruiting up to perhaps 1,000 men. Just as for Phan Boi Chau, as is often the fate of rebel leaders, he was betrayed by a former comrade and took his own life in February 1863 during the ambush of his stronghold at Go-cong by French forces led by Admiral Bonard (for which action Bonard was hailed in France as a hero). Whilst Nguyen Trung Truc and others attempted to continue the fight, they met with comparatively little success (the capture of Kien-giang in 1868 the only notable exception). Importantly, all this occurred without the aid and guidance of the traditional leaders of Vietnamese society.

When the provincial elite finally mobilised after the exile of Ham-nghi in 1885, they had already allowed extensive French rule in Cochinchina to go unchallenged – their way of life had not previously been immediately threatened, local power structures remaining largely in place. The can vuong (‘aid the king’ movement was fragmented by regional divides and was swiftly crushed, leading to the downfall of local bureaucratic structures in many places. So the normal Vietnamese leadership was in disarray, and the memory of past

failed revolution was large in the collective mind of the masses – for both these reasons, a
Communist voice, in some basic aspects so different from the message of the past and the
individuals tarred with that failure, appealed to the new generation of those harbouring
nationalist instincts, whose impression of the old leadership was of crushing failure.

The final blow to the possibility of an ideological position other than Communism
commanding the revolution came at the outset of the 1930’s. A newer, ideologically broad-
based nationalist movement had formed in the 1920’s inspired by the success of the
Kuomintang in China – its name, Quoc dan dang, is the Vietnamese equivalent (hereafter,
VNQDD) and it was dependent upon the neighbouring nationalists for support: Karnow goes
so far as to assert that the group was directly formed by Chiang Kai-Shek’s agents.45 This
group made certain key mistakes that led to its precipitous downfall.

Foolishly, the VNQDD leadership insisted on remaining within colonial Vietnam
whilst issuing their propaganda (the Communist movement more wisely practised from
outside the country at the time). This operational decision, inspired by understandable ideals
of belonging, of defiance from the homeland, made the Sûreté’s pursuit of the VNQDD
leadership much easier than it might otherwise have been. Obtaining support was also more
difficult for the VNQDD than their Chinese counterparts:

Unlike its Chinese namesake, the VNQDD lacked the support of a
large treaty-port merchant class, of a group like the Shanghai bankers
who could combine nationalism with specific pragmatically defined
non-Communist political objectives.46

These general problems were compounded by specific errors of judgment.
Attempting to enlist more aid in the south, in 1929 the VNQDD assassinated a man named
Bazin, a Frenchman in command of the important and resented plantation recruitment
program, whilst he was in Hanoi. In response, the French pursued and executed VNQDD
members throughout that year, liquidating at least 225 and rendering most cells inoperative.
The weakened VNQDD nevertheless staged a rebellion in February 1930, briefly seizing Yen
Bai – the following French action ended in the deaths of almost all VNQDD commanders,
including its Nguyen Thai Hoc, its leader. The movement had called for rebellion too early,

46 Woodside, Alexander ‘Social Change and the Emergence of Nationalism’ pp. 312-323 in David
Joel Steinberg (ed.) op. cit. p. 320
before the populace was organised enough to give the efficient support it needed. A new nationalist party was not to emerge for fifteen years, by which time the Communist lobby was firmly established. This nationalist failure decided the nature of the revolution to come – ‘for with the liquidation of so many non-Communist revolutionaries, the Communists were in a favourable position to regroup the forces of Vietnamese nationalism under their own banner.’47

Whilst an accurate reflection of the changing strengths of competing anti-imperialist groups in Vietnamese politics, this is slightly misleading. For the Communists that were elevated in importance as the VNQDD declined also possessed nationalist tendencies, as exemplified by the ideological makeup of their undisputed leader, Ho Chi Minh.

47 ibid p. 321
In the struggle for independence, there was little emphasis in the Vietnamese resistance movement’s proclamations on the possibility of a ‘society in which the means of production, distribution and exchange are to be owned in common’ – a fact to be discussed at greater length in the following chapter. But the centrality of the nationalist agenda at the heart of Vietnamese Communism never meant that issues of class (and warfare thereof) were wholly absent from the Vietnamese postwar system, or that the Vietnamese resistance movement was duped into accepting an ideology alien to popular needs or desires. Under the French, Vietnam experienced ‘partial modernisation accompanied by accelerating peasant poverty.’ Pelzer-White maintains that popular opposition to colonial rule wasn’t to do with discontent over the denial of the benefits of the Western way of life, of the rewards of the capitalist system but for the simple reason that they were worse off under the French than they had been under the previous oppressive feudal regime.

By this analysis, a class struggle was occurring in 20th century Vietnam – that the ruling class was of a different nationality is, here at least, of no importance: nationalism isn’t even discussed. Though written to deny the idea of a kind of capitalist-style jealousy of the West being a cause for the desire for independence, Peltzer-White’s observation is also a weighted Marxist analysis of revolutionary motivation in Vietnam: societies rebel because the majority within them is receiving insufficient reward. This is more important than any idea of nationality, often far from the immediate concerns of the poverty-stricken target audience of Communist ideologues.

For Marx, the state is unimportant; states will disappear in any case when the revolution is truly realised – the most important factor, as here, is class. Given the perceived impermanent nature of states as building blocks of the current global societal structure, Marx even supported colonialist regimes, applauding the imposition of more developed societal

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49 Pelzer-White, Christine op. cit. p. 79
50 *ibid* p. 78
models atop of less developed, representing a short cut in the historical march through the modes of economic exchange towards Communism: ‘for Marx, the East was stagnant because the state, with its monopoly of surplus value, prevented the growth of competing economic classes.’\footnote{Sawer, Marian \textit{Marxism and the Question of the Asiatic Mode of Production} (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977) pp. 55-6}

Furthermore, Marx saw in Asia particularly certain societal traditions that were damaging to revolution’s prospects, traditions Western empires helped to break down: problematically in Asia, ‘the ossification of a crude division of labour, through its reinforcement by caste, provided another brake on development.’\footnote{ibid. P. 60} Colonialism rectified this ill, an element of the capitalist system playing its part as a stage in the development of communism. The importance of supporting nationalism in subjugated colonies is a \textit{Leninist} consideration – Lenin, who demanded ‘the liberation of the oppressed nations, not only in general, nebulous phrases, nor in empty declamations, not by ‘postponing’ the question until socialism is established, but in a clearly and precisely formulated political program.\footnote{Lenin, V. I. \textit{On the National and Colonial Questions: Three Articles} (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975) p. 6}

As Lenin himself obliquely points out, the doctrine that ‘the working men have no country’ applies only in ‘the \textit{civilised} nations’\footnote{Lenin, V. I. \textit{Karl Marx and His Teaching} (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973) p. 40} (my emphasis) – by which is meant nations free of a predominantly rural peasant economy, unlike Vietnam. The logic of classlessness doesn’t apply, and ‘absolute equality in the rural economic domain was never a goal of the DRV leadership.’\footnote{Elliot, David W.P. ‘Theories of Political Development and the DRV Model’ pp. 165-193 in Joseph J. Zazloff and MacAlister Brown (eds.) \textit{Communism in Indochina} (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1975) p. 167} Vietnam was barely out of feudalism; the working man certainly has a nation at this stage of development, and his liberty is all-important. The lobby that can rectify his ‘national antagonisms,’ it follows, would be rewarded for it: Lenin’s aim of giving ‘the oppressed nations confidence in proletarian internationalism, to prepare the passage from national sentiment to class solidarity’\footnote{ibid. P. 60} once again applies.

Here we make an important distinction, a distinction vital for those that seek to understand the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh. Whilst the Vietnamese independence movement and its struggle would have been of comparatively little importance to Marx, it would have been accepted by Lenin as important in the development of a Communist environment. Ho was a Leninist.
Ho undoubtedly paid a great deal of attention to ideology, and the Vietnamese Communist movement held itself to be of far purer ideological integrity than other Communist nations. But Ho – a tremendously important international figure in the development of Communism – ostensibly contributed little to dogma. Attempting to offer a definitional reading of far-left ideology, Labe dz offers – amongst others – ‘Bolshevism’, ‘Castroism’, ‘Leninism’, ‘Lysenkoism’, ‘Maoism’, ‘Marxism’, ‘Revisionism’, ‘Stalinism’, ‘Titoism’, ‘Trotskyism’ and ‘Stakhanovism’ as identifiable ideological groups within Communism. There is, in the modern political dialogue, no ‘Hoism’ or ‘Minhism.’ Perplexingly in an arena where Communist ideology was affected hugely by local considerations, Ho the leader would have thought of himself, not as an individual that seeks to redefine his movement, but as a pure Leninist. Perhaps exceptions exist, but they are areas in which Lenin himself accepts Marx’s alternative class-based arguments (the desire for absolute equality, ‘the equalisation of profits,’ is an adequate example).

Some see this simply as a lack of interest or aptitude on Ho’s part – ‘certainly, Ho was no theoretician,’ and point to the importance of Le Duan and Truong Chinh as the intellectual keepers of Vietnamese Communism. Regardless of the importance of Ho’s contribution to recorded dogma, we must analyse earlier events and ideological developments to identify the motivations of the leader of the intellectual lobby at the head of the Vietnamese Revolution, Ho Chi Minh, ‘the first Vietnamese Communist,’ whose career and the early progress of Communism and Nationalism in Vietnam are ‘impossible to separate.’ The same discussion of the influence of Communism and/or Nationalism in Indochina occurs in microcosm in analysis of Ho’s ideology. What was he? What did he believe most important in the revolution – an independent Vietnam, or a Communist Vietnam? How did he reach his conclusions?

57 Labe dz, Leopold ‘Communism’ in Alan Bullock and Stephen Trombley (eds.) The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought (London: HarperCollins, 1999) p. 143 – some of these terms are obviously about an individual rather than an individual’s thoughts (vis ‘Stakhanovism’)
58 Lenin, V. I. Karl Marx and His Teaching (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973) p. 35
59 Kelly, Sean and Colin Mackerras op. cit. p. 227
60 Vo Nguyen Giap Selected Writings (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977) pp 204-5
61 Ruane, Kevin op. cit. p. 1
Raised by his nationalist father in French-controlled Annam, Ho’s patriotism and desire for independence for Vietnam is easy to understand. The thoughtful young man wanted what was best for Vietnam, and for this reason Nguyen Ai Quoc rejected such ideologies as anarchism, with its destructive and unhelpful ‘rejection of authority,’ so unhelpful both to revolution and the hope of beneficial Vietnamese self-determination after it. The cause of his attraction to Communism in particular requires more explanation. The natural alignment of Ho's nationalism and Communism was facilitated through two important things – one (the more acknowledged) Russian, the other Chinese. The first, the primary initial reason for his membership of the French Socialist Party (PSF), was the Communist movement’s support of independence movements in colonised nations.

Ho arrived in France in 1917 after serving as a mess boy since 1911 on a French ship. Coming from an arena in which strong nationalism was tainted with the fatalistic fear that European domination would be a constant in Vietnam’s future, the new setting was startling for Ho and his colleagues:

They came into direct contact with the ideology of home France – with its professions of liberty, equality and fraternity – which was unknown, even proscribed, in the colonies. The tradition of the French Revolution was one aspect of French culture which was not exported and imposed on the Vietnamese by the settlers. The Vietnamese in Paris were intoxicated with the ideas and ideals of the liberal and socialist traditions of Western political thought. 

Ironically enough, therefore, the group that was to oppose French rule was inspired at least in part by French ideals. Despite this ideological element of his new environment, Ho swiftly became the chief spokesman of the large Vietnamese expatriate community in Paris - of all Vietnamese, not only of communists. This community grew as France brought in large numbers of colonial workers to replace manpower lost during the First World War.

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As Bousquet points out, like other expatriate lobbies the Parisian Vietnamese group made frequent attempts to ‘exert influence on the policy of their host nation on governmental decision-making’ and this took the form of encouragements both for freedom for Vietnam, and – failing that – better conditions for the Vietnamese peasant communities. Ho played an important role in this ideologically non-partisan process.

However, seeing little success through channels uninvolved in a wider political sphere, Ho swiftly became heavily involved in leftist politics. He freely confessed in 1960 that

The reason for my joining the French Socialist Party was that these ‘ladies and gentlemen’ – as I called my comrades at that moment – had shown their sympathy towards me, towards the struggle of the oppressed peoples. But I understood neither what was a party, a trade-union, nor what was socialism nor communism.

Likewise, at the French Communist Party’s (PCF’s) Foundation Congress of 1920, during the great debate on potential PCF membership of Comintern, Ho – ‘confused by all of the discussion’ – advocated PCF affiliation with Comintern (an enormously important ideological development) chiefly because “by joining Comintern the party would at last give colonial questions ‘the importance they deserve.’” Ho loathed imperialism – an attitude that led him to see colonial urges in all things, some of them verging on the bizarre (see his belief in 1923 that Britain was planning a colonisation of China) – in any case, we can see that Ho’s critical agenda in the early period of his political awareness was a passion for independence. Whilst this doesn’t render impossible an older Ho being deemed more Communist than Nationalist in ideological terms, a stronger demonstration of his initial nationalist motivation could hardly be required.

66 Turner, Robert F. *op. cit.* p. 5
68 Ho Chi Minh *Selected Works Volume One* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961) p. 57
The second principle in Ho’s acceptance of Communist ideology was ‘Mao's thesis of an armed struggle launched from the countryside,’\(^69\) a revolutionary model based on mobilising peasantry, a model perfect for Vietnam’s overwhelmingly agrarian culture. Indeed, Mao (1893-1976) posited that ‘guerrilla warfare is the key to victory of the revolution in a backward struggle’\(^70\) as urban armed struggle is ‘unlikely to succeed because of the superior strength of government power and intelligence concentrated in the cities.’\(^71\)

Mao’s was a successful thesis in China, and successful revolutionaries such as Che Guevara understood it well (though Che’s tactics involved smaller groups than the Maoist ‘human wave’). During his negotiations with Stalin much later (December 1949-January 1950), Mao advised Kim-il Sung to ‘pursue a more guerilla based strategy’\(^72\) in Korea (advice very soon to be ignored): Ho also visited Mao over that time, to receive the same advice for Vietnam’s revolutionary hopes.

Lenin urged his followers to support both these important stances with his 1920 Theses on the National and Colonial Question, ‘the seminal document in Vietnamese Communism’\(^73\):

> The international policy of the Communist International cannot be to limit itself to a mere formal verbal declaration of the recognition of the equality of nations; [it is necessary] to support the revolutionary movement among the... colonies... Above all we must strive as far as possible to give the peasant movement a revolutionary character.\(^74\)

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\(^{69}\) Joo-Jock, Lim and Vani S. (eds.) Armed Communist Movements in Southeast Asia (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984) p. xii-xiii
\(^{71}\) ibid p. xiii
\(^{74}\) Turner, Robert F. op. cit. p. 5: a more striking translation than Lenin, V. I. On the National and Colonial Questions: Three Articles (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975) p. 23 etc
Though reading it alone, the text made Ho shout ‘aloud as if addressing large crowds: ‘Dear martyrs, compatriots! This is what we need, this is the path to our liberation!’ 75 Whilst not an avenue explored before, it is entirely plausible that Lenin’s stance was more pragmatic than this; perhaps, as it was on the lot of the independence of states during the discussion of the formation of Soviet Union (1922-24),

Lenin’s concern was still a practical one... he wanted an equal status for all the nations; but he called for this equality, not out of concern for the nations themselves, but for fear of aggravating the relations between the nations. His concern [was] to give the oppressed nations confidence in proletarian internationalism, to prepare the passage from national sentiment to class solidarity. 76

Whatever his true motivation, the death of Lenin in 1924 effectively signalled the death of interest amongst the communist elite in both the liberation of colonial regimes as an important aim and in advancing rural communism as an engine of revolution. The preferred revolutionary mechanism of the post-Lenin Kremlin was the industrial proletariat: Ho opposed this analysis at the 1924 Fifth Comintern Congress, but was, in his own words, 'a voice crying in the wilderness'. 77 He pursued his agenda for a time without the full aid of the international Communist movement, coming swiftly to the attention to the French establishment in Indochina – Ho was sentenced to death in absentia by the Vinh court in North Vietnam in 1929.

Given all these motivations – the reason for his initial membership of both the Socialist and Communist movements, his intense desire for national liberation – how might one see Ho primarily as a Communist, rather than a Nationalist, as most observers do? After all, in its later form, his organisation was spasmodically Communist, imposing ‘class distinctions on the movement’ 78 against the US, not allowing those from rich families to take part – surely such an agenda conflicts with a nationalist perspective.

75 Ho Chi Minh Selected Works: Volume Four (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961) p. 449
77 Ruane, Kevin op. cit. p. 3
In earlier times, one of the most commonly quoted pieces of evidence for a nationalist bias is his post-war decision to shut down his own movement. In what ‘can be viewed... as the worst sort of nationalistic and populistic deviationism,’ Ho ostensibly dissolved the Indochina Communist Party in November 1945, to serve the interests of the broad-based nationalist cause in maintaining an independent DRV (the Kuomintang, still a powerful player in China, had voiced grave concerns regarding the Communist element in Vietnamese leadership). If Ho were primarily nationalist, this could be an understandable move; nationalistic considerations often overtook ideological matters in other Communist nations, witness ‘Stalin’s distinct preference for Jiang Kai-Shek over Mao,’ for example.

However, Moscow’s approval of the ICP’s dissolution, expressed through the party’s media organ ‘Red Star,’ would indicate an understanding of the wisdom of such a move for the safety of the Communists and their agenda in Vietnam: the party remained internally intact and functioned regardless of their official status, unlike other dissolved parties such as the Yugoslavian or American – the organisation not only maintained its participants at the time of dissolution, but also recruited new individuals. The dissolution, therefore, would seem to indicate neither a predominantly Nationalist nor a Communist agenda. The move safeguarded nationalist advances made before the Kuomintang’s threat was manifested, and effectively protected the Communist flame. As elsewhere in Vietnam, we see that motivations for the aims of two supposedly separate lobbies are served by the same action.

This duality of action is mirrored in ideology. Whilst Ho’s debt to Leninism is obvious – ‘few elements of his political strategy were void of Lenin’s influence’ – he initially became involved with the Communist movement because it supported the cause of Vietnamese independence: that fact continued to affect the nature of his Communism throughout his political life. More subtly, perhaps this involvement with Communism through nationalism is true ideologically, also: perhaps because of his nationalism Ho’s Communism developed, ‘for he felt that Vietnam must become a socialist state on Marxist lines in order to survive.’

By this logic, Communism for Ho was neither a convenient ideology for nationalism nor an essential ideology expressed through less important nationalist sentiment – **Communism was the best expression of nationalism**, the best form for it to take. Communism

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80 ibid p. 142
81 Turner, Robert F. *op. cit.* p. 13
and the nationalist movement were inextricably linked by the Vietnam War – a state of play conveniently ignored by the west, preferring to play up the Communist side, as easiest in the global battle of ideologies. Likewise, Communism and nationalism were inextricably intertwined for Ho.
Chapter Four: The War Years

The swift defeat of the French at the hands of Nazi Germany in 1940 was a tremendous boost for all facets of the independence movement in Vietnam. Those moderates that had hoped twenty years earlier that the First World War’s proclaimed fight for democracy and freedom would result in freedom for the colonial nations as well as selected European states had long ago been bitterly disappointed by France’s refusal to consider independence, and the fall of the colonial master to another European state could only be beneficial in facilitating a French departure.

The fatalistic element of intellectual observation in Vietnam that regarded foreign presence of some kind as an inevitability retreated before the logical difficulty an imperial overlord that has in turn been conquered itself will suffer in maintaining rule in its colonial holdings: weakness is perceived in the colonial power generally, and probed for in its local rule in particular. The Viet Minh movement swiftly began looking at a process of toppling the French regime and putting home rule into place. However, the French administration in Vietnam did not stand alone for long: the Vichy government’s policy of ‘alliance’ with other anti-Comintern powers served as justification for the occupation of this portion of Southeast Asia by Germany’s Axis ally, Japan.

Japan obtained ‘permission’ to utilise Indochinese ports and military posts from the Vichy government in May 1940, and had occupied Indochina by July. Bolstered by her air and sea supremacy in the Asia-Pacific theatre after the Pearl Harbour night raids (British and Dutch military materiel was also simultaneously destroyed in Malaya, the Philippines and Hong Kong) and by Thailand’s decision to join the Axis powers, Japan invaded the rest of Southeast Asia in December 1941.

Japanese occupation had profound repercussions for the immediate prospects of revolution. On the one hand, the simple fact of another territorial overlord was abhorrent to the nationalistic sentiments of the Vietnamese people. Furthermore, the manner and tools of Japanese occupation caused resentment; the introduction of the Imperial calendar (and the enforcement of celebrations within it) coincided with the imposition of a culture of revering the Emperor and compulsory lessons in Japanese. As ever under external rule, these rules were predominantly enforced in the urban regions of Vietnam, with the rural areas freer.

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through the increased difficulty of efficient dominance. This did not affect the widespread resentment of these impositions.

However, many in Southeast Asia regarded the Japanese as a liberator, welcoming them as ‘they made the French appear inferior,’ eagerly giving credence to Japan’s stated aim of an ‘Asia for the Asians’ within the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Given the retention of the French administration, this was felt less in Vietnam than elsewhere. In the territories that had formerly been Dutch and British possessions, the Japanese advanced locals to fill gaps (at lower levels) left in government administrations after the fall of the colonial powers. Because of the Axis relationship with Vichy France, this thoughtful strategy was not reproduced in Indochina; French officials down to the level of policemen were retained in Vietnam as the puppet French regime, helpful in maintaining rule, was retained until May 1945.

This was to the detriment of Japanese rule in Indochina, and encouraged the nationalist movement. Use of ‘natives’ in government was an intelligent strategy on the part of the new colonial power – especially given the fact that Japan lacked the personnel to directly control all territories under their wartime control. The empowerment of local administrators supported the notion that Japan was a fellow Asian power aiding the peoples of Southeast Asia to their freedom. This was a feeling that certainly had currency amongst some Vietnamese thinkers, keen as they were to perceive an end to foreign domination: but it had less chance to develop more widely given the nature of Japanese rule in Vietnam itself.

The combined Franco-Japanese rule created a great deal of resentment amongst the wider Vietnamese community and played a part in building Communist strength during the war (given that they were at this point, as before, the most prominent of independence lobbies). However, as might be expected given the mixed reception to Japanese rule in the region, the new regime was not universally disliked in Vietnam. Importantly, the idea of ‘collaboration’ in Indochina and Southeast Asia more generally had few of the treasonous overtones so prevalent in conquered European nations that had enjoyed a long history of independence.

For the Vietnamese and their neighbours, whilst foreign rule of any kind was resented tremendously, Japan’s presence was not a loss of freedom to an alien regime; rather, it was simply the replacement of one power with another. Furthermore, as the Germans periodically were, the Japanese were keen to foster loyalty amongst the local population –

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85 Tarling, Nicholas ibid p. 5
(especially after the fall of the Vichy government in 1944 and increasing appeal of de Gaulle’s Free French, which created doubts as to the loyalty of the French administration in Vietnam to their Japanese masters.

Whilst the Japanese therefore had to station more troops than desired in Vietnam, in order to monitor its ‘allies’ amongst the large French community with its 50,000 soldiers, overall the transition from one rule to another was therefore much easier in Vietnam than in the European nations, since ‘collaborators were not necessarily drawn from those who had previously opposed Western rule... Asian functionaries of European governments... generally submitted to employment under the new one.’\(^{86}\) Many felt the Japanese to be far preferable to the French, keen to believe in the Japanese propaganda message of Asia run by Asians in the ‘Co-Prosperity Sphere,’ and were willing to work under their rule.

The temptation felt by individuals to collaborate with Franco-Japanese rule and benefit from the often more favourable conditions of the new regime was combatted by nationalists – for, unsurprisingly, in addition to the development of the Communist lobby, the war years were amongst the most successful for non-Communist nationalist movements. Zhang Fakui, a longstanding Kuomintang nationalist leader and onetime unknowing captor of Ho Chi Minh, founded the Viet Nam Cach menh Dong minh Hoi (Vietnamese Revolutionary League, popularly known as the Dong Minh Hoi) in the summer of 1942 – the organisation, heavily pro-Chinese in nature, naturally opposed Japanese expansionism. However, the movement ‘founded on the factional disputes among the leading members’\(^{87}\) – a dilemma that, importantly, the Viet Minh never suffered. Zhang was forced to cede to Ho in reorganising the movement, using his acknowledged ability in directing guerilla groups in anti-Japanese operations. Thus, another potential non-Communist nationalist group was gradually swallowed up or split by the Viet Minh.

But the involvement of the Communists in this movement was more than self-serving in terms of rivalry with other nationalist movements – they also believed in opposing the new imperialists. For the Communists likewise feared pro-Japanese sentiment. If the people of Vietnam accepted Japanese rule, the possibility of realising their twin dreams of independence and social revolution in Indochina retreated. Furthermore, with some foresight, Ho saw a time in which the Allies would be victorious and would be friendlier to claims of independence if made by wartime allies.

The Vietminh sent information to the Allies regularly (rumours that Ho directly

\(^{86}\) ibid p. 9

served with British intelligence, whilst not implausible, remain unsubstantiated), rescued
downed Allied airmen, issued pro-Ally propaganda in Vietnam, and welcomed British troops
on their arrival after the fall of Japan. In return, as part of their relationship with the
American Office of Strategic Services (forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency), the
Vietminh received weaponry to continue their campaign (weaponry, of course, that remained
in their possession after the war). Backing winners is often helpful, and Ho hoped that the aid
extended to the Allies throughout the period of Japanese occupation would make the winners
of the Second World War more amenable to claims for Vietnamese independence at its
conclusion.

However, these hopes was destined to be dashed by the old urge of colonialism and
new power concerns in the international post-atomic environment after the atom bomb was
dropped and Japan surrendered – sooner than the allies expected, leaving Ho and the
Vietminh briefly in charge of Vietnam before British forces arrived (it was at this point that
the Democratic Republic was declared). Instead of liberation, the Vietminh saw British
troops under General Gracey go to extraordinary lengths to help the French reestablish
control, control the Free French had promised in exile with the 1944 Brazzaville Declaration
which ruled out ‘all possibility of development [for Indochina] outside the French Empire.’

After leading his troops in years of bitter struggle against the Emperor’s forces,
Gracey released 5,000 Japanese soldiers and garbed them in British uniforms to aid the
French in restoring order, urging them on with the threat of prosecution as war criminals if
they failed to comply. Thus aided, French troops run amok in Hanoi and Saigon, their ranks
swelled by angry French citizens.

The hardening of Vietnamese opinion against all outside forces, all foreigners, was a
result of this coalition of formerly warring nations in brutal opposition to the popular agenda,
this pact of former enemies against the nascent independence movement. Undoubtedly, this
hard line forced Vietnamese moderates into the arms of the Communists willing to oppose
the French position forcefully in turn. This old-style colonialism, whose decline in the post-
war environment had been imagined and anticipated by the Vietminh, might have fallen
relatively swiftly if it had not found an ally in the nature of the post-war international arena,
in the concerns of power. These concerns were to be displayed in and eventually epitomised
by events in Vietnam – the division of the world into opposing capitalist and Communist

88 Shaplen, Robert op. cit. p. 5 and Ford, Daniel op. cit
blocs, and the development of the Cold War system.
Chapter Five: Fighting the French

Unsurprisingly given the treatment the Vietnamese indiscriminately received at the hands of the colonial nations at the conclusion of the Second World War, the independence movement rapidly gained in strength during the 1946-54 period. The French regime, its power base consolidated in Cochinchina, frequently attempted to paint the Communists as an esoteric set of foreign-controlled extremists, constructing a Vietnamese ‘government’ under the former Annamese Emperor, Bao Dai to compete for nationalist sentiment – but the new arrangement, in which the French maintained full economic control, was denounced not only within Vietnam and the Communist bloc, but also by India, other Asian nations and some Western observers. Bao Dai’s appeal extended only to Saigon’s rich middle classes and groups that were already anti-Communist, such as Vietnam’s two million Catholics. In any case, the Vietminh were inevitably more successful in communicating with the isolated peasant population flung out across the Vietnamese countryside:

a peasant did not have to understand communist ideology to align himself with the Vietminh, only to know that Ho Chi Minh stood for easily comprehended patriotic goals, land reform and social justice.\(^91\)

Setting the pattern that would serve as Vietnam’s military *modus operandi* for the next thirty years, the Vietminh began a series of raids on French holdings. In this, they were following the tried and tested path of many revolutionaries before them. Daniel Ford holds that ‘revolutionary wars follow a three step pattern’:

At first they’re limited to subversion and isolated acts of violence. Then they move into full-scale guerrilla actions... with ambushes and hit-and-run raids... finally, there’s the ‘war of movement’ in which the rebels can battle government troops on equal terms. That is how Michael Collins won the Irish Republic, how Mao Tse Tung won China, how Fidel Castro won Cuba... it also happens to be

\(^{91}\) Ruane *op. cit.* p. 22
Given the problematic nature of French involvement in Indochina, with military commitments elsewhere in the French Union and in occupying West Germany, Ho et al might have been satisfied with only stages one and two – the long-term plan of grinding their opponents down with a drawn-out guerrilla campaign leading to war-weariness in France and, ultimately, to a negotiated withdrawal on terms favourable to the Vietminh.\(^93\) However, this changed as the Vietminh were able to step up to Ford’s ‘final stage’ of the Franco-Vietminh conflict – at Dienbienphu.

The battle at Dienbienphu, a valley in north-west Tonkin, often surprises newcomers to Vietnamese history – the soldiers of a nation whose name is a byword for jungle warfare and guerilla fighting took on their colonial enemy in a large scale, conventionally fought, set-piece battle. European armies have perfected the art of fighting in such conditions over several centuries, and the French forces were significantly better equipped than their opponents. Throughout the Vietnamese conflict, the anti-Communists always attempted to ‘conventionalise’ violence into a mode... closer to the tradition of two World Wars and the Korean War.\(^94\)

Despite this, though sustaining losses at a ratio of four Vietnamese casualties to one French (NRV and Vietcong forces were later to sustain a twenty to one casualty rate against the Americans at Khe Sanh) , Dienbienphu saw the French army facing defeat at the hands of their Asian opponents. The French appealed for aid from the other Western nations.

Whilst a lobby including Vice-President Nixon supported the use of the atomic bomb in support of the French,\(^95\) the Americans wouldn’t intervene in Indochina without the support of allies, in particular Britain, America’s chief ally and the major Southeast-Asian colonial player: ‘Without allies and associates,’ Eisenhower (1890-1969) said privately, ‘the leader is just an adventurer, like Genghis Khan.’\(^96\) Churchill (1874-1965) and his foreign minister Anthony Eden (1897-1977), fearing counter-intervention from the Chinese as in Korea and perhaps even an activation of the Sino-Soviet defence pact of 1950, ruled out support for the French.


\(^{93}\) Ruane op. cit. p. 20


\(^{95}\) Karnow op. cit. p. 579

\(^{96}\) ibid p. 197
Without aid from the other great powers, the French were decisively beaten at Dienbienphu – a turning point in both the Vietnamese struggle for independence from colonialism, and in the Communist Vietminh’s efforts to stand as the undisputed leaders of the nationalist movement. Clear victors at the immediate level, the Communists still had to consider the more powerful nations in the world at large. Having said that, they began their communications this world with the most exquisite military timing; the Vietminh entered into pre-arranged direct talks with the French government of Pierre Mendès-France (1907-1982) at a nine-delegation summit hosted by the British and the Russians at Geneva that began on the 8th of May 1954, the day after the red flag was erected over the French command bunker at Dienbienphu.

Just as they had been during the post-Second World War discussions regarding Vietnam’s future (see Ch. 1), the Communists were unwilling to see partition on Vietnam – albeit from a stronger position, the Vietminh were once again opposed to the consideration of potential gains that would damage the nationalist agenda. Predictably, the individuals that had made up the short-lived DRV administration that had formed in the heady days of liberation from the Japanese wanted the same things they had done during negotiations with Sainteny. The dream that had been the DRV ten years before was the ideal that had been fought for ever since.

However, the great powers at Geneva were, on the whole, ‘resigned to the partition of Vietnam. Eden had clearly accepted the idea, while Eisenhower suggested... that something along the lines of Germany was ‘the most you could ask’ in existing circumstances.’ China as represented by Zhou Enlai (1898-1976) seemed to prefer division with the South under a South Vietnamese government rather than a foreign power taking direct control, something that would interfere with the Chinese vision of the whole of Southeast Asia as a series of weak self-governed nation states under the broad control of Beijing.

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Under such circumstances, the Vietnamese found themselves in the same scenario that had faced them before – take a concrete advantage and hope for later gains in the south, or continue battling. Unbeknownst to the Europeans and the superpowers, the battle with the French had drained Vietminh strength considerably,\(^{98}\) and in any case the lessons of the last time indicated that the choice to struggle would lead to another impasse. Furthermore, the situation was different in two key ways.

Firstly, the offer of Vietminh rule in the North, free of Chinese and other aggression, was much more certain, solid and binding than before. Secondly, the setup in the South differed from d’Argenlieu’s autocratic French-controlled Cochinchina – now, South Vietnam would be a republic under Vietnamese government with democratic elections along western lines to follow soon after partition, with a caretaker government under well-regarded nationalist Ngo Dinh Diem (1901-1963) as president to rule until then. Given the overwhelming public support offered to the Vietminh by the Vietnamese people in the wake of Dienbienphu, Ho et al were confident that they could triumph in such an election – to accept partition in those circumstances seemed to serve both Communism and nationalism.

So the 1954 Geneva Agreement promised elections in 1956 that the Communists seemed almost certain to win. Abiding by the agreement, the Vietnamese withdrew their troops from the South as the French withdrew theirs from the north, confident that soon control of the South would be in their possession formally. Albeit in such circumstances, it is important to note that the Communist Vietminh consented to a peace constructed around a democratic platform for a part of Vietnam, as planned by and agreed upon with the great powers of the day. The Vietnamese twentieth century, with all its trouble, is one that has a million facets and motivations, opposing attitudes and judgments on every element of every issue. In perhaps the clearest moment of fault in the whole struggle, when those same great powers colluded with Diem in ensuring that those promised elections did not take place, they ensured the renewal of conflict in Vietnam.

\(^{98}\) ibid
Chapter Six: Direct American Involvement

More and more, the ‘most prolonged conflict of the twentieth century’\(^9\) in Vietnam became an element of the larger, undeclared conflict between the capitalist and Communist model. Domino Theory, the ‘gravity’ of the red area of the map creeping downwards – the great fears of the Western world that Communism would spread were fuelled by Khrushchev’s infamous ‘we will bury you’ (or more accurately, ‘we will bear witness to your funeral’) – a more subtle statement on perceived weakness of the capitalist model), by the Soviet global policy later encapsulated in Brezhnev’s doctrine of the right to support ‘wars of liberation whenever and wherever targets of opportunity develop.’\(^1\)

It is in this environment – not only a strategic, but also a moral setting – that the Vietnam conflict escalated under Kennedy (1917-1963: many, including his official White House biographer,\(^2\) have a tendency to forget President Kennedy’s important involvement in Vietnam, led by his strong belief in domino theory), Johnson (1908-1973) and finally under Nixon (1913-1994). That perceived danger of a united Communist movement in Southeast Asia with Indochina at its head had led to US support, through SEATO, of the non-Communist South Vietnamese government at the 1954 Geneva talks, after the defeat of France at Dienbienphu. More than seven billion dollars in US materiel and support came through to the Southern government from then until 1961, as the US maneuvered to protect Indochina – and the nations that were predicted to follow it if it fell – from the scourge of Communism. ‘Advisers’ became more and more active in the work of the ineffective Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and the much-disputed Tonkin Incident resulted in Johnson’s Tonkin Resolution which saw the first US combat troops landing at Danang in 1965.

\(^1\) Haig, Alexander M. Jr. *op. cit.* p. 103
\(^2\) http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/jk35.html
Initially, the US was extremely wary of pushing too far in Vietnam for fear of provoking open conflict with her Cold War opponents. Another of America’s great fears in global affairs – the possibility of an alliance between the two great Communist powers in Asia – never materialized. Indeed, rivalry between the neighbouring revolutionary states was intense, and this is manifested in the great fluctuations in influence of the PRC and the USSR in Vietnam. China became convinced of a growing influence of Moscow on the Communist North: ‘by the late 1960s, Peking viewed the North Vietnamese and their proxies essentially as surrogates of the Soviet Union.’

American relations with the PRC, soon to improve under the subtleties of Kissinger’s (b. 1923) policy of ‘tripolarity,’ were at this point so poor that this fact was not realised – indeed, the US remained convinced of Peking’s determination to flood North Vietnam with Chinese regulars if the US pushed too far. Had they become aware of the true Chinese attitude, which made Chinese intervention extremely unlikely, America might conceivably have been more aggressive in the earlier stages of conflict. However, they were not – and instead relied on a partnership between US forces and the nationalist government of South Vietnam, led by President Ngo Dinh Diem – a man dismissed by current observers of Vietnamese history as ineffectual and isolated from the people of his nation, but viewed from the West as the time as ‘one of Asia’s ablest leaders.’

Indeed, Western analysts of the day praised long-term nationalist Diem for his work against the North, building Southern Vietnam into ‘the most anti-China, anti-Communist nation in Asia.’ There had always been a strong non-Communist Nationalist movement in Vietnam (often repressed by the Communists, as we have seen), a movement in which Diem had long been a central figure. As Communism developed in Vietnam centred in Hanoi, the establishment of a non-Communist nationalist centre in the French city of Saigon seemed natural – French rule, after all, had always been stronger in the south, so the anti- or non-Communist movement had a natural advantage there.

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102 ibid p. 121
103 Newsweek, 1959: quoted in McNamara, op. cit. p. 42
104 Buss, Claude A. op. cit. p. 206
However, whilst internationally his actions might have appealed to the capitalist west, internally the aloof Diem struggled. Under the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement regime, the use of 'strategic hamlets' was advocated in the combat against the highly elusive guerrilla forces of the Vietminh, a scheme duplicated from that used by British during the Malayan campaign: the scheme, whose merits have been discussed extensively elsewhere, was actually initially implemented for Diem by British veterans of Malaya such as Robert Thompson, who maintained that South Vietnam could ‘go it alone’ (albeit with US aid) – the hamlets were intended at least initially to be a method of facilitating a stronger role for the Southern Vietnamese government. Their involvement actually diminished the effectiveness of the scheme greatly, as the number of hamlets was cut back more and more and villagers silently left their ‘sanctuaries’ in the night, leaving American ‘observers’ to find their strongholds deserted the next day.

During the construction of the strategic hamlets in Southern Vietnam, ‘the average peasant was required to spend almost as much time on unproductive and unpaid work as he spent in the fields. His basic freedoms might be no less than they were in the past: but he was now obliged to suffer an almost commune-like regimentation.’ So beside the fact that the hamlet plan was improperly implemented, through it anti-communist control had led to collectives, forced labour, lack of choice – all the things the West was supposed to fear would descend under Communism, all the things the nationalist movement was apparently opposing. Ideologies might supposedly be different (and villagers were subjected to several hours of ideological training every week by Diem's government, just as in Viet Minh controlled areas) but these opposing sides in a bitter war deployed much the same tactics: the tactics pioneered by the communist movement.

What encouragement, therefore, was there for the villagers of Diem's Vietnam to subscribe to the Personalist philosophy advocated by Diem’s brother Nhu Dinh, when in practice it seemed a mirror image of the ideology it opposed? What, to those peasant communities at the heart of the conflict, were the differences between the two sides? With the much-suspected figure of Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem’s powerful sister-in-law, prominent in the public eye along with both his brothers, the nepotism and corruption thought to be so prevalent in Southern Vietnamese government would be one thing, especially in comparison with the famed austerity of Uncle Ho’s lifestyle. On a wider level, in the perceived spirit of Nhu, for the average peasant the Personalist agenda differed most from Communism in the

105 Shaplen, Robert op. cit. p. 165. Shaplen discusses ‘strategic hamlets’ thoroughly, as does Warner.
106 Warner, Denis op. cit. p. 32
authoritarian manner in which it was delivered.

Personalism was spread in the far-flung villages of Southern Vietnam by uniformed nationalists brought in from Saigon, who ran hour after hour of mandatory indoctrination sessions. Irrespective of official doctrine, for most peasants this was the image of government, along with soldiers and tax collectors – harsh men, often almost foreigners to the parochial peasants, groups of men that owed their appointments to the favour in which they were held by the man above them in rank – a system that saw frequent abuse, an administration in which ‘corruption was customary.’ In comparison, the unassuming, black-clad messengers of Communism who moved amongst the villagers must have seemed a more appealing, Vietnamese alternative (though certainly guilty of damnable transgressions of its own in relation to people under their control). Again, Communism wasn’t necessarily sought by the citizens of Vietnam – it was presented as the other, the only alternative. Thus, for example, the repression of Buddhist monks under Diem directly benefitted the Viet Cong.

All these nationalistic factors in provoking revolution were beyond the class and international brotherhood arguments of Communism, but they were genuine causes held up by the Viet Cong and Viet Minh – country-specific Vietnamese problems, and solutions offered by those in the Communist movement: still Communists, but also vitally involved in the affairs of what they saw as their sovereign nation. That the Viet Cong courted in a manner appealing to the Vietnamese peasantry need not be evidence of manipulation and falsehood: many were of peasant stock themselves. That the Viet Minh, a Communist-led body, offered answers to those desperate for aid need not be evidence of opportunism: these were causes for which they had fought for many years, and believed in themselves.

In their position, it is hardly surprising that the people of Cochinchina were attracted to the ideology: with the aid of the French and the ruling regime, it had satisfied the prerequisite of revolution: ‘the fact of occupations must be linked to felt deprivations.’ Diem’s murder followed this link; he was killed in 1963, the year of President Kennedy’s assassination – and, no matter how unproductive his reign had been, the last coherent opposition to Communism ended with his fall – ‘his assassination... led to a succession of coups by generals which had the effect of undermining such little authority as had been enjoyed by the un lamented Diem.’

The moral certainty behind the nation that had supported and then deserted Diem

107 Shaplen op. cit. p. 167
109 Yahuda, Michael op cit p. 130
was also immensely troubled. America had honestly ventured into the conflict not only with the belief that if it did not, then the nations of Southeast Asia and elsewhere would be threatened by Communism, but also with the desire to aid the non-Communist South against the North. How legitimate could that aim be, given that the Diem government could hardly claim to represent the people of South Vietnam in any case, and that the US failure to recognise the Geneva Agreement had produced a separate North Vietnam?

Amidst frequent claims of fixed elections in the South after the death of Diem to ensure the victory of pro-Western candidates, and thereby strengthen claims of moral legitimacy in US involvement, the remainder of the 1960s saw a tremendous escalation in US forces in Vietnam. These forces were forced more and more to turn against the civilian villagers that harboured their enemy, strengthening Vietminh and Vietcong claims that America was an ‘imperial aggressor.’ Increasingly, this conflict was little to do with ideology so much as US national pride. The shift away from the anti-Communist agenda in Vietnam, coupled with the disastrous effect of war publicity at home, led to the decline of US support for the South – beginning with Nixon’s Guam proclamation of 1970 which outlined the Vietnamese ‘primary responsibility’ for defence, and ending in the near-concession of this undeclared war in the ‘peace with honour’ settlement of 1973.

As has been discussed exhaustively elsewhere, whilst the US lost specific battles and suffered a significant number of casualties American involvement in Vietnam did not cease primarily because of military defeat, which not only hadn’t happened but in strict terms seemed unlikely to happen; just as it was proving near-impossible for the US to wipe out Vietminh/Vietcong in the villages, it would have been extremely difficult for the Vietminh to push the USMC out of the Southern towns they held. Rather, Nixon reluctantly de-escalated and then withdrew because of enormous opposition to it at home; the conflict in Vietnam was perhaps the first to be brought to a halt by the pressure of public opinion.

In this field, as demonstrated by his efforts to retain broad nationalist support for Vietminh leadership of the revolutionary movement, Ho was a master. The American withdrawal, when it eventually occurred, was complete. Whilst enormous, conscience-alleviating gifts of military matériel from the US in 1973 left the Republic with the fourth-largest air force in the world, by the time North Vietnamese forces flooded into the South in 1975 the US had so thoroughly abandoned their allies that their forces ran out of ammunition on the battlefield. The victory achieved in the South, as it had been in the short-lived Republic after the Second World War, was presided over by Communist leadership.

Through the efforts of its practitioners and the position of those that opposed them,
Communism was no longer an alien dogma to the peasant community. Since 1920, Marxist-Leninism and Maoism had been blended and propagated, particular to the needs of the environment, and the result was an ideologically unique system of beliefs. In the words of Le Duan, this nationalist-communist agenda was born of ‘the creative application of Marxism to our country.’ ¹¹⁰ This system was tailored to the desires of a Vietnamese community that had heard it spoken for thirty years, by other Vietnamese. Both its supporters and opponents constantly discussed it as the alternative in Vietnam. Because of US and French support for the contemporary social structure, ‘the task of socialist revolution is achieved by the patriotic revolution’ and ‘nationalism and socialism are harmonised.’ ¹¹¹

There is no doubt that a huge bitterness existed and still exists over the treatment of the South by the North, epitomised in the renaming of Saigon to Ho Chi Minh, in the bulldozing of all Southern war cemeteries after Communist victory, in the total inability of those that held positions of responsibility under the French and the US to find work, in the continuing resentment in the South of high-ranking officials parachuted into authority from the North. Nevertheless, in the South, just as the US-sponsored capitalist model came to be associated only with the corruption of Diem’s government, the desire for independence and freedom was moulded into a Communist passion. To be against Diem would mean one was for Communism. To be a Communist was to be a Nationalist. The same ideological merger occurred on the other side of the war as American perception collapsed two ideologies – Communism and Nationalism – into one.

¹¹⁰ Le Duan op. cit. p. 113 etc
¹¹¹ Kelly, Sean and Colin Mackerras op. cit. p. 211
Whilst beforehand the success of the Vietminh resulted in their ability ‘to capture the support of large numbers of non-Communists who felt that independence was more important than ideology,’\textsuperscript{112} by this time the ignored Vietnamese peasant voice was represented by both communism and nationalism – for Marxist-Leninism was the latest of ‘the movements which had their beginnings in the political periphery of the nation, so to speak, among elements that had cause for complaint against the central power... the Vietminh movement belongs to this category.’\textsuperscript{113} For it was not nationalism above Communism that Ho dismissed – nationalism without communism was his enemy, for two reasons. Partially because, as O’Neill shows, he found the Marxist-Leninist doctrine to be the best form of expression for nationalism in Vietnam. Partially, it was because he believed in Communism. These are two different statements, two different agendas that find expression through the same set of actions in Vietnam. Their eventual results are inseparable; but importantly, as motivations they are separately identifiable.

\textsuperscript{113} Truong Buu Lâm \textit{op. cit} p. 1
Chapter Seven: Internal and External Influences on Post-War Communist Rhetoric

After the Second World War, the essential dependence on Soviet ideology evident in Ho’s thinking was not reflected in ideological statement, just as it never manifested itself in policy or loyalty to the Soviet bloc. On a wider historical scale, there was a new spirit of regional optimism regarding the ability of native forces to repel Western antagonists. Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905 (the year of Russia’s own abortive revolution) was the first defeat of a European power by an Asian nation in modern times; the period after that victory held none of the feeling of pessimism regarding the ability to throw off the invader that occasionally marked the native dialogue of the 1800’s. All of these factors contribute towards a more independent Communist movement in Vietnam, one unafraid to be more distinctively Vietnamese in character.

The Kremlin’s real politik refusal to recognise the DRV ‘altered Vietnamese perceptions of the Soviet Union,’114 and not in a positive way. The Soviet Union's insistence on neutrality with France was also a divisive factor in the Comintern-ICP relationship. The Soviet Union’s expectation that the ideals of global communism and world revolution would manifest themselves in a defense of Soviet interests on the part of new Communist nations was certainly disappointed in Vietnamese policy, though Vietnam had – like Communist China – entered the 1950’s with the acknowledgement of Soviet Russia as the leader of the Communist world. Within the broad fundamental outlines of Communist ideology, the Vietminh leadership was free to explore a new doctrine of its own.

Despite this, when Ho sought to rally the masses, little Communist ideology emerged. In the ‘Appeal on the Occasion of the Anniversary of Six Months Resistance War’\textsuperscript{115} for example, the stated causes of eventual victory are a) ‘just war’ against a repressor, b) unity in ‘but one determination: not to lose the country,’ c) courage, d) correctness of guerilla tactics, e) many friends in other colonial regimes and abroad. Nowhere is there another, more Communist determination – to live without class divisions, to share the means of production, to beat capital as an evil force – that might appear from the Soviet line, no anti-capitalist battle cry such as Marx’s ‘one capitalist always kills many.’\textsuperscript{116}

Instead, the emphasis is on a broad sense of desire for national self-determination. As Ho said in 1946, ‘our secret weapon is nationalism. To have nationhood, which is a sign of maturity, is greater than any weapons in the world.’\textsuperscript{117} This is because for many, and certainly for the majority of Vietnamese society, concepts of nationality and kinship hold greater instinctive appeal than more esoteric dogma – nationalism and affinity, ideas of exclusivity presented by the demagogue with the listener included in the special group, are attractive: we are together, the revolutionary says, and The Other is the enemy. This hardly fits with a rhetoric of universal brotherhood, based as it is on an exclusivity of kinship. The appeal of revolutionary national independence is very different to that of class warfare, for it is based on the cohesion of small groups – ‘the language of family has so often been invoked by revolutionaries as to seem the natural idiom of revolutionary rhetoric.’\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{115} Ho Chi Minh \textit{Selected Works: Volume Three} (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961) pp 119-122
\textsuperscript{116} Lenin, V. I. \textit{Karl Marx and His Teaching} (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973) p. 32
\textsuperscript{117} Furlonger, B. (ed.) \textit{Vietnam: A Reporter’s War} (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Association, 1975) p. 17
\textsuperscript{118} Hue-Tam Ho Tai \textit{Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 197
In this environment, where nationalism is all-important, Ho outlined his desire to see Vietnam as ‘neutral, like Switzerland’\textsuperscript{119} in global politics. Again, hardly the stuff of global socialism, of the development of an ideological power bloc. At the beginnings of Communism in Vietnam, as later, the belief that Ho was ‘in the final analysis, Moscow’s man’\textsuperscript{120} was entirely wrong. His power in Vietnam was unquestioned – Paul Mus, representing France in negotiations with him in 1946, attests to his dominance, having ‘the power to reject the French offer without even having to consult the Tong Bo.’\textsuperscript{121} Whilst Ho certainly had an interest and belief in world Communism, this power he wielded was focussed not on a global revolution of which Vietnam was a part, but solely on Vietnamese independence.

Others certainly maintained the Soviet ideal, especially later in the development of the Vietnamese Communist movement. Le Duan strongly believed that ‘The battle for national liberation, independence... can only end in total victory if it becomes part and parcel of the world proletarian revolution.’\textsuperscript{122} But as Ho Chi Minh realised, in the post-war Vietnamese environment this kind of dogma simply had no place. For ‘to pursue political legitimacy and pursue its social mission, the youthful Communist movement had constantly to maintain a delicate political balance between patriotism and proletarian internationalism; it had to be both Vietnamese and Communist.’\textsuperscript{123}

This is in evidence in the February 1951 manifesto of the Lao Dong party. Whilst the ‘theoretical foundation of the party is Marxism-Leninism’ and the party will ‘march towards socialism’, the manifesto also commits Lao Dong to ‘lead the resistance to complete victory’ – the party leads not just ‘the working class, the working people’, but ‘the whole Vietnam nation in their liberation struggle.’\textsuperscript{124} This does not mean that those propagating the Vietminh position were somehow less Communist or hid their true beliefs during the post-war era – it simply means that other arguments were imagined to be more important in the current political environment, and more appealing in attracting essential aid.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{119} Shaplen, Robert \textit{The Lost Revolution: Vietnam 1945-1965} (London: Andre Deutsch, 1966) p. 51
\item \textsuperscript{120} \textit{ibid} p. 53
\item \textsuperscript{121} \textit{ibid} p. 51 – the Tong Bo was the five-man Vietnamese ‘politburo.’
\item \textsuperscript{122} Le Duan \textit{The Vietnamese Revolution: Fundamental Problems and Essential Tasks} (New York: International Publishers, 1971) p. 14
\item \textsuperscript{123} Khanh, Huynh Kim \textit{op. cit.} p. 21
\item \textsuperscript{124} Daniels, Robert V. \textit{A Documentary History of Communism Volume Two: Communism and The World} (London: I.B. Tauris and Co, 1985) pp. 199-202
\end{itemize}
Therefore the agenda of inclusivity was pushed in the immediate post-war era in an attempt to attract as wide a spectrum as possible to the anti-colonialist front, for once again the ‘springboard’ of nationalism was needed to drive the Communist lobby’s aims in society at large, since not only by conviction but by necessity, ‘revolutionary violence aimed at overthrowing the ruling class must necessarily be the violence of the broad mass who are oppressed and exploited.’

Initiatives in past Soviet thinking established precedent for this. Zinoviev (who said in 1925 that ‘the road to World Revolution lies through the East rather than through the West’ postulated in 1925 that ‘Communist tactics in Asia should be to support bourgeois-nationalists against the oppressors.’ For the Communists, involvement with the independence movement was thought to be ideologically sound, since ‘Marxism-Leninism has shown that national movements, so long as they are truly aimed against imperialism, objectively promote the revolutionary struggle.’

So in 1947, Ho dropped Giap and other ‘extremists’ from his cabinet: Buddhists, Catholics, socialists joined the cabinet and the rebels in the mountains. Representatives from the Dong Minh Hoi were accepted, one taking the position of Ho’s Vice President; and the rump of the VNQDD was also admitted. A nationalist agenda was adopted, with Viet Minh propaganda playing up the movement's nationalistic aims, and playing down the Communist element. This front ‘continued at least through March 1949 when Ho again denounced charges of “communist domination” of his government as “pure French imperialist propaganda.”

How far Ho had come from the betrayal of Nationalists to the French during the 1920s! Perhaps the shift was facilitated by the dire need of the day. Or perhaps Ho was that much more secure within the power structure of Communist Vietnamese anti-colonialism and could afford to manifest a new perspective that strayed from the strict ideological line. Either way, the same leader that destroyed one of Vietnam’s strongest revolutionary voices because he was ‘a Nationalist, not a Communist’ now seemed to accept all comers to his banner.

The revolutionary agenda’s realignment was not only a domestic issue. Whilst Ho’s coalition strategy was important as an attempt to solidify home support, this stance was not

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125 Le Duan op. cit. p. 38 (his emphasis)
128 Ho Chi Minh, as quoted in R. B Smith op. cit. p. 3
129 Turner, Robert F. op. cit. p. 71
only aimed at the broad population of Vietnam itself; it was also greatly affected by the situation in the US and in France. 1947, the year of Ho’s ‘rainbow coalition’ initiative, wasn’t just a year of change for the revolutionaries in Vietnam – it also had profound repercussions for their European supporters. On the 5th of May, the Communists in coalition with Ramadier in France were dismissed from government en masse after refusing to support the ‘imperialist’ French action against Ho (the Haiphong massacre must have played a part in this conclusion, as it did in swaying others within the political mainstream against war). Whilst the party had in any case supported the Vietnamese Communists far less than they might have liked, and the issue was perhaps subsidiary in the PCF’s stance to that of wage strikes and worker solidarity in France, support for the Vietnamese undoubtedly played a part in the move of the party’s elite ‘from ministers to cold-war pariahs.’

The falling away of the group that Ho hoped would lead France into Communism, and therefore to a more friendly stance towards Indochina, must have played a part in convincing Ho that a perception of non-Communist leadership in the Vietminh was crucial not only in rallying the Vietnamese to his flag, but also in obtaining foreign aid. In the period immediately after the conclusion of the Second World War, both sides in the Vietnamese conflict found themselves rather neglected by outside forces: The real politik policy of both Russia and China, and concentration of the their own direct interests, left the Vietminh without a backer; France’s empire-building was distasteful to Roosevelt and his colleagues who were in any case otherwise occupied in the fortification of the new borders of Europe. However, this lack of attention was soon to change and international perception of the Vietminh, especially that of the US leadership, was extremely important.

For several reasons, the dominance of the resistance movement by the Communists could not be allowed to be seen from abroad. The discussion above concerning the potential uses of the reward obtained in Phan Boi Chau’s arrest points to the enormous importance of financing the revolution more generally. The cloak of the nationalist movement facilitated outside aid for the revolutionary cause, from sources that Communism could never attract: ‘significant foreign assistance, for the purpose of fighting the Japanese, for the British, the Americans, or from the anti-communist Chinese government.’ Amongst the anti-French lobby in Vietnam, this was one of the chief arguments against Communism: that it deterred outside powers – especially the US and Great Britain, the other great Western players in Southeast Asia – from helping the nationalist cause.

Initially in the postwar era, large elements within the US leadership under Roosevelt were firmly established as an anticolonial. Roosevelt specifically supported Indian demands for independence from Britain. More pertinently to the Vietnamese situation, in an affair that soured Franco-American relations in the immediate postwar era, the US ignored requests for help from the French in Vietnam during the war when in 1945, after a period of uncomfortable cohabitation, the Japanese finally disarmed them – partially because the US resented the lack of effort on France’s part in resisting the Japanese in the first place, but moreover because at the time Roosevelt ‘wanted to see the last traces of colonialism purged from Southeast Asia.’

Ho deliberately played on this American anticolonialism in the declaration of the DRV’s independence delivered in Ba Dinh square on the 2nd September 1945, where he consciously alluded to the ‘immortal statement’ of equality in the American Declaration of Independence: the Vietnamese declaration begins with ‘all men are created equal.’ Ho, who had always had a ‘strong interest in the political traditions of American democracy,’ sought to bind American aid into the Vietnamese independence movement by playing on the perceived common drive for self-determination from a far-off colonial master.

132 Ford, Daniel op. cit.
134 Lacouture, Jean Ho Chi Minh (London: Allan Lane, 1968) trans. Peter Wiles p. 212
So the Americans were initially sympathetic to claims of national independence. However, in the postwar environment, the fight against Communism acted as a binding force in the otherwise relatively fragmented American political system. In fact, anticommunism was ‘the fundamental premise of the nation’s political culture.’135 Obviously, any hope of aid from that quarter therefore hinged on playing down the revolutionary flavour of Ho Chi Minh’s regime. The DRV’s representatives abroad pushed the belief that the DRV leadership was far from Communist, attempting to appeal especially to the American lobby. At home, Ho’s ‘Information Service’ at home insisted that ‘it is ludicrous to pretend that Ho Chi Minh’s government is totalitarian or Communist.’136

The distance of this position from the truth, coupled with the rather suspect (to anti-Communist eyes) statements of those such as Tròung Chinh, who believed that ‘the Vietnamese revolution is a people’s national democratic revolution... our revolution will certainly develop into a Socialist revolution’137 forms the ideological fuel for the deduction that the Communists exploited a nationalist revolution for which they had no true affection: in truth, as shown by the placing of a nationalist revolution at the forefront that should in time develop into a Socialist regime, they had a more important, fundamental affection for the nationalist agenda.

Beyond the simple fact that support for the Vietminh rose and other national movements declined, allowing more freedom in ideological position, the policy of inclusion in the Communist leadership of the nationalist movement ceased for two reasons – the one ideological, the other practical. The latter shall be dealt with first; put simply, the position of the United States changed to the point at which there was no possibility of support. Based on factors more complex than the obvious, important changes of the mid-century – the death of Roosevelt in 1945, the conclusion of war - this change is central to the course of Vietnamese nationalism as it developed in the thirty years until independence.

The Americans were increasingly deterred by the ‘spectre’ of Communism in Vietnam, both for strategic reasons and also as larger considerations affected the policy of the US towards Vietnam. At a basic level, the idea of the control of the Straits of Malacca by a Communist leadership open to manipulation by the Soviets was just one prominent fear in US analysis of the repercussions of independence in this strategically vital region. On a wider level though, the shift in the American position came about through three main factors.

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135 Cronin, James E. op. cit. p. 54
136 Turner, Robert F. op. cit. p. 71
137 Truờng Chinh Selected Writings (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977) pp. 356-7
– factors that deserve our attention not only because of the importance of the shift in US attitudes to the policies and makeup of the Vietnamese Communist party of the day, but also because they have shaped (erroneous) later interpretations of the Vietnamese conflict and the role of the Vietnamese Communist movement within it.

The first factor, most unrelated to the Vietminh, was the ‘fear that a Franco-American split would make it harder to contain Soviet expansion in Europe.’\textsuperscript{138} As Germany was divided and Western Europe aligned itself with America in opposition to the USSR, the position of the European powers grew once again in the minds of American policy makers. The French, ardent post-war imperialists keen to use the colonies as a resurgent source of national pride, placed enormous importance on total resistance to rebellion generally and the Viet Minh movement in particular – under the post-war leadership of Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970), they would accept nothing other than US support in their continued reign in Indochina.

Furthermore, as demonstrated from the time of Gracey’s aid to the French immediately after the cessation of World War Two, the British feared that success for independence demands would encourage similar movements amongst other colonial possessions in the region, and pressured their ally America to give her support to Churchill’s post-war aim of maintaining the Empire. So at an important stage of development for the Western alliance, both of America’s major European allies urged the US to help maintain colonial rule in Indochina, an issue that appeared secondary to the broader concerns of the global political environment.

The second factor in the change of heart amongst the US leadership was the erroneous belief that ‘the Communist movement in Vietnam was closely related to guerrilla insurgencies in Burma, Indonesia, Malaya and the Philippines in the 1950’s.’\textsuperscript{139} In hindsight, these movements were clearly at least predominantly nationalist rebellions. More dammingly, the Vietnamese had undoubtedly also aided Son Ngoc Thanh (1908-1975) in Cambodia and the (increasingly Communist) Pathet Lao in Laos under Prince Souphanouvong (1909-1995); but their dominant concern here was an Indochina free of French domination. At the time, such developing resistance organisations were perceived as elements of a concerted Communist drive for domination in Southeast Asia of which the Vietnamese independence movement was a key part. Seen in this manner, such a threat was a manifestation of both an anti-capitalist agenda and of Soviet interests and had to be opposed.

\textsuperscript{138} McNamara, Robert S. \textit{In Retrospect} (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) p. 31
\textsuperscript{139} \textit{ibid}
The third factor was the mistake that has characterised Western interpretation of the situation in Vietnam: ‘we also totally underestimated the nationalist aspect of Ho Chi Minh’s movement. We saw him first as a Communist and only second as a Vietnamese nationalist.’\textsuperscript{140} In this, the Americans were following the French lead: when Lacouture asked Admiral D’Argenlieu what he considered he was dealing with in Ho Chi Minh – nationalism, downtrodden colonial discontent, communism – the answer shot back, ‘Communism, of course.’\textsuperscript{141}

These conclusions led leaders in the West to view Ho as more akin to Communist leaders such as Cuba’s Fidel Castro (b. 1926), with whom they could not deal, rather than to Yugoslavia’s Marshal Tito (1892-1980), with whom they could. This judgment – which some would still maintain was justified, given such developments as Castro’s solidarity-displaying visit to the DRV soon after success in 1973 – was one of the chief causes of the Vietnam crisis.

These decisions and interpretations on the part of the US weren’t formed in a vacuum; they took place in a complex atmosphere of fear and competition. As the colonial regimes around the world became potential targets for Russia in the Cold War, ‘assertions of independence from the West would be interpreted in Washington or London as a victory for the Soviets.’\textsuperscript{142} Beside the fact that the colonial nations were now required as allies on the world stage to aid in the containment of the USSR, the influence of rival ideologies in third-tier nations and the persuasive pervasiveness of Eisenhower’s ‘domino theory’ also pointed to the need for those colonial nations to remain in power in their colonies – the alternative, it was feared, was Russian domination.

The Americans came more and more to believe that the interests of their anti-Communist agenda and the retention by imperial powers of colonial possessions were, through the happenstance of global politics, shared goals. As we’ve seen, this meant that the US backed French efforts to erect Bao Dai as a nationalist alternative to the Viet Minh (Britain, in contrast, recognised both Bao Dai and Ho), even considering direct involvement on France’s behalf when the battle turned against her. Clearly, ‘by the 1950s the United States could no longer be considered an anti-imperial power.’\textsuperscript{143}

Furthermore, an external example encouraged a tightening of the Vietminh’s

\textsuperscript{140} \textit{ibid} p. 33  
\textsuperscript{141} Lacouture, Jean \textit{op. cit} 126  
\textsuperscript{142} Cronin, James E. \textit{The World the Cold War Made: Order, Chaos and the Return of History} (New York: Routledge, 1996) p. 52  
\textsuperscript{143} \textit{ibid}.  

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ideological stance. Despite the preponderance of Soviet ideology in Vietnamese development, the greatest example of Communist success for the leadership of the struggling Vietnamese independence movement was the defeat of Chiang Kai-shek by Mao in China, the perennial oppressor of Vietnam. Mao began with 2.7 million men, Chiang with 5 million: ‘human wave’ tactics of local superiority combined with the successful preaching of the Communist message and demonstration of its (military) success: fear amongst the nationalists and rank-swelling inspiration amongst the Communists saw the post-war Chinese environment fundamentally change. Faced with this, the Vietnamese Communists were all too happy to admit that ‘people’s democracy in China is more advanced in development than its Vietnamese counterpart’ and the emergence of the People’s Republic of China after 1949 was the backdrop before which all Vietnamese attitudes were formed. Mao was the centre of that inspiration.

Maoist philosophy opposed quite fundamentally the kind of ‘dilution' of the Communist agenda Ho was pursuing. To Maoist thinking, the position of Communism as a minor partner in a coalition fight for freedom could never be successful – though Mao himself was quick to compromise this when he needed Nationalist help himself, as in 1938 (see ‘The Kuomintang has a brilliant future’ etc). In the same mode of Soviet thinking that preferred ‘Communist revolutions in Asia rather than nationalist regimes whose ‘bourgeois’ character made them inherently unreliable,’ Mao taught that ‘the party is the leading nucleus... all the peoples’ organisations must accept the leadership of the party’; and of the criteria of the new Chinese constitution, ‘the most important are the socialist path and the leadership of the party.’

144 Truòng Chinh op. cit. p. 313: here as elsewhere ‘people’s democracy’ is a conventional euphemism for Communism.
145 Schram, Stuart R. op. cit p. 228
147 Schram, Stuart R. op. cit. pp 326-8
148 ibid p. 311
Bolstered by an improved post-war position within the revolutionary agenda that made a more extreme position possible where before the need for consensus had denied it, the Vietnamese Communist movement swung rapidly to the Maoist line of exclusivity in leadership, where it has at least technically remained since. The chance of a broader, consensus nationalist government swiftly died in the VCP’s ‘brutally systematic elimination of its rivals’; a development that contrasts interestingly with the fact that the VCP is alone amongst Communist parties that have held power not to have had a purge within its own ranks. That consensus lobby died because the Communists wanted it to. The Communist lobby within the nationalist movement was strong enough to determine its path and Communism held the reins not only in name but in the beliefs of the leadership from revolution until modern-day liberalisation of doi moi as represented by ASEAN membership and accompanying economic reform.

Not all agree with this analysis. Even within an ideologically dogmatic party, thinking is hardly static. Over time, new players and thinkers have arrived in the Vietnamese leadership, and their ideological stance is not necessarily the same as that of the first generation of the communist movement (a movement near-unique, one notes, in the absence of major purges occurring within it – at least in the post-war period). Writing at the time of the fall of Cambodia to the DRV, Marr identifies three generations of Communist leadership – the 1925-30 generation, the generation of 1945, and the 1954-60 group (where each set of dates refers to the period of the group’s formative political experience).

By Marr’s system, the first generation, ‘intensely concerned with ideas’, was an urban lobby perceived as sincerely ideological and Communist. However, the ‘less cosmopolitan’ second group (the generation that followed Ho’s) was ‘intensely nationalist even to the point of autarchy.’ The prominent youth of the 1945 rebellion, Marr seems to say, were inspired by nationalism, not Communism.

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Though the neatness of this ideological pattern matched with the successive generations is initially appealing, there are several objections to this. Firstly, all three generations enjoyed the leadership of the same individual, Ho Chi Minh. Secondly, prominent individuals in the later generations of leadership, such as Le Duan (who became General Secretary of the Party in 1960) were nothing if not Communist, as his eloquent writing on leaders ‘groping in the dark’ ‘without a firm grip of Marxist-Leninist science’ shows.

The dialogue of Communists in Vietnam in the modern era is again more overtly class-based, more Communist and more Marxist – and can afford to be because there is no outside force to repel, no alien aggressor against whom society is required to unite. But the blend of communist and nationalist motivation is still required today, and not just of the intellectual lobby, but of the people as a whole. This we know because the Communists tell us so – at a grant meeting to mark the 110th anniversary of Ho Chi Minh’s birth organized in Hanoi by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Party General Secretary Le Kha Phieu said that ‘a nation is defined by the stance of the working class, which successfully combines patriotism with pure communist internationalism.’

Most importantly though, the critical line that runs through Communist teaching from the end of the Second World War until 1975 is Mao’s dictum – ‘without a party, there can be no revolution.’ Without aspirations for revolution, of course, there is little purpose in the party, so there can be no party without at least the prospect (however dim, as in the European nations) of a revolution. This ideological attempt to present oneself as the only solution to the problem of the status quo assumes particular significance in colonial Vietnam, where whilst the leadership provided by the Communist party is needed for organised action, the survival of the synergy of Communism and Nationalism was balanced on the acceptance of the nationalist lobby of the necessity of its Communist leadership.

151 Le Duan Selected Writings (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977) p. 460
153 Schram, Stuart R. op. cit. p. 318
Conclusion

One of the most important basic factual facets of the Vietnamese revolutionary environment that facilitates the conclusion of a symbiotic nationalist/Communist relationship is the contemporary standard of living of the peasantry and city working classes. These groups made up the vast majority of the membership of Ho’s Indochinese Communist Party in 1931 and functioned as its driving force until the formation of a united Communist Vietnam in 1975. For these people, ‘a nationalist movement was necessarily also a movement for the betterment of their miserable working conditions and a release from their poverty.’\textsuperscript{154} As Truòng Chinh explains, the revolution had two tasks – one anti-imperialist, the other anti-feudal. These two tasks ‘were closely linked together and could not be separated: to drive out the imperialists one had to overthrow the feudal landowners; conversely, to overthrow the feudal landowners, one had to drive out the imperialists.’\textsuperscript{155}

Such a gathering of aims is not without precedent. The Irish and Scottish rebellions against English rules are perhaps the archetypal colonialist resistance movements, given their opposition on both cultural grounds and against an unfavourable feudal subjugation, always with the strong drumbeat of the dream of self-determination and prosperous independence in the background. The American Revolution took place along such lines, a precedent Ho consciously drew upon. More subtly, the Calvinists in England during the latter half of the sixteenth century found their opposition to the Crown in matters political and to the divine rights of the throne in matters spiritual manifested in one action – rebellion against Elizabeth.

The rebels in post-war Vietnam came from a wider set of social groups than the Calvinists, with aims based on a broader set of motivations than the predominantly religious – but they exhibit the same focussing of different hopes into similar aims; the eviction of repressive landowners and the end of colonial-imperial rule (which goes some way to explaining the extent of the difference between Vietnam’s ‘revolution’ and China’s conventionally fought revolutionary civil war). This duality has its roots both in the old imperialism of French colonialism and its position in Vietnamese society, and in the new world order in which American interests were served by maintaining the non-communist governments of colonial regimes.

That duality facilitated the dominance of the revolutionary movement by the Communists. The disputed ideological position of the leadership of that Communist

\textsuperscript{154} Cowie, H.R. \textit{Asia and Australia in World Affairs} (Sydney: Thomas Nelson, 1980) p. 154
\textsuperscript{155} Truòng Chinh \textit{op. cit.} p. 584
movement, which one also concludes was symbiotic nationalist/communist in its nature, arises from a more complex mix of mutually beneficial shared aims. As at the outset, it must be stressed that agents on the world stage often possess multiple agendas and multiple identities – overlapping and conflicting motivations. Whilst attempts can and have been made to understand their relative importance at given times, the effort to distinguish between these aims can often damage an understanding of their complementary involvement in both ideological interpretation and decision-making. The same logic applies to groups, and the terms used to describe them – especially in an environment as complex as 20th century Vietnam.

As has been stressed throughout, Communism was hardly a natural ideology in Vietnam – indeed, Diem and his successor Nguyen Van Thieu (1923-2001; Thieu died in the US this year, and was always perceived during his reign post-1967 elections as America’s puppet) always depicted it as a foreign dogma imported to serve the ends of self-promoting guerillas. It’s certainly true that its practitioners carried out many repugnant acts both before governing and during, and that many Vietnamese feared it and those that promulgated it – a million people fled south when the Communists came to power in the North, and a million fled the South to Hong Kong and elsewhere when the Communists triumphed in 1975 (of course, many of those people fled because they were associated in turn with foreign dogma and rule of a different complexion). But the majority of the population was peasants in villages across Vietnam – those Spector terms ‘the people in the middle’156 – and they were disinterested in struggles that would hardly affect their way of life. They possessed the ideological inclination that is always held by those in that position – the desire to be on the winning side.

It emerged more and more clearly that that side was the Viet Minh and the Viet Cong, which had presented its case through methods more preferable to the peasant community in any case. For those that were active in the pre- and post-war Vietnam anti-imperialist movement, nationalism was the essence of the revolutionary ideal for the majority – but the intellectuals that led them were inspired and prompted by the spirit of brotherhood in Communism. By the time of the revolution, both groups understood and (to varying degrees) shared the aims of the other. Undoubtedly, things had changed in resistance ideology: ‘earlier anticolonial activists had opted for cultural and social reform because they were committed to the goal of national liberation. The youth of the 1920’s travelled the same road, but in reverse.’\footnote{157 Hue-Tam Ho Tai op. cit. p. 195}

The order of importance in which these goals were held by individuals meant relatively little, if success for one meant success for the other. In the revolutionary movement, Nationalism provided manpower and fervour. Communism provided leadership and ideological coherence. Both achieved their goals within the organic alliance that formed as a result of their shared aims, if not shared beliefs. Neither could have achieved such organised campaigning or long-lasting success without the other. Some, like Ho Chi Minh, had always been motivated by such a blend of ideological and national desires. Ignorance of this attitude and its development played a large part in America’s miscalculations in the Vietnam conflict, as she acted in the mistaken belief that Communism and Nationalism were separable in Indochina.

This is an ignorance that men deeply involved in escalation at the time, such as Robert McNamara (b. 1916, Secretary of Defense under both Kennedy and Johnson) now regret. That the US ‘totally underestimated the nationalist aspect of Ho Chi Minh’s movement,’\footnote{158 McNamara, Robert S. op. cit. p. 33} and the increasing Communist aspect of the nationalist agenda, led to a series of assumptions that were fatal to the aims of US policy in Vietnam. Despite this, this ignorance is periodically prevalent in modern analysis of the Vietnamese political environment, both current and contemporary: there is in the post-Cold War world, it seems, a continuation of Cold War ideology in Western interpretation and analysis of events.

By the time of America’s peace with North Vietnam in 1973, Communism and Nationalism were so intertwined with one another as to be indistinguishable in the ideological orthodoxy of the day. More than that, the Communist system stood unchallenged as the best expression of nationalist feeling – whilst a situation that had been far from true in
the early days of Communism in Vietnam, when other lobbies had jockeyed for power in the nationalist arena, this became increasingly the case from the conclusion of the Second World War. Through a mixture of resentment of Western intervention, excellent organisation, immense involvement with the Nationalist agenda and a wonderfully intelligent system of self-promotion, the Communists in Vietnam established themselves as the accepted leaders of the nation: though two generations of nationalists had fought for independence, it was by the Communists that ‘this revolution was in the end made and won.’ In a ‘blend’ or ‘graft’ of ideology that has its closest comparison with Sukarno’s ‘idiosyncratic mixture of traditional Javanese, Islamic and Marxist’ ideas, in the clearest and most successful combination of nationalism and Communism seen to date, the Vietnamese revolution finds its true significance.

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159 Buttinger, Joseph *Vietnam: A Political History* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1969) p. 208
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