

## Denouncing the ‘Việt Cộng’: Tales of revolution and betrayal in the Republic of Vietnam

Nu-Anh Tran

*The Denounce the Communists Campaign (1955–c.1960) was a key moment in the conflict between the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, South Vietnam) and the Vietnamese communist movement and would eventually escalate to become the Vietnam War. The RVN launched the campaign to turn public opinion against communism and destroy the underground communist network. Building on previous scholarship, this article examines the propaganda associated with the initiative. During the campaign, state propagandists and allied intellectuals developed a historical narrative about the Anti-French Resistance (1945–54) that vilified the communists. Although highly partisan, the narrative illuminates the longer history of violence between communists and anti-communists in Vietnam.*

Writing in the early 1960s, the journalist Nguyễn Xuân Mậu described the curious reaction of travellers from the anti-communist Republic of Vietnam (RVN, South Vietnam) upon arriving at the Bến Hải River. The waterway marked the boundary between the two halves of partitioned Vietnam, and visitors excitedly peered across the river to catch a rare glimpse of the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, North Vietnam). In the distance, they saw a barren landscape of parched fields, some ramshackle cottages, and tattered political banners, and most visitors remarked on the visible poverty of the river’s northern bank, Mậu recounted.<sup>1</sup> The reporter was especially amused by the reaction of a young performer from Saigon who accompanied her troupe to the area. Upon catching sight of a North Vietnamese soldier guarding a police station, the woman exclaimed in surprise, ‘Oh! I always thought that a Việt Cộng [Vietnamese communist] would look different’. According to Mậu, the many crimes (*tội ác*) committed by Vietnamese communists had convinced the young woman that enemy soldiers would look like demons rather than humans.<sup>2</sup> The reporter offered no explanation of the communists’ alleged crimes

Nu-Anh Tran is an Associate Professor at the University of Connecticut. Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to: [nu-anh.tran@uconn.edu](mailto:nu-anh.tran@uconn.edu). The author would like to thank Chi Ha, Peter Lavelle, Kevin Li, and Brett Reilly for their help with source materials and the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions. This article was revised while in residence at the UConn Humanities Institute.

1 Nguyễn Xuân Mậu, *Dòng sông sử hận* [The river of historical resentment] (Saigon? n.p., 1962?), p. 20.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

and seemed confident that his readers understood. What horrific crimes had convinced the performer that North Vietnamese soldiers would look different from other human beings? How had these crimes become common knowledge among Mậu's readers?

As the reporter well knew, his readers had been on the receiving end of extensive anti-communist propaganda put out by the RVN as part of the Denounce the Communists Campaign (Chiến Dịch Tố Cộng, 1955–c.1960). The campaign aimed to turn public opinion against communism and destroy the underground communist party. The government and media circulated lurid stories of communist violence, with particular emphasis on the history of the Anti-French Resistance (Kháng Chiến Chống Pháp, 1945–54), Vietnam's decade-long struggle for independence. The same conflict is known in the West as the First Indochina War (1946–54), though that term refers more specifically to the colonial war between France and the DRV. The numerous anti-communist accounts produced in the RVN combined to form a new narrative about the Resistance that vilified Vietnamese communists. The narrative gradually pervaded public discourse, and many urbanites such as Mậu's readers and the impressionable young performer came to associate Vietnamese communism with treachery and violence.

This article examines the anti-communist historical narrative about the Resistance. I argue that state propagandists and allied intellectuals popularised political epithets separating communists from nationalists and developed a narrative that accused the communists of betraying the nationalists and undermining the struggle for independence. Although highly partisan, the narrative illuminates the longer history of violence between communists and anti-communists in Vietnam. At the start of the Resistance, Vietnamese revolutionaries allied to defend the fledgling DRV against French colonialism. The alliance disintegrated amidst a bloody struggle between communists and anti-communist nationalists, and the resulting division became a permanent feature of Vietnamese politics. In 1954, the Geneva Accords ended the war and partitioned the country at the seventeenth parallel, with the Bến Hải River serving as the boundary between the two zones. Ngô Đình Diệm rose to power as the premier of the State of Vietnam (later Republic of Vietnam), the government based in the southern zone, and launched the campaign the following year as a pre-emptive attack against the communists that remained in the southern half of the country. He and his officials understood the campaign as a response to the unresolved conflicts of the Resistance and cited the past persecution of anti-communists to advocate for the counter-persecution of communists. Determined to eradicate communism, officials did not realise that their campaign would perpetuate the internecine violence and help give rise to the Vietnam War.

The campaign has attracted some scholarly attention, but few researchers have shown much interest in the anti-communist historical narrative. Early monographs such as Carlyle Thayer's *War by other means* and David Elliott's *The Vietnamese war* examined the campaign purely as a security operation. These researchers stressed that the campaign was a key moment in the growing conflict between the RVN and the communist movement that would escalate to become the Vietnam War. But Thayer and Elliott ignored the propaganda associated with the campaign and its

relationship to the Resistance.<sup>3</sup> Recent research has offered broader if more abbreviated portrayals of the initiative. Edward Miller argued in *Misalliance* that the campaign was part of Ngô Đình Diệm's consolidation of power and briefly acknowledged that the initiative included propaganda and mass mobilisation in addition to security measures.<sup>4</sup> Jessica Chapman's *Cauldron of resistance* found that the campaign also targeted dissident sect elements and analysed propaganda attacking certain sect factions.<sup>5</sup> In *Vietnam's lost revolution*, Geoffrey Stewart contends that the campaign turned the rural population against the regime and undermined its civic action programme.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps only Tuan Hoang has given the anti-communist propaganda serious attention. His study revealed that intellectuals in the RVN developed a critique of Vietnamese communism based on their experience of communist rule during the Resistance, but Hoang did not analyse the material as a historical narrative. Nor did he mention the campaign and the RVN's anti-communist repression.<sup>7</sup>

The limited scholarly interest is due in part to the inaccessibility of archival documents in Vietnam. The National Archives Centre II (Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia II) in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) holds a series of folders about the campaign, but the archives routinely deny permission to consult the folders. Until these documents become available, it may be impossible to form a comprehensive, detailed understanding of the campaign's operation. The United States was broadly uninterested in the initiative, and the documents housed at the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland, rarely mention the campaign explicitly.<sup>8</sup> The most plentiful sources presently available are propaganda tracts and other anti-communist works published in the RVN. These texts shed light on how government officials and anti-communist intellectuals understood the troubled history of the Resistance and rationalised the suppression of the communist party.

This article focuses specifically on the historical narrative to make use of the available materials and offer a corrective to the past emphasis on security. First, I present an overview of the campaign and show that its scope and purpose changed over time. Then, the heart of the article examines the political vocabulary and historical

3 Carlyle Thayer, *War by other means: National liberation and revolution in Viet-Nam, 1954–60* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), pp. 49, 81–3, 112–17; David Elliott, *The Vietnamese war: Revolution and social change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975*, concise ed. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), pp. 98–110.

4 Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 132–4.

5 Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s southern Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), pp. 118–21, 128–9, 183–5.

6 Geoffrey Stewart, *Vietnam's lost revolution: Ngô Đình Diệm's failure to build an independent nation, 1955–1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 45–6, 169–70.

7 Tuan Hoang, 'The early South Vietnamese critique of communism', in *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia*, ed. Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 17–32. For the most extensive examination of the campaign currently available, see Nu-Anh Tran, 'Contested identities: Nationalism in the Republic of Vietnam (1954–1963)' (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2013), pp. 23–90.

8 At the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, I examined Record Group (RG) 59 General Records of the Department of State, RG472 US Forces in Southeast Asia, RG469 US Operations Mission Vietnam Resettlement and Rehabilitation, and RG84 Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State. I have also used the CIA Records Search Tool.

narrative developed by Vietnamese anti-communists. Lastly, I assess the impact and legacy of the campaign.

### Defining the campaign

The scope of the Denounce the Communists Campaign was broader and more vaguely defined than its name implied. Ngô Đình Diệm's government did not produce a definitive explanation of the initiative when his administration inaugurated the campaign on 20 July 1955, and officials later described a variety of measures as belonging to the campaign. The amorphous character of the initiative reflected the wide-ranging authority of its architect, Minister of Information Trần Chánh Thành. Thành was a lawyer from south-central Vietnam who spent the early years of the Resistance serving in the DRV's justice ministry in the north. He later defected from the DRV, moved to Saigon, struck up a friendship with Diệm's younger brother Ngô Đình Nhu, and became a founding member of Nhu's Revolutionary Personalist Labour Party (Cần Lao Nhân Vị Cách Mạng Đảng, or Cần Lao), a semi-clandestine political party that advocated for Diệm as the future leader of Vietnam. Diệm's ascent to the premiership in 1954 catapulted Thành's political career to new heights. The young lawyer served as the chair of the National Revolutionary Movement (Phong Trào Cách Mạng Quốc Gia, NRM), a mass political party that was covertly controlled by the Cần Lao. In spring and early summer 1955, Diệm appointed Thành to lead the information ministry and the anti-communist denunciation campaign.<sup>9</sup> Because Thành occupied multiple roles simultaneously, the campaign was inextricably entwined with his ministry, the NRM, and the Cần Lao party. He served as the chair of the People's Central Steering Committee of the Denounce the Communists Campaign (PCSC), which appears to have consisted primarily of Cần Lao partisans, and his ministry's chief of cabinet Lê Khải Trạch headed the central leadership committee of the PCSC.<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of the campaign evolved in tandem with Diệm's political priorities. The initial objective was to bring the civil service and the military under the control of the Cần Lao and the NRM. The Ngô brothers had placed Cần Lao partisans in key positions within both organisations, and Trần Chánh Thành oversaw the recruitment of government employees into the NRM. The information minister helped establish a civil servants' league affiliated with the party, and the government pressured its employees to join.<sup>11</sup> At his behest, the PCSC organised a hierarchy of steering

9 'Tiểu sử ông Trần Chánh Thành' [Biography of Mr Trần Chánh Thành], *Cách mạng quốc gia* 189, 28 Feb. 1956, pp. 1, 4; *Quốc Hội Lập Hiến* [The Constituent Assembly] (Saigon? n.p., 1956), p. 12; Edward Lansdale, *In the midst of wars: An American's mission to Southeast Asia* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991), p. 340.

10 *Thành tích tố cộng giai đoạn 1* [Achievements of the Denounce the Communists Campaign, phase I] (Saigon: Hội Đồng Nhân Dân Chỉ Đạo Chiến Dịch Tô Cộng, 1956), pp. 17, 25.

11 *Thành tích tố cộng giai đoạn 1*, pp. 73, 77; Charles Joiner and Roy Jumper, 'Organizing bureaucrats: South Viet Nam's National Revolutionary Civil Servants' League', *Asian Survey*, 3 (1963): 206–8. For the origins of the civil servants' league, see 'Quyết nghị của Đại Hội Công Tư Chức Cứu Trợ Đồng Bào Tản Cư' [Resolution of the Conference of Public and Private Sector Employees for the Assistance of Evacuees], *Thần Chung* [The sacred bell] 1645, 14–15 Aug. 1954, pp. 1, 4; 'Tìm hiểu "Liên Đoàn Công Chức Cách Mạng Quốc Gia"' [Understanding the 'League of National Revolutionary Civil Servants'], *Việt Nam Thông Tấn Xã* [Vietnam Press] 2633, 19 May 1958, afternoon ed., pp. C–I, in National Archives Center II (NACII), Hồ Chí Minh City, Phòng Phủ Tổng Thống Đế Nhất Cộng

committees within the civil service to operate the league's mandatory political study programme, and Thành's ministry furnished the study materials.<sup>12</sup> A parallel but less documented effort at indoctrination took place among military officers.<sup>13</sup> Political study originally focused on the alleged shortcomings of Vietnamese communists and the need to support Diệm's government, then shifted to promote a succession of government policies.<sup>14</sup> When Diệm decided to organise a plebiscite in October 1955 to overthrow the former emperor, Bảo Đại, study sessions began accusing the monarch of colluding with French colonialists (*thực dân*) and Vietnamese 'feudalists' (*phong kiến*), that is, dissident sect factions that opposed Diệm.<sup>15</sup> Diệm renamed his government the Republic of Vietnam following the plebiscite. Study materials for the military later claimed that the campaign additionally contributed to the constituent elections of 1956.<sup>16</sup> Thành later tried to impose coherence on the campaign by retroactively linking its disparate objectives. Speaking at the campaign's national conference in spring 1956, he claimed that the communists, colonialists, and feudalists colluded and therefore the government aimed to destroy all three enemies.<sup>17</sup> Such rhetoric aimed to discredit Diệm's anti-communist rivals, including Bảo Đại and the sects, by conflating them with the communists and the French.

After mid-autumn 1955, the campaign entered a more aggressive phase that focused specifically on the clandestine communist party.<sup>18</sup> As the troops and personnel of the DRV withdrew from the southern zone in accordance with the Geneva Accords, the RVN extended its administrative apparatus into former communist territories. Yet numerous communist agents remained in those areas and could subvert the local government. In response, the Denounce the Communists Campaign shifted to concentrate on two main objectives. First, the government tried to destroy the underground communist apparatus through a technique known as 'denunciation of communism' (*tố cộng*), from which the campaign derived its name. It appears that Trần Chánh Thành and the central government instructed local authorities to

Hòa (Office of the President Collection, First Republic, ĐỊCH), 16799; Charles Joiner, *The politics of massacre: Political processes in South Vietnam* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1974), pp. 39–41.

12 Correspondence 1600-BTT/VP, form letter, Lê Khả Trạch to government offices, 17 Aug. 1955, NACII, Phòng Phủ Thủ Tướng Việt Nam Cộng Hòa (Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Vietnam Collection, PThTVNCH), 29164; Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation under stress* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), pp. 51, 168.

13 Phạm Văn Liễu, *Trả ta sông núi* [Give my country back to me], vol. 1 (Houston, TX: Văn Hóa, 2002), pp. 340–41; John Donnell, 'Politics in South Vietnam: Doctrines of authority in conflict' (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1964), p. 236; Nguyễn Văn Minh, *Dòng họ Ngô Đình* [The Ngô Đình lineage], 4th ed. (Garden Grove, CA: Hoàng Nguyên, 2004), pp. 436–7.

14 Correspondence 1578-BTT/VP, form letter, Trần Chánh Thành on the establishment of political study organisations in all ministries, offices, and agencies, 13 Aug. 1955, PThTVNCH 29164; 'Những tội ác của Việt Cộng' [The crimes of the Việt Cộng], c.13 Aug. 1955, PThTVNCH 29164; Despatch 266, Saigon to Department of State, 2 Mar. 1960, NARA, RG84, Classified General Records, 1946–1963, Vietnam, Saigon Embassy, box 64, folder 560.1 Trade Unionism, Trade Union Movement-Vietnam.

15 'Tài liệu học tập về cuộc trưng cầu dân ý ngày 23-10-1955' [Political study material about the plebiscite of 23 Oct. 1955], c.Oct. 1955, ĐỊCH 639.

16 *Quân đội học tập chính trị* [Political study for the army] (Saigon: n.p., 1956?), p. 55.

17 *Thành tích tố cộng giai đoạn 1*, 20.

18 Office of the Regional Delegate for Southern Vietnam, summary of the general monthly report for Oct. 1955, c.Oct. 1955, PThTVNCH 17; Thayer, *War by other means*, p. 49.

orchestrate public denunciation sessions in former communist territories. The authorities arranged for individuals victimised by communism to share their stories and forced former communists to confess their crimes and renounce the party. Officials often pressured members of the audience to identify underground communists and the party's weapons caches. In some cases, cadres from the information ministry and other agents of the central government oversaw the denunciation sessions.<sup>19</sup> Anti-communist denunciations bore striking resemblance to the communist technique of 'denunciation of suffering' (*tố khổ*), during which peasants publicly accused landlords of exploiting the poor. Indeed, some contemporary accounts suggest that Trần Chánh Thành adopted the technique from the DRV.<sup>20</sup>

Afterwards, the government sent suspected communists to 're-education camps' (*trại cải huấn*) for weeks, months, or even years. The camps ostensibly rehabilitated former communists and taught them to become loyal citizens of Diệm's republic. In practice, the mass detentions caused the prison population to skyrocket and led to overcrowding, limited rations, and unsanitary conditions.<sup>21</sup> The most unfortunate detainees were executed. Estimates for the total number of arrests and executions vary considerably, ranging from 1,000 to 5,000 executions and between 25,000 to 184,000 arrests from 1954 to the end of the decade.<sup>22</sup> The countryside bore the brunt of these harsh measures as the main location of former communist territories. Consequently, denunciation sessions and mass arrests were common in the countryside but not in the cities, and many urbanites were unaware of the reign of terror that the campaign unleashed on the peasantry. Little is known about the denunciations and detentions beyond these basic outlines due to the unavailability of sources.

The second objective of the later phase of the campaign was to publicly discredit communism.<sup>23</sup> Trần Chánh Thành's ministry led the production of anti-communist propaganda, with significant contributions by other government ministries and private individuals. The information ministry sponsored a series of anti-communist literary and artistic contests and released a flood of jingles, poems, plays, and tracts criticising communism.<sup>24</sup> The defence ministry published additional books and articles, the education ministry awarded the national literary prize to explicitly

19 Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, pp. 167–8; Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, p. 101.

20 Despatch 329, Saigon to Secretary of State, 2 Feb. 1962, NARA, RG59, Central Decimal Files (RG59-CDF) 1960–1963, 751G.00/2-262. See also Minh Kinh, *Thoái trào của Việt Cộng* [The decline of the Việt Cộng] (Saigon? Trần Ánh Nguyệt, 1956), pp. 5–6.

21 Telegram 2763, Saigon to Secretary of State, 10 Jan. 1956, NARA, RG59-CDF 1955–1959, 751G.00/1-1056; Thomas Ahern, Jr., *CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert action in South Vietnam, 1954–63* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2000), p. 94.

22 Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, pp. 170–71; William Duiker, *The communist road to power in Vietnam*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), p. 184; George Kahin, *Intervention: How America became involved in Vietnam* (New York: Anchor, 1987), p. 96; Thayer, *War by other means*, pp. 116–17, table 6.2.

23 *Thành tích tổ cộng giai đoạn 1*, p. 81.

24 *Thành tích tổ cộng giai đoạn 1*, pp. 80–81; 'Thông cáo của Hội Đồng Nhân Dân Chỉ Đạo Chiến Dịch Tố Cộng: Cuộc thi văn nghệ tổ cộng toàn quốc' [Announcement of the People's Steering Committee of the Denounce the Communists Campaign: National contest of anti-communist art], *Xây Dựng* [Build] 7, 15 Mar. 1956, pp. 22, 26; 'Lễ khánh thành phòng liên lạc của Đại Hội Văn Hoá Toàn Quốc' [Opening ceremony for the publicity hall of the National Conference on Culture], *Việt Nam Thông Tấn Xã* 2088, 18 Nov. 1956, afternoon ed., pp. IV–VII, especially VII, in ĐỊCH 16035; Thanh Sơn, 'Ca dao tổ cộng' [Anticommunist folk poem], *Xây Dựng* 3, 15 Jan. 1956, pp. 35; Thế Hoài, 'Trở về' [The return], *Xây Dựng* 13, 16 June 1956, pp. 11–13; Hoàng Minh, 'Đằng nào cũng chết' [I'll die either way], *Xây Dựng*

anti-communist works, and the state-owned radio station aired politically-themed folk songs and operas.<sup>25</sup> Outside of the government, independent writers penned memoirs, monographs, short stories, and novels. A cursory survey of extant works suggest that the publication of anti-communist books surged in 1955 and did not ebb until 1958. The simultaneous appearance of numerous accounts must have strengthened the effect of the anti-communist works, especially in the cities. The RVN's media and publishing industry were concentrated in urban areas, and the accounts justified to urban readers the harsh measures enacted in the distant countryside. Most works analysed in this article were published in Saigon during the later phase of the campaign. The historical record is unusually thin for the campaign in the late 1950s. Trần Chánh Thành fell out of favour with the Ngô brothers, and it is unclear how long he retained control over the initiative. In 1960, his ministry lost its status as a cabinet-level ministry, and Diệm sent Thành into a golden exile as the regime's ambassador to Tunisia. The campaign never came to a formal end and simply faded away.

Northern émigré intellectuals contributed disproportionately to the anti-communist publications. The Geneva Accords specified that civilians would be allowed a period of 300 days to migrate to their preferred zone, and over 800,000 people moved to the southern zone, where they became known as *Bắc di cư*, or 'northern émigrés'. A decidedly northern perspective characterised the anti-communist texts. Most authors explicitly identified themselves as émigrés, and even those who did not usually set their novels in northern Vietnam or focused their research on historical events that took place in the region. Many writers also depicted themselves as defectors similar to Trần Chánh Thành. That is, they claimed to be patriots who supported the DRV but grew disillusioned and migrated south to escape communism. The preponderance of defectors likely reflected Thành's tendency to staff the information ministry with émigré defectors who shared his experience of the Resistance in northern Vietnam.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, some authors were probably former partisans of the anti-communist nationalist parties that had been strong in the north. These writers exhibited remarkable familiarity with the history of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, VNP) and the Đại Việt Nationalist Party (Đại Việt Quốc Dân Đảng, ĐVNQ), though few authors explicitly identified themselves as erstwhile members. Surprisingly, only a handful of writers described themselves as Catholic or even discussed their religious affiliation even though northern émigrés as a population were predominantly Catholic.<sup>27</sup>

The central theme of the anti-communist publications was communist treachery during the Resistance. Authors accused the communists of attacking allies and purging earnest followers. Many writers traced the evolution of their own sentiments

29, 1 Apr. 1957, pp. 19–22, 30–33; Ban Văn Nghệ Trường Di Chuyển Khánh Hội, 'Ca dao mới' [New folk poems], *Xây Dựng* 16, 1 Aug. 1956, pp. 58.

25 Correspondence 1290-VTV/SVT, Bửu Thọ to the Chief of Cabinet, Ministry at the President's Office, 9 May 1958, ĐICH 16602; various songs composed in the traditional musical style of central Vietnam, 9 May 1958, ĐICH 16602; and 'Cổ nhạc Bắc Việt' [Traditional music of northern Vietnam], 4 Feb. 1958, both in ĐICH 16603.

26 Despatch 3076, Saigon to Department of State, 11 June 1956, NARA, RG59-CDF 1955-1959, 751G.00/6-1156; Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, pp. 54, 167.

27 Hoang, 'Early South Vietnamese critique', p. 19.

from idealistic patriotism to disgust with communism. The texts fell into two general categories, distinguished by the degree of adherence to state propaganda. The first consisted mostly of non-fiction by writers with ties to the government or whose ideas hewed closely to the regime's brand of anti-communism. These stridently political texts often contained references to the campaign, were endorsed by government officials, or were published by the regime. Sprinkling the pages with political epithets, authors contended that Vietnamese communists betrayed genuine nationalists and undermined the struggle for independence. The literary and academic merit of such texts was mostly mediocre, and the tone often bordered on hysterical, but what made the accounts compelling was that their authors wrote with the passion of historical witnesses.

The second category was what might be described as literary anti-communism. It consisted mostly of fiction written by professional writers and published on the private market. More literary than political, these works featured complex characters, realistic dialogue, and graceful prose that was free of slogans and epithets, and the history of the Resistance was secondary to plot development. Independent writers offered a humanistic rather than political interpretation of the past. They lamented that communism corrupted the inherent goodness of humanity and disrupted the harmony of traditional Vietnamese society. The distinction between the two categories was clear but not sharp. Some texts blended political and humanistic concerns, and authors sometimes moved between public and private employment. A handful of writers even achieved literary fame while writing for the military. This article will focus exclusively on the first category. I provide biographical sketches of authors when sources are available, but the only author for whom there is significant information was Nguyễn Mạnh Côn.

It appears that the Americans did not play a major role in the propaganda, denunciation sessions, and mass detentions associated with the campaign. The embassy did not participate in the later phase of the initiative and rarely commented on it. The US Operations Mission provided funds to the information ministry, and the US Information Service offered other forms of assistance, but Trần Chánh Thành resisted accepting American advice regarding the content of the propaganda.<sup>28</sup> The regular station of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) disapproved of Thành's 'Leninist' tendencies and kept its distance from the initiative.<sup>29</sup> Only Edward Lansdale's independent CIA station was minimally involved, a point I will return to later. Although the United States did undertake its own anti-communist projects, they appear to have been distinct from the RVN's campaign, and it was Vietnamese actors who spearheaded the historical narrative and political vocabulary that defined anti-communism in the early RVN.

### ***Việt Cộng and Vietnamese nationalists***

Propagandists and other intellectuals faced a conundrum when they tried to turn the communists into the villains of the Resistance: the communists had actively fought

28 Despatch 339, US Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 23 Apr. 1956, NARA, RG59-CDF 1955-1959, 751G.00/4-2356.

29 Ahern, *CIA*, p. 95.



against the French, but Diệm's government originated as a French-sponsored state. Anti-communists resolved the problem by arguing that Vietnamese communism and Vietnamese nationalism were mutually exclusive. They drew on an existing political vocabulary to distinguish their enemies from themselves: the pejorative *Việt Cộng*, meaning 'Vietnamese communists' and *quốc gia*, meaning 'nationalist' or 'nation-state', which was used only for anti-communists. The terminology denied the very possibility of communist nationalism. The dichotomy between communism and nationalism was typical of mid-century anti-communism in the United States, but the evidence suggests that Vietnamese activists and propagandists developed the binary of *Việt Cộng* and *quốc gia* during the Resistance and later popularised it during the Denounce the Communists Campaign.

The origins of the term *Việt Cộng* have long eluded scholars despite its ubiquity during the Vietnam War. Most writers have attributed the term to either the US Information Service or the RVN's Ministry of Information without providing much evidence.<sup>30</sup> Based on new archival research in Vietnam and Taiwan, I contend that the term originated as a neutral descriptor in Chinese, and Vietnamese anti-communists adopted it as a loanword in the late 1940s and turned it into a political pejorative.<sup>31</sup> The roots of *Việt Cộng* can be traced back to the Chinese term *Yuegong*, itself an abbreviation for the 'Vietnamese communist party' (Viet. 'Việt Nam cộng sản đảng', Ch. Yuenan gongchandang), though the actual name of the party was the Indochinese Communist Party (Đông Dương Cộng Sản Đảng, ICP). During the Second World War, many Vietnamese revolutionary organisations established networks in southern China to avoid repression from the French colonial state. The revolutionaries received assistance from Jiang Jieshi's Chinese Nationalist Party, the dominant power in the region. The most important exile groups were the ICP, the anti-communist Vietnamese Nationalist Party, and the Vietnamese Revolutionary League (Việt Nam Cách Mạng Đồng Minh Hội, VRL), which was led by an anti-communist. Documents produced by Chinese Nationalist leaders sometimes referred to the ICP as the *Yuenan gongchandang* and *Yuegong*.<sup>32</sup> Although many Chinese Nationalists were certainly anti-communist, it is plausible that they regarded the monikers as neutral terms modelled after the name of the Chinese Communist Party (Viet. Trung Quốc Cộng Sản Đảng, Ch. Zhongguo Gongchandang) and its abbreviation, *Zhonggong* (Viet. *Trung Cộng*). In fact, Chinese communists referred

30 For various claims about the invention of the term, see Daniel Ellsberg, 'Communists and Vietnamese: Comments by Hoang Van Chi', Working notes on Vietnam no. 7, RAND file 19134-ARPA/AGILE, available at Daniel Ellsberg's website, <http://www.ellsberg.net/documents/Communists.pdf> (accessed 12 Sept. 2014); Neil Sheehan, *A bright shining lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 189; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A history* (New York: Penguin, 1997), pp. 10, 245; Joe Sucksmith and Ngô Vinh Long, 'Vietcong – what's in a word?' The Blog-O-Bot, 5 Oct. 2013, <http://theblogobot.wordpress.com/2013/10/05/vietcong-whats-in-a-word/> (last accessed 1 Oct. 2014).

31 I thank Peter Lavelle for his assistance in locating and translating Chinese-language archival materials from Taiwan and his insight into Chinese terms. All translations from the Chinese are his.

32 'Report on Sino-Vietnamese relations and assistance for the Vietnamese Revolution', 1943, Kuomintang Party Archives, Taipei, Taiwan, Special Collections (SC), 11/3.22; 'Recent situation regarding the activities of the Chinese communists and VC on the border region of Vietnam and Guangxi', 6 Dec. 1944, SC 29/7.47; cable to Wu Tiejeng, 20 Nov. 1945, SC 11/26.15.

to their own party as *Zhonggong*.<sup>33</sup> The Vietnamese parties in exile adopted *Yuegong* in their Chinese-language communications with the Chinese Nationalists.<sup>34</sup>

Vietnamese anti-communists first began using *Việt Cộng* mid-way through the Anti-French Resistance and gradually remade it into a pejorative, though the term remained rare outside of political circles in the 1940s and early 1950s. The exile parties returned to northern Vietnam after the start of the Resistance but were dismayed to find that the newly independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam was dominated by the Vietnamese Independence League (Việt Minh Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội, or Việt Minh), a communist front organisation established by the ICP in 1941. The outbreak of violence between the Việt Minh and the anti-communist organisations in 1946 forced many members of the latter to seek safety in southern China once again. It was at this point that these groups began using the term *Việt Cộng* in Vietnamese publications. In spring 1949, a journal issued by the VNP in China reported that 'the joint military of the Chinese and Vietnamese communists' (*liên quân Trung Việt Cộng*) were attacking French forces in Vietnam.<sup>35</sup> That same year, the French experimented with a new political strategy to defeat the DRV. French officials cooperated with the former Vietnamese emperor Bảo Đại to form a nominally independent Vietnamese state called the State of Vietnam (SVN) that would woo the population away from the communists. Bảo Đại's propagandists dismissively referred to the DRV as the *Việt Cộng, cộng sản* ('communists'), *cộng sản Việt Minh* ('Việt Minh communists'), and *Việt Minh cộng sản* ('Việt Minh communists', according to Sino-Vietnamese grammar).<sup>36</sup> But the term *Việt Cộng* proved so unfamiliar to most Vietnamese in the early 1950s that propaganda tracts often had to provide a gloss to aid comprehension.

The SVN laid the foundation for the future usage of *Việt Cộng* when the government depicted Vietnamese communists as false patriots who served foreign communists. In April 1950, the southern regional branch of Bảo Đại's government issued a leaflet urging the population to abandon the DRV. The leaflet argued that Vietnamese communists could not be nationalist because they served the communist superpowers. 'After Soviet Russia [Nga Sô], communist China [Trung Cộng], and the Việt Minh

33 For usage of *Zhonggong* by the Chinese Communist Party, see Zhou Enlai, 'Zai Yan'an gejie juxing de "shuang shi er" jinianhui shang de jiangyan' [Speech at a meeting held by representatives of all walks of life in Yan'an in commemoration of the December 12th incident], in *Zhou Enlai xuanji* [Selected works of Zhou Enlai], vol. 1 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1980), pp. 248–9.

34 Nghiêm Kế Tổ to Zhang Shouxian, 2 Dec. 1944, SC 11/15.89; Nguyễn Hải Thần to Wu Tiejeng, 15 Feb. 1946, SC 11/16.63; Nguyễn Hải Thần to Jiang Jieshi, 14 Dec. 1945, Chiang Kai-shek Archives, Academia Historica, Taipei, Revolutionary Documents, Period of Suppressing Rebellion, 002-020400-00050-025.

35 Chu Đạt, 'Cộng sản và bù nhìn Pháp' [The communists and the French puppets], *Tiếng gọi*, 1 June 1949, unpaginated. I thank Brett Reilly for providing me with this article.

36 Later publications in the RVN claimed that the term *Việt Cộng* was a contraction of *Việt Minh cộng sản*. For the claim, see *Quân đội*, p. 148. For usage of *cộng sản Việt Minh* and *Việt Minh cộng sản*, see 'Hãy vạch mặt bọn sát nhân!' [Let's unmask the murderers!], c.May 1950, and 'Kỷ niệm trò Trần Văn Ôn' [In memory of the student Trần Văn Ôn], 9 Jan. 1951, both in 'Chánh phủ Bảo Đại kêu gọi đồng bào, 4/49–4/50', NACII, Phòng Phủ Thủ Hiến Nam Việt (Collection of the Office of the Governor of Southern Vietnam, PTHNV), F6-134; 'Quân đội VN' [The Vietnamese army], *Chiến Sĩ* [Warrior] 27, 5 Nov. 1951, pp. 3; CS, 'Giai đoạn lịch sử' [A historical period], *Chiến Sĩ* 42, 20 June 1952, pp. 3, 18; 'Toàn dân chiến đấu' [The entire people must fight], *Chiến Sĩ* 43, 5 July 1952, pp. 3, 18.

(that is, the Việt Cộng) let their masks fall, the Vietnamese people can no longer be confused,' the leaflet declared, using a string of political epithets. 'Now, it is clear: Venerable Hồ [Chí Minh] and the Việt Minh are the lackeys of the Third International. They are not struggling for the independence of the homeland but only to clear the path for the armies of communist Russia and China to invade our country'.<sup>37</sup> State publications used *Việt Cộng* sporadically for the next few years and repeated similar accusations.<sup>38</sup> Ngô Đình Diệm and the anti-communist southern sects adopted the term soon after he became the prime minister of the SVN (soon to become the Republic of Vietnam) in 1954.<sup>39</sup>

Information minister Trần Chánh Thành played the decisive role in popularising the epithet in the mid-1950s. On 31 May 1955, after only a few weeks in office, Thành ordered that all official documents replace *Việt Minh* with *Việt Cộng* and instructed the censorship board to carry out the same substitution in the popular press. His reasoning echoed the earlier propaganda. 'The Việt Cộng's dependency on Russian and Chinese communists is now clear. Nationalist warriors have left the ranks of the Việt Minh. Therefore, the term *Việt Cộng* is the primary term used to refer to all actions of the Việt Cộng,' he admonished.<sup>40</sup> Usage of the epithet increased exponentially in state propaganda and the press after the launch of the Denounce the Communists Campaign, and the repetition popularised the term among the general population.

The term *quốc gia* formed the other half of the emerging binary. The ordinary vocabulary word took on a partisan meaning after the establishment of the SVN. The Vietnamese name of the regime can be alternatively translated as the 'Nation of Vietnam' (Quốc Gia Việt Nam), and its military was known as the Vietnamese National Army (Quân Đội Quốc Gia Việt Nam). Accordingly, the fighting during the late years of the Resistance was between the so-called Việt Cộng and a self-anointed 'Nation of Vietnam'. Although the SVN never attracted widespread popular support, the regime did win over some anti-communist supporters, and the term *quốc gia* came to designate them too. In the early RVN, contributors to the Denounce the Communists Campaign typically used the term to refer to defectors from the DRV and anti-communist nationalist parties and organisations. More generally, politicians and activists in the RVN described all anti-communists as *quốc gia*.

37 'Hỡi [sic] đồng bào!' [O compatriots!], c.1949–1950, in 'Chánh phủ Bảo Đại kêu gọi đồng bào, 4/49–4/50', PTHNV F6-134. I thank Brett Reilly and Chi Ha for providing me with this source.

38 Thu Hương, 'Anh dân quân Nguyễn hay câu chuyện chánh nghĩa' [Nguyễn the civil defense militiaman or a story about the just cause], *Chiến Sĩ* 24, 20 Sept. 1951, pp. 12–13; *Chiến Sĩ*, 'Một đòn chí tử cho Việt cộng [sic]' [A deathblow for the Việt Cộng], *Chiến Sĩ* 60, 20 Mar. 1953, pp. 3, 22; 'Một cuộc mít tinh và biểu tình tuần hành khổng lồ tại Công Trường Nhà Hát Lớn, Hanoi' [A huge meeting and protest march at Opera House Square, Hanoi], *Việt Nam Thông Tấn Xã* 926, 7 Sept. 1953, afternoon ed., pp. III–IV, in PThTVNCH 20119.

39 For the earliest documented usage of the term in sectarian circles, see Hồ Hán Sơn, 'Hiệu triệu đồng bào của Tổng Tư Lệnh Bộ Quân Đội Cao Đài' [An appeal to compatriots from the Commander-in-Chief of the Cao Đài Army], *Thần Chung* 1639, 6 Aug. 1954, pp. 4. For the earliest recorded usage by Ngô Đình Diệm, see 'Diễn văn đọc trong dịp lễ mãn khóa lớp cán bộ tuyên truyền (28-11-54)' [Speech read at the graduation ceremony of propaganda cadres (28 Nov. 1954)], *Con đường chính nghĩa* [Path of righteousness], vol. 1 (Saigon: Sở Báo Chí Thông Tin, Phủ Thủ Tướng, 1955), pp. 77–9.

40 Trần Chánh Thành to Phan Quang Bồng, 31 May 1955, NACII, Phòng Toà Đại Biểu Chánh Phủ Nam Phần (Collection of the Regional Delegate of Southern Vietnam), D1-158. I thank Kevin Li for bringing this document to my attention.

### False patriots and the contested August Revolution

During the campaign, anti-communists drew on the earlier political discourse to argue that the *Việt Cộng* only pretended to ally with other groups and fight for independence but actually harboured ulterior motives. Authors interpreted the Resistance as a moral struggle in which treacherous communists deceived genuine nationalists during three specific moments: the August Revolution, the partisan violence in northern Vietnam in 1946, and the radicalisation of the DRV after 1949. Writers described actual events but employed tropes such as betrayal, fratricide, and persecution. This combination of historical specificity and ethical outrage endowed their writing with a sense of authenticity. Anti-communists often made inaccurate accusations against the communists, though not always intentionally, as the history of the Resistance remained poorly understood during Diệm's rule.

The August Revolution of 1945 was the first moment that exemplified communist treachery in the eyes of anti-communist writers. The uprising marked the start of the Anti-French Resistance as well as the ascent of communist power in Vietnam. Japan occupied Vietnam during most of the Second World War and overthrew the French colonial regime in spring 1945. The surrender of Tokyo that summer created a brief vacuum of power before the arrival of the Allies to disarm the Japanese. Recognising the rare opportunity, Vietnamese revolutionaries of all persuasions hoped to declare independence and secure a position in the future political order. The ICP outmanoeuvred other groups and seized power in the name of the Việt Minh on 19 August. In early September, Hồ Chí Minh formally declared the independence of the DRV and unveiled a government dominated by the ICP and non-communist members of the Việt Minh.<sup>41</sup> But if the communists considered the August Revolution to be a righteous uprising, anti-communists in the RVN condemned the seizure of power as a usurpation and accused the communists of feigning patriotism while betraying nationalist allies.

The northern émigré journalist Tô Văn asserted in *The three-stage strategy of the communists (Sách lược ba giai đoạn của cộng sản, 1956)* that Asian communists used a three-stage strategy devised by the Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong to pose as nationalists. The first stage focused on national liberation, and the communists willingly cooperated with the nationalists. The second called for the formation of a bourgeois democracy, and only the third stage was overtly communist and aimed at forming a dictatorship of the proletariat. Tô Văn insisted that Vietnamese communists had followed this strategy when they falsely allied with other revolutionaries in southern China. According to the journalist, Hồ Chí Minh was operating in the first stage when he pretended to serve the VRL. The VRL was a Chinese-sponsored coalition formed in exile and included the Việt Minh, the VNP, and a variety of minor exile parties. Tô Văn claimed that Hồ Chí Minh led members of the VRL back to Vietnam in 1939 but had his comrades murdered. Then, Hồ stole the abbreviation *Việt Minh* from the VRL and claimed the August Revolution exclusively for the communist-led Việt Minh. The ploy duped the population into inadvertently throwing its support behind the communists, the journalist asserted. The leaders of

41 François Guillemot, *Dai Việt, indépendance et révolution au Việt-Nam: L'échec de la troisième voie, 1938–1955* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2012), p. 282.

the VRL did not realise the deceit until Hồ Chí Minh shut them out of the government in September. Hồ's treachery was especially vile because the leader of the VRL had earlier secured the communist leader's release from prison in southern China, Tô Văn added.<sup>42</sup>

Trần Ích Quốc offered a slightly different interpretation in *'The Fatherland Front': A devious strategy of the communist Việt Minh* (*'Mặt Trận Tổ Quốc': Một chiến thuật sảo quyết của Việt Minh cộng sản*, 1957). A winner of the information ministry's literary contest, the tract claimed that communists throughout the world employed front organisations in order to seize power in countries where the communists faced opposition. 'The communists put forth an organisation that has the appearance of patriotism and unity,' but whose true purpose was to 'win over the people, annihilate the nationalists, and establish a communist government,' the author explained.<sup>43</sup> Before the August Revolution, the Việt Minh had been a genuine alliance of the various parties in southern China, and they had agreed to form a national union government (*chính phủ liên hiệp quốc gia*) and share power, Trần Ích Quốc insisted. 'But the Communists became traitorous and took advantage of the opportune moment. They hung their red flag with the yellow star at the top of the Opera House on 19 August 1945, where the other parties were holding rallies with civil servants and the people, and the communists seized power,' the author recounted.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the Vietnamese people should not trust any communist front organisation, including the Fatherland Front established in 1955, Trần Ích Quốc warned. Tô Văn's and Trần Ích Quốc's accounts captured the anti-communist parties' resentment at the communist success during the August Revolution, but the authors greatly exaggerated the degree of cooperation between exile groups. The VRL did not reflect actual political affinity and was formed only under Chinese pressure. Groups within the league never coordinated their strategy or merged their armies, and it is doubtful that the squabbling parties ever came to a consensus on sharing power prior to the August Revolution.<sup>45</sup>

### 'Fratricide': The partisan violence of 1946

The partisan violence between the Việt Minh and the anti-communist parties in northern Vietnam marked the second betrayal in the anti-communist historical narrative. Hồ Chí Minh's failure to include rival groups in the DRV's first government set off an intense political competition that was complicated by foreign occupation. Just days after the declaration of independence, the Allies sent the Chinese Nationalists to disarm the Japanese in the northern half of Vietnam. ICP leaders worried about the anti-communist character of the Chinese Nationalists and dissolved the party to allay Chinese suspicions. In actuality, the ICP went underground and continued to control

42 Tô Văn, *Sách lược ba giai đoạn của cộng sản* [The three-stage strategy of the communists] (Saigon? Chống Cộng, 1956), pp. 27–35.

43 Trần Ích Quốc, *'Mặt Trận Tổ Quốc': Một chiến thuật sảo quyết của Việt Minh cộng sản* ['The Fatherland Front': A devious strategy of the communist Việt Minh] (Saigon: self-published, 1957), p. 69.

44 Trần Ích Quốc, *Mặt Trận Tổ Quốc*, p. 104.

45 David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The quest for power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 251–4; David Marr, *Vietnam: State, war, and revolution, 1945–1946* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), pp. 410; Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A new history* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), p. 194.

the Việt Minh front. Accompanying the Chinese were the exiled VNP and VRL, and both organisations seized major towns from the Việt Minh along the route from southern China to Hanoi. The Chinese also pressured the Việt Minh to grant a few government ministries and a bloc of seats in the national assembly to the other two organisations. As a result, a deeply divided coalition government emerged in Hanoi in January 1946. The end of the Chinese occupation upset the precarious political arrangement. The Chinese pushed the DRV into signing the Preliminary Agreement of 6 March 1946 with France, which allowed French forces to replace the Chinese. As the Chinese withdrew that spring and summer, the Việt Minh launched a systematic assassination campaign against the VNP, the VRL, the Đại Việt party, and other anti-communist groups and attacked their strongholds in the provinces.<sup>46</sup> War erupted between France and the DRV in northern Vietnam by the end of the year.

Looking back at the partisan violence, anti-communists in the RVN accused the communists of starting a civil war. Thanh Lâm's *Putting history on trial (Những vụ án lịch sử, 1957)* graphically described the bloodshed: 'Throughout several months, the foam on the Lô and Thao rivers was muddy red, and hundreds of decapitated and disembowelled human corpses were fished out of the water every day. Who were these people, if not the victims of the disputes between the Việt Minh and the VNP?'<sup>47</sup> The Lô and Thao Rivers were located in areas that the VNP controlled prior to the attacks.<sup>48</sup> Thanh Lâm castigated Hồ Chí Minh for committing fratricide: 'He crushed the power of the nationalists in the beginning in order to kill them later, without mercy, not caring that they were his flesh and blood.'<sup>49</sup> Phạm Văn Sơn's *The seventeenth parallel (Vĩ tuyến 17, 1955)* was equally sensational. Sơn was an army officer from Hà Đông province who fought for the SVN during the Resistance. After 1955, he worked as a historian for Army of the Republic of Vietnam and became the most important living historian in the RVN.<sup>50</sup> He had written politically neutral accounts of Hồ Chí Minh in the late 1940s, but Sơn abandoned any pretence to moderation in *The seventeenth parallel*, a study of the Resistance and the Geneva Accords written under the pen name Dương Châu.<sup>51</sup> The budding historian cited the lyrics of the national anthem of the DRV and snidely denounced the internecine violence: 'This [the partisan violence] is true to the words in "The Advancing Army Song":

46 Marr, *Vietnam: State, war, and revolution*, pp. 405–28; Guillemot, *Dai Việt*, pp. 323–88; Goscha, *Vietnam*, pp. 206–8.

47 Thanh Lâm, *Những vụ án lịch sử* [Putting history on trial] (Saigon? n.p., 1957), p. 16. I have not been able to positively identify the author, but Thanh Lâm was one of the pseudonyms employed by the writer Trần Văn Thái.

48 Bernard Fall, *The Việt Minh regime: Government and administration in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam*, 2nd ed., (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1956), p. 7, map 2.

49 Thanh Lâm, *Những vụ án*, p. 20.

50 Trường Xuân Phú Tử Hồ Quang, 'Sử gia Phạm Văn Sơn' [The historian Phạm Văn Sơn], *Vietnamsuhoc.com* (3 Nov. 2013), <http://vietnamsuhoc.com/Lsvhnext.aspx?id=12&tentheloicha=L%E1%BB%8Bch%20S%E1%BB%AD&tentheloicon=%20Nh%C3%A2n%20v%E1%BA%ADt%20l%E1%BB%8Bch%20s%E1%BB%AD&idtheloicon=6> (last accessed 21 Dec. 2019).

51 Phạm Văn Sơn [Dương Châu, pseud.], *Vĩ tuyến 17* [The seventeenth parallel] (Saigon: self-published, 1955). For his earlier, neutral account of Hồ Chí Minh, see Phạm Văn Sơn, *Việt Nam tranh đấu sử* [The history of Vietnamese struggles], 1st ed. (Hanoi: self-published, 1949), pp. 185–96, 240–54.

“VOW TO QUARTER THE ENEMY’S CORPSES AND DRINK THEIR BLOOD,” but it is unfortunate in that the enemy in this case were actually compatriots.<sup>52</sup>

What made the conflict so heinous for anti-communists was that the Việt Minh intentionally made peace with the colonial power in order to murder Vietnamese nationalists, and many authors linked the timing of the attacks to the agreement with France in March 1946. *The deceitful front organisations of the communists* (*Những mặt trận bí bợm của cộng sản*, 1956), a study published by the information ministry about communist front organisations throughout the world, claimed, ‘While temporarily shaking hands with the French in the Preliminary Agreement of 6 March, the communists immediately began terrorising the nationalist parties because they [the nationalists] no longer enjoyed assistance from the Chinese Nationalist army.’<sup>53</sup> This claim became the standard interpretation in historical research in the RVN. Phạm Văn Sơn’s *The history of Vietnamese struggles* (*Việt Nam tranh đấu sử*, 1959), a survey of Vietnamese resistance against external invasion since pre-modern times, asserted that the communists actually collaborated with the French to destroy the anti-communist parties: ‘In a few provinces in the north-western highlands such as Phongsaly, Yên Bái, and Việt Trì, the Việt Minh even received assistance from the French army in this fratricide [*thủ túc tương tàn*]’.<sup>54</sup> Phongsaly was the northernmost province of Laos and bordered Vietnam, and Yên Bái and Việt Trì were provinces in northern Vietnam that were historic strongholds of the VNP. Schoolchildren learned the same interpretation in the classroom. *Vietnamese history for the First Form* (*Việt sử lớp đệ nhất*, 1961–62), a popular secondary school textbook, discussed the partisan conflict under subheadings such as, ‘The provisional government led by the Việt Minh prioritised the destruction of the nationalist parties over resistance to foreign invasion’ and ‘The Việt Minh made concessions to the French to have a free hand to eliminate the nationalists and to manage the difficult conditions in the country’.<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps the most influential account of the August Revolution and the partisan violence was Nguyễn Mạnh Côn’s debut novel, *Writing history with personal sentiments* (*Đem tâm tình viết lịch sử*, 1958). Published under the pen name Nguyễn Kiên Trung, the novel was initially serialised in the official journal of the defence ministry, *Guidance* (*Chỉ đạo*). Born in Hải Dương province, Côn was a rising literary star and a former activist in the Resistance. He joined the National Restoration Party (Phục Quốc Đảng, a constituent member of the VRL), served as a deputy in the national assembly of the coalition government, and suffered imprisonment by the Việt Minh in 1946. After his release, he appears to have fought for the DRV against the French and defected in the early 1950s. During Ngô Đình Diệm’s rule, Côn served

52 Phạm Văn Sơn, *Vĩ tuyến 17*, pp. 42–3 (capitalised in original). The translation of ‘The Advancing Army Song’ is taken from Jason Gibbs, ‘The music of the state: Vietnam’s quest for a national anthem’, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2, 2 (2007): 144.

53 *Những mặt trận bí bợm của cộng sản* [The deceitful front organisations of the communists] (Saigon? Bộ Thông Tin và Thanh Niên, 1956), p. 57.

54 Phạm Văn Sơn, *Việt Nam tranh đấu sử*, 5th ed. (Saigon: Việt Cường, 1959), p. 273.

55 Tăng Xuân An and Nguyễn Thị Hợp [Mrs Tăng Xuân An, pseud.], *Việt sử lớp đệ nhất* [Vietnamese history for the First Form] (Saigon? Tao Đàn, 1961–62), pp. 237, 251. See also Nguyễn Văn Mùi and Vũ Ngọc Ánh, *Việt sử và thế giới sử lớp đệ tứ* (Saigon: Thăng Long, 1959), pp. 160–61. I am indebted to Nguyễn Nguyệt Cầm for identifying Nguyễn Thị Hợp’s real name.

as an army officer, worked as a writer and editor for the literary journals of the defence and information ministries, and contributed to independent Saigon newspapers.<sup>56</sup> He would go on to become one of the most prominent writers in the RVN and the only one discussed in this article to achieve literary renown.

Nguyễn Mạnh Côn's *Writing history with personal sentiments* won second place in the category of novels in the first national literary competition organised by the education ministry. The book reads like a cross between a political manifesto and a lightly fictionalised memoir. The epistolary novel consists of five letters written between 1945 and 1954 from Minh, a partisan in the National Restoration Army (Phục Quốc Quân, a forerunner to the National Restoration Party), to his friend Trung, a young Vietnamese in Europe and a former partisan of the Free France movement. Minh's third letter narrates a history of partisan violence that dated back to the August Revolution and culminated in the attacks in 1946. The novel reprised earlier claims about Hồ Chí Minh's treachery towards the VRL and added that Hồ attacked his erstwhile allies immediately upon seizing power during the August Revolution. 'Although the pledge to share the responsibilities of government still seemed very fresh to the nationalist parties, they [the communists] started to hunt down and liquidate their opponents, from the night of 19 August,' Minh laments.<sup>57</sup> The letter writer further accuses the Việt Minh of betraying his party. Minh explains that the local Việt Minh in Lạng Sơn province invited his party to a reception, then murdered hundreds of unsuspecting partisans.<sup>58</sup> Minh himself falls victim to the partisan violence after the Preliminary Agreement, and the Việt Minh arrest and nearly execute him.<sup>59</sup>

The anti-communist accounts mixed partisan assumptions with historically accurate claims. Authors assumed that the anti-communists had an indisputable right to their bases in the provinces without acknowledging that the VNP and VRL had seized some of the territory from the Việt Minh. The anti-communists rightfully blamed the communists for the escalation of violence but did not fully understand the historical context. The communists did intend to use the temporary peace with France to annihilate their domestic opponents and were the first revolutionary group to employ large-scale, systematic violence against its rivals. However, it was not the agreement itself but the discovery of a possible plot that immediately precipitated the communist attacks. The DRV's interior minister Võ Nguyên Giáp suspected some anti-communist leaders of conspiring to overthrow the DRV and used the

56 Nguyễn Mạnh Côn never publicly admitted to joining the National Restoration Party, but he was the director of the party's official organ. For biographical details, see Nguyễn Ngu Í, ed., 'Quan niệm sáng tác của các nhà thơ, nhà viết truyện, nhà soạn kịch' [Conceptions of artistic creation among poets, fiction writers, and dramatists], *Bách Khoa* [Encyclopedia] 122, 1 Feb. 1962, pp. 73–96; Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, 'Tâm sự tác giả' [A writer shares his confidences], *Tin Sách* [Book news] 8–9, Aug.–Sept. 1961, pp. 25–33; Viên Linh, 'Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, nhà văn miền nam tuyệt thực chết trong tù CS' [Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, the South Vietnamese writer who died from a hunger strike in a communist prison], *Người Tinh Hư Vô* Blog (24 Apr. 2014), <https://nguoitinhhuvo.wordpress.com/2014/04/24/nguyen-manh-con-nha-van-mien-nam-tuyet-thuc-chet-trong-tu-cs-vien-linh/> (last accessed 21 Dec. 2019).

57 Nguyễn Mạnh Côn [pseud. Nguyễn Kiên Trung], *Đem tâm tình viết lịch sử* [Writing history with personal sentiments] (Saigon: Nguyễn Đình Vương, 1958), p. 61.

58 Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, *Đem tâm tình*, pp. 61–2.

59 *Ibid.*, pp. 74–6.



alleged plot to justify the elimination of all opposition parties, including those not involved in the plot.<sup>60</sup>

### 'After the fish is caught': The radicalisation of the DRV

The radicalisation of the DRV after 1949 constituted the most fully developed episode in the anti-communist narrative. At the time of the August Revolution, the Việt Minh presented itself as a broad political front and accepted members from all social classes. The DRV likewise recruited Vietnamese from different class backgrounds into its army and administrative apparatus, and many rank-and-file supporters were unaware that the regime was led by the communist party. Communist leaders did not introduce overtly class-based policies until the end of the decade. The victory of the Chinese communists in the Chinese Revolution of 1949 secured the northern flank of the DRV, and the People's Republic of China extended diplomatic recognition to the Vietnamese regime and sent aid and advisers.<sup>61</sup> Under the influence of Chinese advisers, the Vietnamese communists launched a rectification campaign (Viet. *chỉnh huấn*, Ch. *zhengfeng*) to purge undesirable class elements from the party and from the DRV's army, administration, and educational system.<sup>62</sup> Middle- and upper-class individuals suffered abrupt demotion, dismissal, or even imprisonment. The party openly reasserted its dominance in 1951 when it re-emerged as the Vietnamese Labour Party and arranged for the Việt Minh to be absorbed by a different political front. Two years later, the DRV introduced a punitive land reform programme to redistribute land from wealthy landlords to poor peasants. The programme's centrepiece were show trials featuring the 'denunciation of suffering'. Cadres urged peasants to publicly accuse landlords of heinous crimes, and convicted landlords lost their property, their freedom, and even their lives.<sup>63</sup> Limited research suggests that southern Vietnam experienced a more moderate version of communist rule compared to the north and central regions.<sup>64</sup> In the south, the DRV redistributed land taken from absentee landlords and removed wealthier peasants from the local leadership, but the communists refrained from radical measures such as executing landlords for owning property.<sup>65</sup> These regional differences meant that southerners

60 Guillemot confirms that the communists planned to take advantage of the temporary cessation of fighting after the Preliminary Agreement of 6 March 1946 to pre-emptively attack its non-communist rivals. He also contends that some non-communist leaders made secret plans for an event, possibly a coup, to take place in mid-July. Both Guillemot and Marr suggest that the communists used the suspected plot as a pretext for eliminating the VNP. See Guillemot, *Dai Việt*, pp. 323–4, 336–41; Marr, *Vietnam: State, war, and revolution*, pp. 424–5.

61 King Chen, *Vietnam and China, 1938–1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 155–278; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 10–64; Chen Jian, 'China and the First Indo-China War, 1950–1954', *China Quarterly* 133 (1993): 85–110; Xiaobing Li, *Building Ho's army* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019), pp. 63–107.

62 Kim Ninh, *A world transformed: The politics of culture in revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. 83–117; Chen, *Vietnam*, p. 258; Zhai, *China*, p. 34–5.

63 Alec Holcombe, *Mass mobilization in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945–1960* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020), pp. 139–58; Edwin Moise, *Land reform in China and North Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), pp. 178–204.

64 Võ Phiến, *Văn học miền nam tổng quan* [An overview of South Vietnamese literature] (Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 1986), pp. 168–9; Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, p. 54.

65 Elliott, *Vietnamese war*, pp. 67–9.

experienced a much milder version of the radicalisation than Vietnamese elsewhere in the country.

The class-based policies provoked widespread alienation among the targeted classes, and numerous partisans abandoned their posts or were purged.<sup>66</sup> Many came to hate communism and fled the resistance zone altogether. As David Elliot explains, 'In 1949–50 a country-wide hemorrhage of the urban middle class from the ranks of the Viet Minh happened at the same time as much of the rural middle class was being pushed out of the revolution'.<sup>67</sup> The defections took place on such a massive scale that northern Vietnamese coined a specific term, *dinh tê*, to describe the action of crossing over from an area controlled by the DRV to the French zone.<sup>68</sup>

In the RVN, intellectuals depicted the radicalisation in northern Vietnam as a power play in which devious communists betrayed earnest patriots and hijacked the struggle for independence. The film *We want to live* (*Chúng tôi muốn sống*, 1956), the RVN's first motion picture, portrayed the communists as persecuting the bravest and most loyal patriots. The director and screenwriter Vĩnh Noãn was not an émigré, but he based the screenplay on interviews with actual émigrés, and almost all the actors and extras were northerners.<sup>69</sup> In the film, Vinh is a patriotic company commander in the army of the DRV and heroically leads his unit to successive victories on the battlefield. His parents are wealthy landlords who support the government with donations of grain. But in 1953, the communists arrest Vinh and escort him back to his village, where the land reform programme is under way, and he is shocked to find that the land reform cadres have put his parents on trial. The cadres accuse Vinh's parents of feigning support for the DRV in order to conceal their crimes and force other villagers to make false accusations against the couple.<sup>70</sup> When Vinh attempts to defend his parents' innocence, the presiding cadre denies him permission to speak, but Vinh is defiant. Addressing the crowd, the company commander asks, 'I have fought on the battlefield for the liberation of the homeland, side by side with other warriors. Don't I have the right to speak up?'<sup>71</sup> The court subsequently executes his parents and condemns Vinh to forced labour.

66 For personal accounts of defection see Phạm Duy, *Hồi ký* [Memoir], vol. 2 (Midway City, CA: PDC Musical Productions, 1989), pp. 285–331; Lu Lan, 'The People's War or War on the People?', in *Prelude to tragedy in Vietnam, 1960–1965*, ed. John O'Donnell and Harvey Neese (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), pp. 133–4.

67 Elliott, *Vietnamese war*, p. 76.

68 The term may have been a corruption of the French word *rentrer*, meaning 'to return'. See Phạm Duy, *Hồi ký*, vol. 2, pp. 324–5. For usage of *dinh tê* and the variation *dinh tề*, see Phạm Duy, *Hồi ký*, vol. 2, pp. 111, 118, 210, 269, 293; Phạm Duy, *Hồi ký*, vol. 3 (Midway City, CA: PDC Musical Productions, 1991), pp. 28, 43, 91; Hà Thúc Ký, *Sống còn với dân tộc* [Living and dying with the nation] (n.p.: Phương Nghi, 2009), p. 155.

69 Bùi Diễm, *Gọng kim lịch sử* [The pincers of history] (Paris: Cơ Sở Xuất Bản Phạm Quang Khải, 2000), pp. 156–8; Võ Văn Tùng, 'Tuống nhớ cố đạo diễn Vĩnh Noãn: Đôi lời về một người anh' [Remembering deceased director Vĩnh Noãn: A few words about an elder], *Việt báo* (10 Nov. 2003), [http://www.vietbao.com/D\\_1-2\\_2-282\\_4-61965/](http://www.vietbao.com/D_1-2_2-282_4-61965/) (last accessed 10 June 2011); Phương Anh and Hoàng Phong Khôi, 'Behind the scenes with two Vietnamese actresses', *Radio Free Asia*, 13 June 2006, [https://www.rfa.org/english/features/women/witow\\_vietnamese-20060613.html](https://www.rfa.org/english/features/women/witow_vietnamese-20060613.html) (last accessed 12 Aug. 2021).

70 *Chúng tôi muốn sống* [We want to live], directed by Vĩnh Noãn (Saigon: Tân Việt, 1956). The film is also available as a privately produced DVD (Westminster, CA, 2002?).

71 Ibid.

Other works such as Kỳ Văn Nguyên's novel, *Searching for the path to survival* (*Tìm về sinh lộ*, 1957), stressed that the introduction of radical policies midway through the Resistance was an act of deception. The author was originally from Hanoi and arrested by the Việt Minh in 1946, probably during the partisan violence. He escaped from prison and fought for the SVN and later the RVN. Nguyên enjoyed a long career in psychological warfare and worked as an editor, playwright, filmmaker, and radio director for the army.<sup>72</sup> His decidedly mediocre book won the prize for best novel ahead of *Writing history with personal sentiments* in the literary competition organised by the education ministry. In *Searching for the path to survival*, the patriotic Trần Vũ joins the Việt Minh after the August Revolution and gains renown for his military exploits, but the party demotes him around 1949 on suspicion of engaging in counterrevolution. He flees the resistance zone to avoid arrest.<sup>73</sup> After reaching Hanoi, he ruefully confides to his lover that the communists deceived him into believing that they were nationalists. 'A few years ago, when I first started learning about politics, I couldn't recognise their trickery ... I mistakenly thought that the dictatorship of the proletariat leads to the nation and the people.'<sup>74</sup> The communists' mistreatment of him opens his eyes to the reality that national independence was not the ultimate objective of the DRV, according to the novel.<sup>75</sup>

For the author Lê Phong, the radicalisation marked the moment when Chinese encroachment subverted the struggle for independence. The writer was a defector from Quảng Yên province and formerly fought for the DRV. In his memoir, *Soldiers under the Việt Cộng regime* (*Người quân nhân dưới chế độ Việt Cộng*, c.1955–59), he accused Vietnamese communists of blindly imitating the Chinese model of rectification to the detriment of military morale. Lê Phong recounted that a political cadre who had trained for three years in China oversaw the rectification of Company 120 in 1953. The cadre 'talked incessantly about the imported experiences of the "comrade advisers"' from China, the author recalled.<sup>76</sup> After months of indoctrination and training, the cadre publicly accused many trainees of committing bogus or petty infractions and ordered the immediate arrest of ten trainees. Morale plummeted, and soldiers defected en masse. According to Lê Phong, his comrades still supported independence but felt trapped because they did not want to serve a regime that was dependent on a foreign power: 'They knew full well that the gang of Chinese advisers had interfered and encroached upon all areas of authority in Uncle's [Hồ Chí Minh] government, which they [the soldiers] served, but they were all in the same boat with no way out.'<sup>77</sup>

Nguyễn Mạnh Côn synthesised the different accusations of persecution, deception, and Chinese encroachment in *Whereto, Việt Minh?* (*Việt Minh, người đi đâu?*, 1957), a carefully researched monograph about the land reform programme.

72 Hoàng Trúc Tâm, 'Tiểu sử và sự nghiệp' [Biography and career], in *Tìm về sinh lộ* [Searching for the path to survival], by Kỳ Văn Nguyên (n.p.: Kyvannguyen USA, 1996), pp. 321–30; Nguyễn Ngọc Thông, introduction to *Tìm về*, by Kỳ Văn Nguyên, pp. 10.

73 Kỳ Văn Nguyên, *Tìm về*, pp. 51–76.

74 Ibid., p. 69.

75 Ibid., pp. 70.

76 Lê Phong, *Người quân nhân dưới chế độ Việt Cộng* [Soldiers under the Việt Cộng regime] (Saigon? Hoàng Ba, c.1955–59), p. 69.

77 Lê Phong, *Người quân nhân*, p. 70.

Writing under the pen name of Nguyễn Kiên Trung, Côn argued that the communists intentionally recruited members that the party intended to purge later. Middle- and upper-class elements provided a 'screen' (*bình phong*) to conceal the communist character of the DRV, and landlords were the regime's most enthusiastic supporters during the early years of the Resistance, according to the author.<sup>78</sup> But the Vietnamese communists reversed their strategy after 1950 because the Chinese communists began providing diplomatic and military assistance. It was now advantageous to be openly communist, and the party eliminated its unwanted members with the rectification campaign in 1952–53 and the subsequent land reform programme. Côn denounced the change of policy as exploitative and deceptive. He cited a Vietnamese proverb to describe the communists' ruthless calculation: 'Discard the crossbow after the bird is shot, throw away the tackle after the fish is caught.'<sup>79</sup>

Côn's novel *Writing history with personal sentiments*, discussed earlier, argued that the true purpose of the purge was to place the war of independence in service of the international communist struggle. In the fourth letter of the epistolary novel, Minh recounts the unjust execution of his friend during the radicalisation and ponders why the communists should want to purge the petty bourgeoisie (*tiểu tư sản*). The answer is somewhat convoluted. The letter writer cites the Chinese communist theorist Liu Shaoqi to claim that communists conceive of the petty bourgeoisie as a consciousness rather than a class. Departing from Liu, Minh argues that a petty bourgeois consciousness is a sense of ownership over one's material property and subjectivity, regardless of a person's actual wealth.<sup>80</sup> All nationalists are petty bourgeois in the sense that they feel a sense of ownership over their nation, and Minh asserts that the Resistance began as a struggle for independence waged by the Vietnamese petty bourgeoisie. So why did the communists later purge middle-class cadres? 'In order to establish a *monopoly over the resistance*, so that they [the communists] could transform the Anti-French Resistance for independence into a big war between two political blocs, according to their [the communists'] desire and the requirements of the situation,' Minh explains.<sup>81</sup> That is, he claims that Vietnamese communists wrested control of the DRV from true patriots in order to turn the national liberation struggle into a communist struggle that was in line with the international communist revolution. The accusation echoed the earlier assertion that the ultimate goal of the Vietnamese communists was to facilitate a foreign invasion of the country.

These accounts represented a serious if highly partisan attempt to make sense of the political changes in the later years of the Resistance. Although the radicalisation of the DRV could not be attributed to Chinese encroachment or a planned Soviet invasion, the class-based policies did discriminate against middle- and upper-class supporters of the DRV. Authors took pains to correctly date the radicalisation and to enumerate specific locations, military units, and individuals. The passionate indignation that animated these works reflected the very real sense of victimisation and disenchantment that many northern defectors experienced.

78 Nguyễn Mạnh Côn [pseud. Nguyễn Kiên Trung], *Việt Minh, người đi đâu?* [Where to, Việt Minh?] (Saigon? n.p., 1957), pp. 36–8.

79 Ibid., p. 38.

80 Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, *Đem tâm tình*, pp. 104–17.

81 Ibid., pp. 124 (italics in original).

## Conclusion

Although Diệm claimed that his government represented Vietnamese anti-communist nationalism as a whole, the historical narrative promoted by his administration primarily reflected the views of only his political faction. He and his followers controlled the government, and sidelined and suppressed other anti-communists. The regime refused to grant legal recognition to these other parties, shut down their publications, and harassed and arrested opposition politicians.<sup>82</sup> Such repression created a climate that was hostile to alternative interpretations of the Resistance. Anti-communist writers and intellectuals who otherwise might have contributed to the narrative fled into exile, went underground, or remained silent. Consequently, the narrative that emerged captured only a narrow slice of the anti-communist historical experience.

In fact, the regime was so wary of other parties that it was reluctant to let them contribute to the propaganda even when the rivals conformed to the officially sanctioned narrative, as illustrated by the circumstances surrounding the film *We want to live*. The movie's producer was Bùi Diễm, a cadre of the émigré branch of the Đại Việt party, and he and his comrades financed the project. After much prodding from the CIA agent Edward Lansdale, Diệm reluctantly agreed to let the defence ministry purchase copies of the film so that the investors could recover their investment. But just before the movie premiered, Diệm's brother Ngô Đình Nhu cancelled the defence ministry's contract and claimed that the party was raising funds for anti-government activities, an apparent reference to the Đại Việt rebellion in central Vietnam in which the party's émigré branch was not involved. Despite these setbacks, audiences hailed *We want to live* as a cinematic triumph, and it became the most influential film in the early RVN. Cinemagoers clamoured to see it in the theatre, and critics heaped praise on the film. Yet the film was a financial failure. Although the CIA arranged for the information ministry to buy copies of the film to help the investors, Bùi Diễm and his comrades found themselves not only politically marginalised but also deeply in debt.<sup>83</sup> The regime's treatment of its political rivals gave the lie to the government's claim to represent all victims of the Vietnamese communists.

The partisan character of the anti-communist propaganda partly accounts for its failure in the countryside and relative success in the cities. The distinctively northern orientation of the narrative limited its appeal to the southern peasantry. Peasants in the south scoffed at the outlandish tales of purges and land reform trials in the far-off north, and government agents struggled to convince rural people to oppose communism. Especially in former communist areas, peasants admired local communists as heroes of the Resistance and considered them to be nationalists in direct contradiction to the claims of northern émigrés.<sup>84</sup> The discrepancy partly reflects the regional

82 Nu-Anh Tran, *Disunion: Anticommunist nationalism and the making of the Republic of Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022).

83 Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam matters: An eyewitness account of lessons not learned* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), pp. 90–91; Bùi Diễm, *Gọng kìm*, pp. 157–8; Bùi Diễm, *In the jaws of history* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 92; Kim Văn An, 'Chúng tôi muốn sống' [We want to live], *Văn Nghệ Tiền Phong* [Avant-garde art] 23, 8 Nov. 1956, pp. 29–30, 33.

84 Jeffery Race, *War comes to Long An: Revolutionary conflict in a Vietnamese province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p. 26; Nguyễn Trân, *Công và tội: Những sự thật lịch sử* [Merit and crime: Historical truths] (Los Alamitos, CA: Xuân Thu, 1992), p. 218; Hoàng Văn Chí, 'Land

variations of the radicalisation, as the southerners did not experience the political upheavals described in the narrative.

More importantly, the RVN undermined the legitimacy of the narrative due to the poor execution of the Denounce the Communists Campaign. The stated policy was to differentiate between full-fledged communists and non-communist patriots who supported the DRV. But in practice, local officials arrested suspects indiscriminately, and even resistance fighters who voluntarily presented themselves to the authorities could be detained. That the campaign was carried out by local officials, most of whom had served the colonial regime, did not help Diệm's cause.<sup>85</sup> In some locales, the government's dragnet swept up sectarian partisans who were decidedly anti-communist.<sup>86</sup> The peasants rightly recognised that the RVN condemned communist persecution in northern Vietnam while carrying out anti-communist repression in the south.

The campaign found its most receptive audience in urban areas.<sup>87</sup> Compared to peasants, city people had greater exposure to anti-communist books and movies but less contact with actual communists. Such conditions enabled the campaign to popularise the belief that the communists persecuted Vietnamese nationalists — an assertion that ignored the RVN's own violence towards suspected communists. The trope of communist persecution proved enduring. It outlived Diệm's tenure and became the template for later anti-communist narratives. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Trần Văn Thái's popular novel *Camp Đầm Đùn* (*Trại Đầm Đùn*) described the brutal conditions that defectors and partisans of the nationalist parties endured in communist prisons during the Resistance.<sup>88</sup> Although the topic somewhat resembled earlier accounts, later developments gave Thái's work new meaning. Whereas the propagandists of the 1950s used tales of persecution to justify the destruction of the still quiescent communist party, the publication of *Camp Đầm Đùn* at the height of the Vietnam War served as a warning that the anti-communists would face oppression if they lost the war.

After the defeat of the RVN in 1975, Vietnamese refugees fled overseas and drew on the older discourse to accuse the post-war communist government of persecuting supporters of the fallen regime.<sup>89</sup> Vietnam's communist rulers imprisoned hundreds

reform', in *To bear any burden: The Vietnam War and its aftermath in the words of Americans and Southeast Asians*, ed. Al Santoli (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 47.

85 Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 243–5; Race, *War*, pp. 26–7, 37–8; Kahin, *Intervention*, p. 96; Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, pp. 96–7.

86 Lê Thị Gấm to Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ, 12 June 1956, ĐICH 4320; Lâm Thế Xương, former secretary of the Long Xuyên Provincial Committee, to the leaders and members of the Social Democratic Party, 5 Feb. 1956, ĐICH 4349.

87 This paragraph and the following rely heavily on Tuan Hoang, 'From reeducation camps to Little Saigons: Historicizing Vietnamese diasporic anticommunism', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, 2 (2016): 43–95, esp. pp. 57–9.

88 Trần Văn Thái, *Trại Đầm Đùn* [Camp Đầm Đùn] (Saigon: Nguyễn Trãi, 1973; Fort Smith, AR: Sống Mới, 1979).

89 Y Thien Nguyen has persuasively demonstrated that Vietnamese-Americans adapted old anti-communist narratives from the RVN of the 1950s to narrate their experiences as refugees. This paragraph draws on Nguyen's work to suggest that Vietnamese refugees also drew on the anti-communist historical narrative to make sense of the mass incarceration of former citizens of the RVN after the war. See Y Thien Nguyen, 'When state propaganda becomes social knowledge', in *Building a republican*

of thousands of the RVN's military officers, government officials, artists, and intellectuals in 're-education camps' (*trại cải tạo*). For the refugees, such policies were a continuation of the communist violence against Vietnamese nationalists during the Resistance. Survivors of communist re-education camps escaped abroad and wrote heartrending memoirs of their time in prison. At the same time, overseas Vietnamese publishers reprinted older novels such as *Writing history with my personal sentiments* and *Camp Đầm Đùn*, and refugees circulated videocassette copies of *We want to live*. Together, the old and new accounts created a seamless history of unceasing communist persecution. Yet few refugees acknowledged that the RVN had once rounded up suspected communists in similarly named 're-education camps'. Like the anti-communist narrative that formed during the Denounce the Communists Campaign, the new stories of persecution were rooted in actual historical experience but also highly partisan.

*nation in Vietnam, 1920–1963*, ed. Nu-Anh Tran and Tuong Vu (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, forthcoming).