

## Revolutionary Paths through the Mind, 1917–1930

Ho Chi Minh, the man who came to symbolize Vietnamese nationalism and communism, was one of the first Vietnamese to convert to Leninism. As he later reminisced,

At first, patriotism, not yet communism, led me to believe in Lenin, in the Third International. Step by step, along the struggle, by studying Marxism-Leninism parallel with participation in practical activities, I gradually came upon the fact that only socialism and communism can liberate the oppressed nations and the working people throughout the world from slavery. There is a legend, in our country as well as in China, of the miraculous “Book of the Wise.” When facing great difficulties, one opens it and finds a way out. Leninism is not only a miraculous “Book of the Wise...” it is also the radiant sun illuminating our path to final victory, to socialism and communism.<sup>1</sup>

Born Nguyen Sinh Cung (or Con) around 1890, Ho received limited formal education as a child and became a political activist by the end of World War I while living in France.<sup>2</sup> His path from patriotism to Leninism was a common experience shared by many Vietnamese communists, as in the case of Truong Chinh. As Ho admitted, acquiring a belief in Leninism was not the end but just the beginning of a new path. It took time and

<sup>1</sup> Ho Chi Minh, “The Path That Led Me to Leninism,” in Prasenjit Duara, ed. *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Ho studied Chinese classics at home and may have attended a Vietnamese-Franco elementary school. His formal education was disrupted many times and appeared limited. See Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, transl. Claire Duiker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2–7; Thuy Khue, *Nhan Van Giai Pham va Van de Nguyen Ai Quoc* (Online publication, 2011), 595–597; available at <http://thuykhue.free.fr/stt/n/nhanvan15-2.html>

effort for him to fully grasp communist ideas. The revolutionary path was an intellectual as much as a physical struggle for Nguyen Ai Quoc (or Quac or Kwak in some versions), the name Ho was using at the time. It is possible to observe this mental struggle through his writings: he first expressed a simplistic and mechanical understanding of the concept of world revolution, but gradually showed a more sophisticated knowledge.

By the early 1930s, the Communist Party that Quoc helped found under Comintern guidance had settled on a clear and firm vision of their revolution as a component of world revolution. In this vision, the Vietnamese revolution was to pass through two phases: the “bourgeois democratic” phase and the “proletarian” phase. The first phase involved the overthrow of French rule, a land revolution, and the formation of a state based on a triple alliance of workers, peasants, and soldiers, but led solely by workers. The second phase would take Vietnam to socialism.

The Marxist-Leninist worldview united, rather than divided, Quoc and his comrades. They all shared a deep love of the Soviet Union as a laboratory of revolution. They did not see eye to eye on some issues, but their disagreement reflected not a difference in their worldview or their loyalty to the Comintern, but the timing of their induction into the movement, their formal education and personal theoretical aptitude, and timely access to information from the Comintern.

“FIRST MAKE A NATIONAL REVOLUTION,  
THEN MAKE A WORLD REVOLUTION”

By the turn of the twentieth century, the French colonial system in Vietnam had been consolidated and was about to experience rapid expansion.<sup>3</sup> In the following three decades, colonial administration continued to penetrate deeply into Vietnamese villages to enforce control and exploit resources for a growing capitalist economy. In many parts of the colony, landlessness became more widespread, and state extraction through taxes, forced labor, and conscription became more effective.

Against that backdrop of colonial development were the establishment of a formal school system that taught French and other subjects, the broad adoption of the Vietnamese vernacular language *Quoc Ngu*, and

<sup>3</sup> The best account of French colonialism in Indochina is Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémerly, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, transl. Ly-Lan Dill-Klein, Eric Jennings, Nora A. Taylor, and Noémi Tousignant (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

the emergence of a reading public.<sup>4</sup> Similar to other colonies, these trends fuelled the rise of modern Vietnamese nationalism.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the turn of the century, the universe for most Vietnamese was the East Asian cultural sphere anchored in China. Ideas from outside that sphere were mostly absorbed through the medium of the Chinese language and worldview. Knowledge of French opened up a whole new world for Vietnamese youth who came of age in the 1920s and afterward. It brought not only new concepts but also direct contacts with European social and political movements of the time.

The Vietnamized term “cach mang” (revolution) in its modern sense was imported into Vietnam by way of Japan and China around the turn of the century,<sup>6</sup> but there was no evidence of Vietnamese knowledge of Marx and Lenin before the Russian Revolution in 1917.<sup>7</sup> Reports in the Vietnamese-language press on that revolution likely drew from French and Chinese sources and were generally unfavorable. For example, *Nam Phong* [Southern Wind], a prominent Vietnamese/Chinese journal, praised the Kerensky government and described its opponents, including Lenin, as “corrupt” and “selling their country” to Germany for money [bai liet o hanh, phan nuoc].<sup>8</sup> The term “Bolshevik” was translated into Vietnamese as “qua kich” [extremist].<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, in an extended analysis of Russian politics, *Nam Phong* reported that Lenin’s party favored the use of violence to force the “powerful capitalists” to cede more rights to the people.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the Bolsheviks were against

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, UK: Verso, 1991). For Vietnam, see William Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900–1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976); and Christopher Goscha, *Going Indochinese: Contesting Concepts of Space and Place in French Indochina* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of the origins of this term in the Vietnamese political discourse, see George Dutton, “Cach Mang, Révolution: The Early History of ‘Revolution’ in Vietnam,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 46: 1 (2015), 4–31. According to this source, the French term “révolution” appeared in French Cochinchina much earlier, perhaps in the 1870s. The Vietnamese term first appeared around 1910 but was hardly used by any anticolonialists prior to 1920.

<sup>7</sup> Some Vietnamese official historians argued that French censorship prevented information about the Russian revolution from reaching Vietnam. See, for example, Minh Tran, *Chung run so truoc anh huong cua Cach mang Thang Muoi toi Viet Nam* [They trembled at the influence of the October Revolution in Vietnam] (Hanoi: Su That, 1958).

<sup>8</sup> “Talk of the Day” [*Thoi Dam*], *Nam Phong* 2, August 1917, 132–133.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. The French word “maximalistes” accompanied the Vietnamese term in original. The contemporary spelling of this Vietnamese term is “qua khich.”

<sup>10</sup> “Talk of the Day” [*Thoi Dam*], *Nam Phong* no. 7, January 1918, 53.

war, believing that it would only benefit capitalists. *Nam Phong* criticized the Bolsheviks' penchant for violence and for "betraying the Allies" and "disgracing the (Russian) nation" by signing a peace agreement with Germany-Austria."<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, exiled Vietnamese revolutionaries in France and southern China welcomed the Russian revolution. Yet they did so for different reasons. Older Vietnamese revolutionaries, in particular, either hoped to secure Soviet military support or to draw practical lessons from the Russian revolution. Phan Boi Chau, who was the most prominent revolutionary at the time and who had earlier sought Japan's assistance in fighting France, went to meet Soviet officials in Peiping (Beijing) in 1920 to inquire about possible assistance for sending Vietnamese students to study in the Soviet Union. He described the attitude of Soviet officials as "friendly and honest."<sup>12</sup> They promised to cover all expenses of interested students on the condition that those students believe in communism and be committed to carrying out the revolution in Vietnam after graduation. Phan Boi Chau did not reveal his reactions to this offer but no further contacts followed. A year later, he wrote an article published in a Chinese military journal praising Lenin as a superb revolutionary strategist.<sup>13</sup> Although he credited the Soviet government with establishing the first ever government of workers and peasants [*chinh phu Lao Nong*], he was mostly impressed, not with communism, but with the Bolsheviks' success in seizing power. Phan Chau Trinh, another veteran revolutionary of Phan Boi Chau's generation, reacted in the same manner. In his letter to Nguyen Ai Quoc in 1922, Phan Chau Trinh expressed general admiration for the 1917 revolution, but for him the main lesson from this revolution was that revolutionaries could succeed only if they operated inside the country (rather than from abroad).<sup>14</sup>

Like Phan Boi Chau, Nguyen Ai Quoc's interest in the Bolshevik revolution stemmed from Lenin's support for colonial independence. Unlike Phan, Quoc strived to understand communism by studying the theory

<sup>11</sup> "Talk of the Day" [*Thoi Dam*], *Nam Phong* no. 9, March 1918, 186.

<sup>12</sup> Phan Boi Chau, "Phan Boi Chau Nien Bieu" [The Timeline of Phan Boi Chau's Career] in Chuong Thau, ed., *Phan Boi Chau Toan Tap* [Complete works by Phan Boi Chau] (Hanoi: Trung Tam Van Hoa Ngon Ngu Dong Tay, 2001), v. 6, 251–252.

<sup>13</sup> Phan Boi Chau, "Luoc truyen Liet Ninh, vi nhan cua nuoc Nga Do" [A brief story about Lenin, the great man of Red Russia] in Chuong Thau, ed., *Phan Boi Chau Toan Tap*, v. 5, 317–323.

<sup>14</sup> Phan Chau Trinh, "Thu gui Nguyen Ai Quoc," February 18, 1922 in Chuong Thau, Duong Trung Quoc, Le Thi Kinh et al., eds., *Phan Chau Trinh Toan Tap* [Complete works by Phan Chau Trinh] (Da Nang: Da Nang Publishing House, 2005), v. 3, 99–104.

and by being involved in the communist movement.<sup>15</sup> This process of radicalization is traceable in his writings. Quoc left the socialists to join the communists in France in 1920, after having read and being convinced by Lenin's thesis on the colonial question. Throughout his writings in the early 1920s, Quoc was obsessed with colonialism and its crimes against his people. But his perspective became increasingly internationalized and influenced by Leninist concepts.<sup>16</sup>

In an article published in 1921, for example, Quoc cited Chinese thinkers such as Confucius and Mencius to argue that it would be easier to realize communism in Asia than in Europe.<sup>17</sup> According to him, labor mobilization and the public ownership of land had been common in Asian societies since ancient times, which would make them more receptive to communist ideas and institutions. This article was perhaps written simply to raise support from the European left for revolutions in the colonies, but it betrayed Quoc's shallow understanding of Marxism.

By the following year, however, Quoc showed a better grasp of the doctrine. He was now able to understand the social basis of communism and to distinguish communism from nationalism. In the colonies, he complained that

ordinary people have no idea what class struggle is, as there is no industry and commerce as well as workers' organizations there. To indigenous people, Bolshevism means either the destruction of everything or the liberation from foreign rule. The first interpretation makes the uneducated and timid masses avoid us. The second interpretation leads them to nationalism. Both are dangerous.<sup>18</sup>

The process of intellectual radicalization accelerated after Nguyen Ai Quoc arrived in the Soviet Union in June 1923 at the invitation of the Comintern.<sup>19</sup> His writings were now dominated by themes of class struggle. Among his favorite topics were workers movements around

<sup>15</sup> See Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years 1919–1941* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), esp. 31–32.

<sup>16</sup> See William Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 123 for a similar observation.

<sup>17</sup> Nguyen Ai Quoc, "Phong trao Cong san quoc te" [The international Communist movement], published in *La Revue Communiste* no. 15 (May 1921) and reprinted in Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh Toan Tap* [Collected works by Ho Chi Minh, hereafter *HCMTT*], 2nd ed., v. 1 (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 1995), 33–36.

<sup>18</sup> Nguyen Ai Quoc, "May y nghi ve van de thuoc dia" [Some thoughts about the colonial problem], published in *L'Humanite*, May 25, 1922. *HCMTT*, 2nd ed., v. 1, 63.

<sup>19</sup> Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, 23–29.

the world.<sup>20</sup> He also paid attention to gender and racial issues across national boundaries.<sup>21</sup> He went from denouncing colonialism to launching broad attacks on French and American “civilizations.”<sup>22</sup> In an article titled “Lynching: A Little Known Aspect of American Civilization,” for example, Quoc blamed capitalism for slavery and expressed solidarity with American blacks. The article included graphic descriptions of several lynching cases, some apparently translated from American newspapers. The paragraph below, which described the climax of a lynching case, showcased Quoc’s sharp writing skills and his intense feelings about the injustice toward blacks:

The black man could no longer scream; his tongue had swollen after a hot iron bar was thrust into his mouth. His whole body twisted like a beaten snake – half-alive, half-dead. A knife was raised, and an ear fell off. Oh my god, how black it was! How disgusting! Then the [white] women ripped his face apart .... [After they had burned the black man’s body,] the ground was dirty with [burned] fat and [the air filled with] smoke. [Left behind] was a blackened, burned, and crushed skull that horrifyingly grimaced at the setting sun with the question: “is that a civilized [act]?”<sup>23</sup>

While writing for newspapers and participating in Comintern activities, Quoc also received some training at the University of the Toilers of the East.<sup>24</sup> The Soviet government created this university in 1921 to train foreign youths in communism and revolutionary science. Quoc was particularly impressed with the school’s diverse student body, the majority of whom came from working-class backgrounds.<sup>25</sup> In the classroom, he described, “young people of 62 nations sat side by side like brothers.” They did not just study but also helped with work on farms. They lived

<sup>20</sup> For example, see his articles on the workers’ movement in China, Japan, and Turkey, respectively, in *HCMTT*, 2nd ed., v. 1, 215–220, 224–226.

<sup>21</sup> Nguyen Ai Quoc, “Phu nu phuong Dong” [Women of the East], May 1924, in *HCMTT*, 2nd ed., v. 1, 267–268; “Dang Ku Klux Klan” [Ku Klux Klan Party], *Inprekorr* no. 74 (1924), in *HCMTT*, 2nd ed., v. 1, 336–341.

<sup>22</sup> For example, see Nguyen Ai Quoc, “Giao duc quoc dan” [National education], *Le Paria* no. 29 (September 1924), in *HCMTT*, 2nd ed., v. 1, 313–314.

<sup>23</sup> “Hanh hinh kieu lynso” [Lynching], *Inprekorr* no. 59 (1924), in *HCMTT*, 2nd ed., v. 1, 306–312.

<sup>24</sup> There is no formal record of his registration at the school although several sources suggest he attended some training there. See Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, 54–55.

<sup>25</sup> Nguyen Ai Quoc, “Cach mang Nga voi cac dan toc thuoc dia” [The Russian revolution and the colonized nations], published in 1925 in *Ban an che do thuc dan Phap* [Verdict on the French colonial regime] and reprinted in Ho Chi Minh, *Ket hop chat che long yeu nuoc voi tinh than quoc te vo san* [Unity of patriotism and proletarian internationalism] (Hanoi: Su That, 1976), 57–62.

comfortably as the school paid for their room, board, clothes, and even gave them some pocket money. They enjoyed a rich intellectual life with free access to libraries and cinema theaters. Although they were denied political freedoms in their own countries, they were invited to participate in school management and even to vote in local elections, just like Soviet citizens. Quoc passionately called on his “brothers in colonized countries” to compare “bourgeois democracy” with “proletarian democracy.”<sup>26</sup>

Yet it would be a mistake to think that life in the Soviet Union was always pleasant for Quoc. The Comintern archive in Moscow still keeps a letter he wrote to the Secretary of the Eastern Department of the Comintern after having lived for nine months in Moscow.<sup>27</sup> The letter asked for help in dealing with the housing department, which threatened to take him to court if he failed to pay an amount of 40 roubles and 35 kopecks he allegedly owed. Quoc explained that he was not negligent but had paid only 5 roubles per month for rent (instead of the full rent, perhaps as a gesture of protest?) because the house he lived in was too noisy with four or five renters and the bed was full of bedbugs that caused him to lose many nights of sleep.

Irritating pests, overcrowded apartments, and red tape, however, did not dampen Quoc’s admiration for the Soviet Union. As he reminisced some 20 years later:

Some thought Russia was hell. Others said Russia was a paradise. To [me], Russia was certainly not hell, but at the same time not yet a paradise. It was a transforming country with many admirable aspects, but still it had not eliminated all defects. Occasionally one could still see the wounds left by wars such as orphaned children, the shortage of housing and food, etc. But these wounds were healing. Everywhere people were working enthusiastically... [I] did not forget that this was a country that had just experienced four years of World War and one year of civil war . . . [I] did not forget comparing Russia where a revolution was advancing with Vietnam that had been a colony for decades.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>27</sup> “Gui dong chi Pe to rop, chu tich Ban Phuong dong” [To Comrade Petrov, Chair of the Eastern Department] (c. March 1924). Reprinted in *HCMTT*, 2nd ed., v. 1, 248.

<sup>28</sup> Tran Dan Tien (a pseudonym), *Nhung mau chuyen ve doi hoat dong cua Ho Chu tich* [Stories about the life and career of Chairman Ho] (Hanoi: Su That, 1976), 59; Olga Dror, “Establishing Ho Chi Minh’s Cult: Vietnamese Traditions and Their Transformations,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 75: 2 (2016), 433–466. According to Olga Dror’s meticulous research, the first versions of this book were published in 1949 in Paris (in Vietnamese with Tran Ngoc Danh named as author), and in Shanghai (in Chinese with Tran Dan Tien, a pseudonym, as author) in 1949. It was published for the first time in Vietnam in 1955 with Tran Dan Tien as author, and has since served as a central tool in creating the cult of Ho Chi Minh. The book was either written by Ho himself or by his subordinates

If we can believe him, Quoc was impressed neither by Soviet level of wealth nor by its social conditions. Rather, it was the enthusiasm of Soviet people and the promises of the revolution that enchanted him.

By the time Quoc arrived in southern China in late 1924 to work as a Comintern agent for Southeast Asia, his theoretical understanding had improved but remained limited. For the next three years, Quoc led *Hoi Viet Nam Cach Mang Thanh Nien* (Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League, hereafter Thanh Nien), a revolutionary group that he helped found. Working closely with leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Thanh Nien recruited its first members among exiled Vietnamese and organized the smuggling of youth from inside Vietnam to Guangzhou for revolutionary training.

As the trainer, Quoc edited the journal *Thanh Nien* and authored a pamphlet titled “The Revolutionary Path” [Duong Kach Menh]. The pamphlet was Quoc’s first and most elaborate theoretical analysis to date. It opened with Lenin’s famous dictum that “without a revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement.”<sup>29</sup> Quoc explained what “revolution” meant and called on Vietnamese to follow the model of the Russian revolution.<sup>30</sup> An analysis of how Quoc explained the concept of revolution in this pamphlet is key to understanding his emerging Leninist worldview.

Quoc employed Marxist-Leninist theory – as he understood it – to propose a taxonomy that included three kinds of revolutions – namely, “capitalist,” “national,” and “class-based” revolutions.<sup>31</sup> According to

based on what he told them. The tone in the quoted paragraph is consistent with his view expressed in other texts.

<sup>29</sup> Nguyen Ai Quoc, “Duong Kach Menh” [The Revolutionary Path], originally published in 1927 and reprinted in *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* [Collected Party documents], hereafter *VKDTT*, v. 1, 15.

<sup>30</sup> By mistranslating key quotes from the pamphlet and misinterpreting Quoc’s argument, Mark Bradley incorrectly argues that Quoc wanted Vietnamese to study the American revolution and that he had little interest in the Stalinist model. For example, the Vietnamese phrase “hoc My” that Quoc used is translated by Bradley as “study the American revolution,” whereas it should be translated as “imitate the Americans to launch a revolution.” Quoc’s statement “The moi khoi hy sinh nhieu lan, the dan chung moi duoc hanh phuc” is mistranslated by Bradley as “Only by struggling many times over can all the people have happiness.” The correct translation is: “Only [by a radical revolution unlike the one in America] would we not have to sacrifice again and again and would [our] people achieve happiness.” “Duong Kach Menh,” 26–27; Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam & America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam 1919–1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 34–35.

<sup>31</sup> An earlier taxonomy of revolutions found in *Thanh Nien* (July 26, 1925) distinguished political, social, and world revolutions, with political revolutions apparently similar to



Quoc, capitalist revolutions were caused by conflicts between capitalists and landlords; national revolutions were caused by conflicts between an oppressed nation and the oppressor nation; and class-based revolutions were caused by conflicts between capitalists and worker-peasants. Having juxtaposed capitalist, national, and class-based revolutions, Quoc further distinguished between national and world revolutions. “World revolution” was defined as the unity of peasants and workers of all nations and races in the world “to overthrow capitalist rule, to make all nations happy, [and] to create a harmonious world.”<sup>32</sup> National and world revolutions were different because all the social classes uniting against the national authorities made the former event, whereas the proletariat of all nations led the latter. Quoc went on to say,

But the two revolutions are interconnected. For example, the success of the Annamese national revolution will weaken French capitalists, making it easier for French peasants and workers to launch a class-based revolution. And [vice versa, if] the revolution of French peasants and workers succeeds, the Annamese nation will be liberated. Thus Annamese and French [revolutionaries] must maintain contact.<sup>33</sup>

Some articles written earlier by Quoc in the journal *Thanh Nien* mechanically considered making national revolution as the first mission of the Vietnamese communist movement and making world revolution as its second mission distinct from the first.<sup>34</sup> In “The Revolutionary Path,” hints emerged of a more dynamic and sophisticated view that fused together the national revolution with class-based revolution and with world revolution. The thinking was still fluid; at one point Quoc still tried to distinguish national from class-based from world revolution, but at other points world revolution was thought of as a complex process that involved many components both substantively (national and class issues) and geographically (Annamese and French).

This evolutionary thought process is significant because initially Quoc had been concerned only with the colonial relationship between Vietnam

national revolutions and social revolutions similar to class-based revolutions. See Huynh, *Vietnamese Communism* 87–88.

<sup>32</sup> Nguyen Ai Quoc, “Duong Kach Menh,” 22. The concept of a harmonious world [thien ha dai dong] is a Confucian one. The context of the entire article suggests that Nguyen Ai Quoc’s use of this concept here does not suggest his belief in Confucianism but rather his attempt to make the Marxist vision of classless society easier to be imagined for his fellow Vietnamese.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> See Huynh, *Vietnamese Communism*, 85–88, for a discussion in *Thanh Nien* on this topic.

and France, but now had moved much closer to a worldview in which that relationship was part of other, more fundamental relationships. The separation or compartmentalization of different kinds of revolutions in his mind was evidence of the incomplete or superficial acceptance of the Marxist-Leninist worldview, whereas the fusion of those revolutions marked a conceptual leap in consciousness toward complete mental submission to that worldview. In the 1940s, Quoc would still advocate for the primacy of national revolution relative to class-based revolution for Vietnam, but that argument was conceived only in *tactical* terms. Conceptually Quoc no longer compartmentalized them. As will be seen in the next section, younger and better-educated revolutionaries would take further steps to articulate that conceptual fusion more forcefully.

“THE VIETNAMESE REVOLUTION WAS A COMPONENT  
OF WORLD REVOLUTION”

Nguyen Ai Quoc arrived in southern China at an auspicious time. A series of events had deeply radicalized Vietnamese politics and readied it for the acceptance of communism. A few years earlier, the colonial government had released many prominent political prisoners such as Huynh Thuc Khang and Ngo Duc Ke who had led the 1908 antitax revolt in central Vietnam. These older leaders quickly revived their dormant anti-colonial network, and their return inspired many youths toward political activism.<sup>35</sup> Opportunities for such activism expanded with the rapid growth of the press in Saigon in the early 1920s and with the elections organized for the Chambers of People's Deputies [Vien Dan Bieu]. The reform carried out by the new Indochinese Governor-General Alexander Varenne (1925–1928), however limited, also contributed to a more open political context.<sup>36</sup> A leader of the French Socialist Party, Varenne sought to rein in the excesses of colonial rule in Indochina.

Just as the political environment was heating up, it was jolted by two particular events: one was the capture of Phan Boi Chau in China and his trial in Hanoi in 1925, and the other was Phan Chau Trinh's return to Vietnam from France and his subsequent death in 1926. These two events aroused great popular resentment and triggered many spontaneous

<sup>35</sup> Dao Duy Anh, *Nho nghi chieu hom* [Memoirs and thoughts] (Ho Chi Minh City: Tre Publishers, 1989), 8–26.

<sup>36</sup> Philippe Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon, 1916–1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization*, 308.

student protests against the colonial regime. Hundreds of students were expelled from school for their participation in the protests; many would soon join clandestine political groups.<sup>37</sup>

Thanks to such an auspicious environment Thanh Nien gained many followers inside Vietnam, either through the spread of propaganda into Vietnam or through direct training offered to youths smuggled out of Vietnam. But Thanh Nien was not the only source of radical ideas for Vietnamese youths. As Sun Yat-sen reorganized the Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang or GMD) and prepared to launch a military campaign to reunify China, his Three People's Principles (which were themselves influenced in part by communist ideas) were also popular in Vietnam. Books and newspapers imported from France and China or published in Saigon offered those Vietnamese with foreign language skills much more systematic discussions of Marx and Lenin than did Thanh Nien's materials.<sup>38</sup>

The final source of radicalization came from China and the Soviet Union. In April 1927, Chiang Kai-shek ordered the massacre of Chinese communists in Shanghai, ending the United Front between the GMD and the CCP. Chiang's "betrayal" contributed to the new, radical policy decided at the Sixth World Congress and the Tenth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Comintern in Moscow in 1928 and 1929, respectively. At these events, Comintern leaders issued calls for communists worldwide to strengthen the proletarian character of their parties and to engage in class struggle against the bourgeoisie.<sup>39</sup> Chiang's turn against Chinese communists also made it unsafe for Thanh Nien members in southern China. By mid-1928, Nguyen Ai Quoc had fled China while Thanh Nien withered in Guangzhou.

The conditions described earlier in Vietnam and abroad combined to shift the center of radicalism from southern China into Vietnam. By late 1928, there had emerged small revolutionary groups in all three regions of Vietnam. A major group was the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNP) that embraced Three People's Principles as its ideological foundation. Thanh Nien trainees created other groups who were eager to take the movement to a new radical height. This shift can be observed in the contrast between the Tan Viet group based mainly in central Vietnam and the Dong Duong group in northern Vietnam.

<sup>37</sup> Many were future leaders of the VCP, including Pham Van Dong, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Truong Chinh.

<sup>38</sup> See Dao Duy Anh, *Nho nghi chieu hom*, 27, 31–34.

<sup>39</sup> Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, 121–130; Huynh, *Vietnamese Communism*, 105–109.

Tan Viet Revolutionary Party (hereafter Tan Viet) originated from Phuc Viet Hoi (Party for Restoring Vietnam), which had been organized several years earlier by political prisoners released from Poulo Condore. Younger leaders of Phuc Viet received training from Thanh Nien but also were influenced by Sun Yat-sen's ideas.<sup>40</sup> According to Tan Viet's manifesto drafted in 1928, its mission was "to unite comrades inside and outside [Vietnam], domestically leading peasants, workers, and soldiers, and externally linking with other oppressed nations to overthrow imperialism and build a new equal and benevolent society."<sup>41</sup> Once achieving power, the party pledged to implement the dictatorship of the proletariat, equal human rights for all citizens, provision of welfare for children, the invalids, and the elderly, and the public ownership of land and other means of production. Significantly, the manifesto did not mention communism as a revolutionary goal. Newly admitted party members were required to swear their loyalty "under the sacred spirit of the Vietnamese land and the revered law of world revolution."<sup>42</sup> Clearly Tan Viet's program was communist in spirit but its language was not fully purged of nationalist concepts, as was the case with Thanh Nien.

The Dong Duong group based in northern Vietnam provided an interesting contrast with Tan Viet. Trained by Thanh Nien, Dong Duong men such as Ngo Gia Tu and Trinh Dinh Cuu quickly grew dissatisfied with Thanh Nien's leadership and political program.<sup>43</sup> At the First National Congress of Thanh Nien in Hong Kong in 1929, these men walked out of the meeting when the majority of those present refused their request to dissolve Thanh Nien to create a new communist party.<sup>44</sup> Upon their return from Hong Kong, Dong Duong leaders founded the Dong Duong Communist Party (hereafter Dong Duong).<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Dinh Tran Duong, *Tan Viet Cach Mang Dang trong cuoc van dong thanh lap Dang Cong San Viet Nam* [Tan Viet Revolutionary Party's role in the formation of the Vietnamese Communist Party] (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> "Dang Chuong" [Party Manifesto], *VKDTT*, v. 1, 143.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>43</sup> Quinn-Judge speculates that Dong Duong leaders were influenced by the southern branch of the Chinese Communist Party based in Saigon at the time. See Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, 132.

<sup>44</sup> See an account by Tran Cung and Trinh Dinh Cuu, "Mot vai net ve chi bo dau tien cua Dang va ve Dong Duong Cong San Dang" [On the first Party cell and the Indochinese Communist Party] in *Hoi Ky Cach Mang tuyen chon* [Selected memoirs about the revolution] (Hanoi: Hoi Nha Van, 1995), 55–64.

<sup>45</sup> Dong Duong means Indochina or Indochinese. Here I do not translate the word to avoid confusion with the name of the Vietnamese Communist Party during 1930–1945.

The manifesto of Dong Duong authored by Trinh Dinh Cuu suggested its leaders were more radical and theoretically more ambitious than their counterparts in Tan Viet.<sup>46</sup> The document began with a lengthy chapter on the theory of Marxism-Leninism, which it claimed “not to be a mysterious doctrine or the product of anyone’s imagination, but a *scientific* ideology based on facts.”<sup>47</sup> After analyzing class conflicts in capitalist societies, the authors of the manifesto argued that “the gap between capitalist and proletarian classes today is so wide that the struggle between them must be brutal: one class must win and survive whereas the other lose and die.”<sup>48</sup> Who would win? It was said, “the imperialist countries are in conflict and will soon fight each other in a war that will be many times more destructive than the recent one” (i.e., World War I). In opposition to imperialism was the “proletarian camp comprising millions of proletarian brothers in capitalist countries who are poised to seize power, hundreds of millions of colonized people who are clamoring for revolution, as well as millions of Soviet proletarian brothers – all are aligned on a front led by the [Soviet] Communist Party and the Comintern.” Given the existing balance of forces, the manifesto concluded, the days of capitalist societies were numbered.

In the same manifesto, Dong Duong leaders took Thanh Nien and Tan Viet to task on two counts. First, Thanh Nien and Tan Viet’s membership was “open to all Vietnamese.” Dong Duong leaders found such a nation- and race-based membership policy “uncommunist.” They believed that a “communist” membership policy should be based only on class. Second, recall that the motto of Thanh Nien was first to make a national revolution, then to make a world revolution. That was wrong, Dong Duong argued, because “national revolution was [necessarily] a component of world revolution.”<sup>49</sup> Making a national revolution required a national alliance of all classes without distinguishing capitalists from proletarians, and landlords from peasants. Not only incorrect, that motto was also “uncommunist.”

Dong Duong leaders also believed that the Indochinese revolution had to go through two phases, but they defined the phases differently, showing

<sup>46</sup> Tran Cung and Trinh Dinh Cuu, “Mot vai net ve chi bo dau tien cua Dang va ve Dong Duong Cong San Dang,” 60.

<sup>47</sup> “Tuyen ngon cua Dang Cong San Dong Duong” [Manifesto of the Dong Duong Communist Party], *VKD TT*, v. 1, 179. Italics in original. It does not appear that this manifesto was informed of the new Comintern policy decided at the Sixth World Congress. See Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, 132.

<sup>48</sup> “Tuyen ngon cua Dang Cong San Dong Duong,” *VKD TT*, v. 1, 185.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 208–209.

their greater familiarity with Leninist concepts. Because capitalism was not well developed and feudal forces remained strong in Indochina, those phases included a “bourgeois democratic revolution” led by proletarians and peasants to overthrow imperialism and feudalism, and a subsequent “social revolution” to eliminate capitalism and build communism.<sup>50</sup> This two-phase formula came from Lenin and fused national, class-based, and world revolutions in one single dynamic framework.<sup>51</sup> The thinking was sharper and the language of Dong Duong’s manifesto more lucid relative to that in Nguyen Ai Quoc’s “Revolutionary Path.” The commitment to communism was firm and explicit, unlike that of Tan Viet.

Although Dong Duong leaders were theoretically sophisticated, it would be a mistake to assume that they were dogmatic in their tactics. During the “bourgeois democratic” phase, they believed that the appropriate slogan should be limited to the redistribution of lands to peasants, but not yet public ownership of all lands.<sup>52</sup> This was apparently to maximize peasants’ interests in the revolution. Although Dong Duong leaders wanted Thanh Nien and Tan Viet to dissolve immediately to pave the way for a new communist party, they were willing to work with the Vietnamese Nationalist Party during the first phase of the revolution.<sup>53</sup> Despite their sharp criticism of Thanh Nien, Dong Duong leaders still held some respect for Nguyen Ai Quoc.<sup>54</sup>

After leaving China in mid-1927, Quoc spent about a year in the Soviet Union and Europe before traveling to Siam to organize a communist movement there.<sup>55</sup> While in Siam, he received the news from a Thanh Nien leader informing him of the disputes between Thanh Nien and Dong Duong.<sup>56</sup> Claiming to represent the Comintern, Quoc traveled

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>51</sup> The idea appeared to come from Lenin’s so-called “April Theses” of 1917, titled “The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution,” April 7, 1917. V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1952), v. 2, book 2, 13–17.

<sup>52</sup> “Nhiệm vụ can kíp của những người công sản Đông Duong” [Urgent tasks for Indochinese communists], *VKDTT*, v. 1, 268.

<sup>53</sup> “Tuyen ngôn của Đảng Công sản Đông duong,” *VKDTT*, v. 1, 230–231.

<sup>54</sup> “Trung ương Đảng Công sản Đông duong gửi cho những người Công sản An nam ở Tàu” [from the Central leadership of the Dong Duong Communist Party to Annamese communists in China], *VKDTT*, v. 1, 231. My interpretation is based on the fact that Nguyen Ai Quoc was not personally criticized in the document and that Dong Duong leaders proposed to discuss any disagreements they might have with him. See a different interpretation by Quinn-Judge in *Ho Chi Minh*, 150.

<sup>55</sup> Much of Quoc’s time was spent waiting for money and instructions from the Comintern for his return to Asia. Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, 116–120.

<sup>56</sup> Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, 150.

to Hong Kong in late 1929 and immediately convened a meeting to facilitate the unification of all Vietnamese communist groups based in China and Vietnam. At that meeting, which took place in early 1930, representatives of Dong Duong, Tan Viet, Annamese Communist Party (Thanh Nien branch in southern Vietnam), and Thanh Nien in southern China agreed to form the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP).

Although this “unification meeting” has been treated as a historical landmark of Vietnamese communism in official historiography,<sup>57</sup> it achieved little beyond an agreement among the groups to join a new organization, the VCP. The documents produced at this meeting were untypically brief: the minutes of the meeting, the Party’s program, the Party code, and the strategy statement were about 10 pages total, compared to Dong Duong’s “Manifesto,” which was forty-two pages. This brevity likely reflected the huge gap among the groups on many issues. The meeting also failed to elect new leadership, agreeing only on the process to nominate a Central Committee to be formed later.

A question that historians have not asked is why Quoc did not make himself the head of the VCP at this meeting. With his authority as the Comintern representative and with his ability to convene the meeting and force Dong Duong representatives to admit their mistakes (see later), he must have been able to assume the top post if he so wished. It is not clear why he did not do so, but Quoc was an official in the Comintern bureaucracy responsible for entire Southeast Asia and he most likely did not want to assume personal responsibility for the Vietnamese Party unless being appointed to the position by the Comintern.<sup>58</sup> Regardless of his motives, the point is that Quoc did not seek to take personal control of the VCP even though he was in a position to do so.<sup>59</sup> Without leadership, however, the VCP existed only on paper.

<sup>57</sup> This is the term commonly used by Vietnamese official history.

<sup>58</sup> This was, in fact, the reason given by Quoc when he declined the offer to be the Party’s general secretary in 1941 (see Chapter 3). According to Truong Chinh who made the offer, Quoc said he did not want the job because he worked for the Comintern, which might later send him to work elsewhere.

<sup>59</sup> Alternatively, Quoc may have wished to maintain his Comintern position that he would have to give up if assuming personal leadership of the new VCP. Given the bitter quarrel among various Vietnamese factions over strategy and their shared loyalty to Comintern authority, he may have felt that he would have greater influence on the future of Vietnamese communism as a Comintern official. Another possible explanation is that, as the top leader of the VCP he would have to return to Vietnam where a death sentence (issued *in absentia*) awaited him. The danger was real because Quoc had been away from Vietnam for nineteen years and did not have any experience organizing inside Vietnam when he left.



The VCP program tersely pledged to “make a bourgeois democratic revolution and land revolution to achieve communism,” without further elaboration.<sup>60</sup> This new formula was brief and crude but it fundamentally did not contradict the concept of the two-phase revolution Dong Duong had advocated earlier. According to the minutes of the meeting, Dong Duong was criticized for being too restrictive in its membership policy, for being organized “like a clique aloof from the masses,” and for causing the dissolution of Thanh Nien and Tan Viet against Comintern policy.<sup>61</sup> Significantly, those criticisms were based on Comintern policy and were mostly directed at Dong Duong’s organizational business, not at its ideological vision.<sup>62</sup>

In correcting Dong Duong’s errors, the VCP defined the main enemies of the revolution more narrowly to involve only the imperialists and the big landlords. This move indicated a flexible strategy but not a change in worldview, as the VCP’s strategy statement produced at the same meeting made clear.<sup>63</sup> In this document, the VCP vowed to make the best efforts to establish links with other classes, including the petit bourgeoisie, intellectuals, and middle peasants, to attract their support for the proletariat. The VCP would also try to “take advantage of” [loi dung] rich peasants, middle and small landlords, and Vietnamese capitalists who had not yet showed “counterrevolutionary tendencies.” But there were clear limits to any class coalitions despite the new flexibility:

While making coalitions with other classes, [we] must be careful not to compromise on any interests of workers and peasants; while advocating the independence of Annam, [we need to] simultaneously advocate and maintain links with other oppressed nations and with the world’s proletarian class, especially the French proletariat.<sup>64</sup>

In other words, the new VCP maintained doctrinal loyalty while being more flexible and pragmatic with respect to the strategy of class coalition. Cooperation with other classes beyond workers and poor peasants was purely a political expediency, not suggesting solidarity based on a shared

<sup>60</sup> “Chanh cuong van tat cua Dang” [Brief Program of the Party], *VKDTT*, v. 2, 2.

<sup>61</sup> “Bao cao tom tat Hoi nghi” [Brief Minutes of meeting], *VKDTT*, v. 2, 11.

<sup>62</sup> The memoir by Tran Cung and Trinh Dinh Cuu does not reveal how Cuu and Nguyen Duc Canh, the other Dong Duong representative at the meeting, reacted to such criticisms. Tran Cung and Trinh Dinh Cuu, “Mot vai net ve chi bo dau tien cua Dang va ve Dong Duong Cong San Dang,” 63–64.

<sup>63</sup> “Sach luoc van tat cua Dang” [Brief Statement on Strategy of the Party], *VKDTT*, v. 2, 4–5.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*



Vietnamese identity. The VCP Program did not deviate from the resolution of the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern of 1928, and Nguyen Ai Quoc was acting as an agent who faithfully carried out Comintern policy at this point, even without specific Comintern authorization and without knowing that Comintern leaders had moved further to the left in July 1929 with the Tenth Plenum of its executive committee.<sup>65</sup> With a very brief program and no leadership, the VCP appeared to have been devised as a temporary truce whose details were left to further negotiations among stakeholders.

The news of the disputes between Dong Duong and Thanh Nien likely reached Moscow at the same time it got to Quoc in Siam. In late 1929, while Quoc was on his way from Siam to Hong Kong, a meeting of Comintern officials in Moscow discussed and issued an order for rival Indochinese communist groups to form a communist party.<sup>66</sup> Quoc had no knowledge of this meeting. In the archived notes from the meeting, Moscow praised Thanh Nien for keeping up with the new Comintern policy but also criticized it for making many mistakes in strategy and organization.<sup>67</sup> The praise and criticism were directed at the policy made by Thanh Nien leaders in May 1929.<sup>68</sup> No specific criticisms were made of Nguyen Ai Quoc who had not been at the helm of Thanh Nien since mid-1928. This is important evidence that Quoc had not lost his status at the Comintern.

Two Vietnamese students attended the Comintern meeting in Moscow. They were Tran Phu and Ngo Duc Tri, two former Thanh Nien members trained by Quoc and sent to study in Moscow in 1927. After the meeting, Phu and Tri left Moscow for Indochina with instructions for unifying Vietnamese communist groups there. By the time they arrived in Hong Kong, the unification meeting that Quoc convened had occurred.<sup>69</sup> Yet Phu and Tri appeared not to have been authorized by the Comintern to replace Quoc. When they finally met in Hong Kong in March 1930, Quoc had enough authority to send Tran Phu to work in Hanoi and Ngo Duc

<sup>65</sup> Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, 157–158.

<sup>66</sup> “Ban dua ra thao luan tai phien hop cua Hoi dong Ban Bi thu Phuong Dong” [Draft for discussion at the meeting of the Eastern Bureau Secretariat], October 18, 1929. *VKDĐT*, v. 1, 593–612; “Ve viec thanh lap mot Dang Cong san o Dong duong” [On establishing a communist party in Indochina], October 27, 1930. *VKDĐT*, v. 1, 613–620.

<sup>67</sup> “Ban dua ra thao luan tai phien hop cua Hoi dong Ban Bi thu Phuong Dong.” *VKDĐT*, v. 1, 594–596.

<sup>68</sup> This referred to the First National Congress of Thanh Nien. See the Congress’s Manifesto, Minimum Program, and Resolutions in *VKDĐT*, v. 1, 90–133.

<sup>69</sup> See Quinn-Judge in *Ho Chi Minh*, 150–153.

Tri to travel to Saigon.<sup>70</sup> Then in March-April 1930, Quoc was authorized by the Shanghai-based Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern to preside over the formation of the Siamese Communist Party in Bangkok and the Malayan Communist Party conference in Singapore. In the conventional view, Phu is portrayed as posing a challenge to Quoc's leadership of Vietnamese communism. This would not make sense if Quoc only saw his role as a Comintern representative but not leader of the VCP. These events suggested that Phu and Tri accepted Quoc's authority as a Comintern representative, while Quoc recognized them as Comintern-mandated leaders of the VCP. In other words, no power rivalry existed between them, only a mutually accepted division of roles and duties.

Together, Quoc, Phu, and Tri convened a meeting that would later be called the Party's First Plenum in Hong Kong in October 1930. This meeting, which was also attended by a few representatives from Vietnam, took place against the backdrop of an extremely volatile situation in Vietnam. In February 1930, just after the unification meeting, the Yen Bai rebellion broke out in northern Vietnam, led by the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNP). The rebels attempted to seize control of several French garrisons in the Red River Delta, and they were briefly successful in the town of Yen Bai, before being brutally crushed. Thirteen VNP leaders were guillotined in June 1930 and thousands of their followers were imprisoned. By then, unrest had spread to Nghe An and Ha Tinh in central Vietnam – this time led in part by members of local Thanh Nien or Dong Duong. The movement there started with a strike by workers in the city of Vinh on May 1st and soon engulfed nearby rural areas and provinces.<sup>71</sup> Thousands of peasants marched, attacked government buildings, and in some cases executed local notables and French officials. In some districts and villages, peasants even formed "Soviet governments" that killed landlords and expropriated their lands. The colonial government responded with force, but it would take nearly a year for the movement to die out.

Even though the VCP did not yet have a central leadership and played no direct role in the Nghe-Tinh movement, the events appeared to confirm the new Comintern analysis of the world situation since 1928. Tran Phu's "Political Thesis" presented at the First Plenum in October 1930 fully adopted that analysis. The world was believed to have entered a new period in 1928 with an economic crisis in the capitalist system, looming threats of imperialist warfare, and brightening prospects of worker

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 162–163, 169.

<sup>71</sup> Huynh, *Vietnamese Communism*, 151–171.

movements worldwide.<sup>72</sup> To Phu, the massive unrest in Indochina during the previous eight months was a clear sign of how revolution there was “marching to the same vigorous tune” [*ram ro*] with world revolution.<sup>73</sup> Phu took delight in the fact that the worker and peasant movement in Vietnam had now gained its own momentum and was no longer motivated by nationalism as before.

Phu presented an updated and most elaborate exposition of the two-phase concept of revolution to date. Indochina’s backwardness would not permit the construction of socialism right away, so revolution there had to begin with the bourgeois democratic phase. The success of this phase would foster the growth and power of the proletariat, preparing Indochina to advance to the next phase of “proletarian revolution.” As Phu imagined, the proletarian revolution would be possible then because “[t]his age is the age of worldwide proletarian revolution and the age of socialist construction in the Soviet Union. Indochina will receive assistance from proletarian governments in other countries to develop socialism without the need to go through the capitalist stage first.”<sup>74</sup>

To Phu, the bourgeois democratic phase had two mutually dependent tasks of antifeudalism and anti-imperialism. One task could not be fulfilled without the other. On land policy, Phu’s program took a sharper class line than Nguyen Ai Quoc’s earlier program. The latter promised the redistribution of land taken from French owners to “poor peasants.”<sup>75</sup> Phu’s thesis proposed to take land not only from foreign landlords but also from indigenous landlords and from the church, to redistribute to “middle and poor peasants, with ownership rights retained by the government.”<sup>76</sup> The difference here was on the strategy of mobilization: Quoc had wanted to mobilize small indigenous landlords and indigenous capitalists, whereas Phu considered them enemies of the revolution even in the bourgeois democratic phase.<sup>77</sup> Phu also made clear for the first time that land must be publicly owned.

<sup>72</sup> “Luan cuong chanh tri cua Dang Cong san Dong duong” [Political Thesis of the Indochinese Communist Party], *VKD TT*, v. 2, 88–89.

<sup>73</sup> Phu did not mention the stock market crash in the United States in late 1929 and the economic crisis that followed.

<sup>74</sup> “Luan cuong chanh tri,” *VKD TT*, v. 2, 94.

<sup>75</sup> “Chanh cuong van tat cua Dang,” *VKD TT*, v. 2, 3.

<sup>76</sup> “Luan cuong chanh tri,” *VKD TT*, v. 2, 95. Also, “An nghi quyet cua Trung uong toan the dai hoi noi ve tinh hinh hien tai o Dong duong va nhiem vu can kip cua Dang” [Resolution of the Central Committee meeting on the current situation in Indochina and the urgent tasks of the Party], *VKD TT*, v. 2, 110.

<sup>77</sup> “Luan cuong chanh tri,” *VKD TT*, v. 2, 98.

The resolution of this Plenum announced the annulment of the VCP's Program, Strategy Statement, and Party Code drafted by the unification meeting convened by Nguyen Ai Quoc eight months earlier.<sup>78</sup> The Plenum also changed the Party's name from Vietnamese Communist Party to Indochinese Communist Party, and made Phu its general secretary. Significantly, although Phu's thesis proposed a new program more in line with the latest Comintern policy, it did not directly criticize the VCP program. Such criticisms were raised only in the resolution issued after the meeting. This resolution delved at length on the strategic and organizational mistakes made in that program. According to the resolution, those mistakes indicated that the VCP was "too preoccupied with the anti-imperialist task but neglected class interests."<sup>79</sup> A letter sent by the new Central Committee to Party members in December 1930 explained that the mistakes in the VCP program had occurred because

the comrade who convened the unification meeting was sent [to Hong Kong] with a broad assignment but did not receive any specific plans from the Comintern [for unification]. When he arrived and learned about the disputes ..., he acted on his own. Many mistakes were made and the policy did not follow the Comintern's plan. He has since admitted those mistakes and agreed with the Central Committee [of the Party] to correct them.<sup>80</sup>

The preceding quotation appeared less a criticism than an explanation aimed at confused members who were not present at the Plenum. Quoc was not named, and it did not seem that he was forced to correct his "mistakes." Tran Phu's rise to becoming general secretary also did not mean Quoc had lost power over Vietnamese communism or "authority to interpret Comintern policy for Vietnam" as Huynh Kim Khanh and Quinn-Judge argue.<sup>81</sup> It is a fact that Quoc did not try to make himself the head of the Party at the unification meeting; no power rivalry was involved, nor had Quoc lost his status at the Comintern. We do not know what he really thought about the new Comintern policy, but Quoc had always, including at the unification meeting, willingly followed Comintern guidance, and there is no reason to expect him not to have

<sup>78</sup> "An nghi quyét," *VKDTT*, v. 2, 112–113.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>80</sup> "Thu của Trung uong gui cho cac cap Dang bo" [Letter from the Central Committee to the Party's rank and file], *VKDTT*, v. 2, 238.

<sup>81</sup> Quinn-Judge makes her argument based on the simple fact that the program of the VCP was replaced by Tran Phu's "Political Thesis," which was "in tune with current Comintern policy." She provides no evidence that Quoc disagreed with the new Comintern policy. See Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, 180.

done so in this circumstance. As the preceding quotation implied, his comrades well understood the situation in which “mistakes” were made. Specifically, they were made because Quoc had been out of contact with Moscow, not because he did not obey the new Comintern policy that had not yet reached him.

Tran Phu’s “Political Thesis” would have a lasting impact on the thinking of Vietnamese communists, even though he would soon die while under arrest. In the Thesis, Lenin’s concept of revolution was fully developed and expressed in *Vietnamese* for the first time, with the “bourgeois democratic” phase structurally connected to the “proletarian” phase, and both phases intertwined organically with the worldwide proletarian movement in an “age of proletarian revolutions.” The revolutionary character of the age and the proletarian leadership of the revolution would allow Vietnamese communists to bypass capitalism and build a socialist country from scratch on the foundation of a still backward economy.

Yet it was not simply the thought process that offered Phu and his comrades a deep sense of the age in which they were living. For some of them their personal experience of being in the Soviet Union and participating in the Stalinist revolution contributed as much to that sense. From the accounts left behind, it is possible to understand what it was about the Soviet Union that impassioned them. Such personal experiences were crucial not only for their direct impacts on particular individuals but also for their informative and symbolic values to the communist movement as a whole.<sup>82</sup> To communists of Phu’s generation, the Soviet Union was seen as a symbol and model of the future. Most Vietnamese communists, including those who later led the communist regime such as Truong Chinh, Le Duan, Pham Van Dong, Hoang Quoc Viet, and Le Duc Tho, never set foot in the Soviet Union before rising to leadership positions. What they knew about Lenin’s homeland was through the accounts of those who had been there such as Tran Dinh Long whose story is described next.

#### A TASTE OF PARADISE

By the late 1920s, many Vietnamese youths had followed Nguyen Ai Quoc to study in the Soviet Union. One of these was Tran Dinh Long,

<sup>82</sup> See Hoang Quoc Viet, “Tinh than Pham Hong Thai” [The spirit of Pham Hong Thai] in *Hoi Ky Cach Mang tuyen chon* [Selected memoirs about the revolution] (Hanoi: Hoi Nha Van, 1995), 165.

whose time at the same university during 1928–1931 partially overlapped with that of Tran Phu and Ngo Duc Tri. Long was also enlisted for four months in the Soviet Red Army. After his return to Indochina he became a journalist. During 1936–1939 when Indochina enjoyed greater freedom of press, thanks to the government of the Popular Front in France, Long published serially a long memoir in two newspapers recounting his experience in the Soviet Union.<sup>83</sup> Apparently the first half of this memoir has been lost, but the remaining half of nearly 200 pages is sufficient to offer an example of the particular ways the Soviet Union might have been alluring to Vietnamese youth at the time.<sup>84</sup> Although it is possible that Tran Dinh Long exaggerated his feelings for the Soviet Union in his memoir, in fact numerous Soviet citizens at the time shared his enthusiasm.<sup>85</sup>

Unlike Nguyen Ai Quoc, Tran Dinh Long was in the Soviet Union at a high tide of revolution: 1928–1933 were the first and formative years of the Stalin era. These years roughly coincided with the first Five-Year Plan (1929–1933), which involved an all-out drive for industrialization and rural collectivization.<sup>86</sup> In the cultural realm, a cultural revolution sponsored by Stalin took on a life of its own, becoming a mass movement directed against the old intelligentsia as class enemies. As Sheila Fitzpatrick has described it, this revolution had many facets. “It was a worker-promotion movement linked to a political campaign to discredit the ‘Right Opposition’ within the Party. It was an iconoclastic youth movement directed against ‘bureaucratic’ authority. It was a process by which militant Communist groups in the professions established

<sup>83</sup> The colonial Vietnamese-language press sometimes published positive news and stories about the Soviet Union, but these accounts were brief. See, for example, C. P., “Nghe chieu bong tai nuoc Nga” [Russian cinema], *Ngo Bao*, February 15, 1933; Chuyet Phu, “Van de huan luyen quan su cua To Nga” [On military training in Russia], *Ngo Bao*, March 25, 1933; L. V. Hoe, “Tho chu nghia duy vat la ngu dai u?” [Is it stupid to believe in materialism?], *Cong Luan*, March 28, 1936; No author, “Nga So Viet lap dao nu binh” [Soviet Russia formed a female army], *Cong Luan*, January 06, 1937.

<sup>84</sup> Le Thanh Hien, ed. *Tuyen Tap Tran Dinh Long* [Tran Dinh Long's selected works] (Hanoi: Van Hoc, 2000). The memoir was published during 1938–1939 under the title “Ba nam o nuoc Nga Xo Viet” [My three years in the Soviet Union]. Tran Dinh Long would be arrested in the early 1940s and became an official in the Viet Minh government in late 1945. He was allegedly abducted and killed in late 1945 by agents of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995); Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>86</sup> M. Levin, “Society, State, and Ideology during the First Five-Year Plan” in Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed. *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 41–77.

local dictatorships and attempted to revolutionize their disciplines.”<sup>87</sup> Although Long mentioned none of these events in the remaining part of his memoir, one can sense a far more radical political environment in the background of his account compared to earlier ones.

Long’s topics ranged from life in the Soviet Red Army; gender and sexual relationships; political and social institutions including the courts, prisons, youth organizations, child care, and the “hygiene police”; cultural activities such as arts, sports, dance, and cinema; and social and cultural “vices” such as prostitution, drugs, drinking, and religion. Long’s often-defensive tone indicated his effort to counter negative views of the Soviet Union that emerged from reports of Stalin’s show trials published in the colonial press at the same time.<sup>88</sup> Yet his lively images and frank discussions of personal feelings displayed a genuine sense of excitement and earnest belief in the Soviet revolution.

Two central threads ran throughout his account. The first thread was the contrast between the “proletarian” society in the Soviet Union on the one hand, and the “capitalist,” “imperialist,” and “feudal” societies on the other. The Soviet Red Army, Tran Dinh Long told us from his own experience, was very different from “capitalist armies.” Although it had an iron discipline that made it a “powerful army,” Red Army soldiers followed discipline not because they were forced to, as in “capitalist armies,” but because they were conscious of the fact that “discipline was necessary to protect their interests as well as their class interests in the national and international arenas.”<sup>89</sup> Long believed that this class consciousness helped maintain true equality between officers and soldiers. Although soldiers must obey officers during office hours, in regular “town-hall” meetings [*hoi dong*] of the entire unit, soldiers were free to criticize officers who gave wrong orders or who displayed inappropriate attitudes to them. If the whole unit expressed disapproval of an officer, he could be reprimanded and transferred. Long admitted that most soldiers came from peasant backgrounds and were still deferent [*rut re e so*] to officers, and some officers still displayed upper-class [*truong gia*] mentality in their behavior and treated soldiers with arrogance [*venh vao*]. Yet

<sup>87</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Cultural Revolution as Class War” in Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed. *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931*, 11.

<sup>88</sup> For an excellent analysis of Vietnamese press coverage of the show trials, see Alex Holcombe, “Stalin, the Moscow Show Trials, and Contesting Visions of Vietnamese Communism in the late 1930s: A Reappraisal,” paper presented at the Workshop on the Vietnamese Revolution, University of California, Berkeley, November 11–12, 2011.

<sup>89</sup> Le Thanh Hien, ed. *Tuyen Tap Tran Dinh Long*, 35–38.



he believed that the Red Army was the “most democratic” and “most equal” army of the world.

Another sharp contrast Tran Dinh Long found between the Red Army and its capitalist counterparts was the projustice character of the former. “Every Red Army soldier I asked,” he recalled, “told me directly that he was enlisted to defend the Soviet Union and serve the world’s proletariat when needed.”<sup>90</sup> Unlike capitalist armies created to suppress labor strikes and people’s protests and to conquer colonies, the Red Army was involved in building a classless society in the Soviet Union and to assist the world’s proletariat in their struggle with the capitalist class. Rephrasing a statement by Soviet leader Voroshilov, Long clarified that the Red Army was ready to help the world’s proletariat to overthrow capitalism, but this did not mean that the Red Army would seek to invade other countries. It only made itself available to the world’s proletariat when they needed it. It was involved in Outer Mongolia, Spain, and China to help those weak nations resist foreign invaders. “The Red Army [was] the only army in the world that [fought] sincerely for justice” [*cong ly*].<sup>91</sup>

The contrast between the socialist system and its predecessors was described most lively in gender relations in the Soviet Union. Tran Dinh Long foreshadowed his discussion with a criticism of the caricatures of communists in Vietnam at the time. In the negative version of these caricatures, communists shared everything, including their wives. In the positive version, communists were depicted as monks who were so devoted to their ideology that they never knew romance [*tin h ai*].<sup>92</sup> Long contended that communists were only human beings with normal feelings. Although their feelings for justice were stronger than in ordinary people, they were capable of being moved by natural beauty and by “romantic feelings that are honest and free.” In capitalist societies, “love” resulted from family oppression and desire for power, social status, and money. In the Soviet Union, love was genuine without any intention of taking advantage of each other. This was possible because the Soviet woman was financially independent, whereas her counterpart in capitalist societies was not. One was truly liberated and could enjoy true love, whereas the other was only a slave of her husband and had to cling to him.

Spending vacations in the Crimea and “Ughennana” (Ukraine?), Tran Dinh Long described physical contacts between men and women in the

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 45–46.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 56.



Soviet Union as open and “natural” [*tu nhien*] – even “intimate” [*suong sa*], but at the same time, as maintaining clear boundaries between love and friendship.<sup>93</sup> His two female art teachers who were young college students were not shy about touching and hugging him while playing with him. In the vacation house for workers in the Crimea, he made friends with hundreds of Russian girls. One asked him once to sit on her lap; another lifted him up on her arms to demonstrate her strength; still another went out with him at 3:00 A.M. on an empty beach. Long confessed he was at first tempted by these girls but then quickly discovered that such physical intimacy meant neither love nor lust. Recalling gender relations in Vietnam, he chastised Confucius for teaching that women must keep a physical distance from men. Soviet gender relations indicated that restrictions on physical intimacy only increased people’s curiosity about sex and their desire for it. Suppressed curiosity and desire in turn would lead to illicit relationships. Long credited the Russian revolution for “having enlightened Russian women and placed them equal to men in all respects.” He eloquently declared, “Russian women have demolished the wall between men and women – the wall built by the self-serving morality of feudalists and capitalists that split society into two halves and that blocked the evolutionary path [*con duong tien hoa*] of humankind.”<sup>94</sup>

As Tran Dinh Long went from one topic to the next, the sharp contrast between capitalism and socialism appeared again and again. Soviet family laws allowed easy marriages and divorces based simply on the will of couples, which differed from “capitalist laws” that often prevented loving couples from marrying each other and abused women from getting a divorce.<sup>95</sup> Soviet courts held trials (especially for counterrevolutionaries) in courthouses infrequently compared to courts in capitalist countries. These events were instead held in much larger public venues such as theaters so that ordinary people could attend and yell at the accused to express their anger. Soviet courts often came down to factories, offices, schools, and collective farms to hold trials on site, unlike “capitalist courts” that were aloof [*quan dang, be ve*] from the people.<sup>96</sup> Soviet sports did not cultivate professional players who were in effect commodities for sale in capitalist countries.<sup>97</sup> Sports in the Soviet Union

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 58–61.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 66–67.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 73–78.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 125.

were to improve people's health so that they could fight to end the exploitation of men by men. Soviet arts similarly were oriented to serving the whole society, especially the working people, whereas capitalist arts were mainly created for money and served only a wealthy minority. Under declining economies and decadent political systems, capitalist arts necessarily took the forms of "pornographic literature [*khieu dam, phong dang*], obscene dances [*uon eo, tho tuc*], and movies full of naked women, lust, and crimes."<sup>98</sup>

As an example of how the Soviet system fostered the development of arts in service of the masses, Tran Dinh Long discussed Soviet policy to protect and promote the cultures of ethnic minorities.<sup>99</sup> Before the revolution, he noted that 90 percent of minorities in northeastern Russia were illiterate. These peoples used to have their own literatures but their cultures had been gradually destroyed after being colonized by Tsarist Russia for two hundred years. Since the rise of "proletarian rule," the Soviet government had tried hard to collect and preserve the folk songs and folk dances of all ethnic groups to protect their best traditions.<sup>100</sup> It also did its best to improve education and develop ethnic literatures based on the language of each group, "bringing bright literary light to shine on the most remote areas" where Mongolians, Turks, and Eskimos lived.<sup>101</sup> The "proletarian approach to literary development" specifically aimed to nurture "literary concepts and spirits" for each ethnic group, based on their native tongue and aided by Russian if necessary. The promotion of native tongues to be foundations for ethnic literatures and arts allowed these to "develop freely according to their natural characteristics."<sup>102</sup> Thanks to efforts by the Soviet government, "all ethnic groups in the USSR today possess their own print media to develop their own talents and to gather the refined knowledge [*tri thuc cao sieu*] of all the masses that has long been trampled and wasted under capitalism."

Long's account of Soviet "affirmative-action" policies to protect ethnic cultures clearly implied where he placed his loyalties. Although such policies were unprecedented in world history,<sup>103</sup> Long did not treat them in a separate section but subsumed them under Soviet literary policies.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 134–137 and 143–144.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>103</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative-Action Empire: Nations and Nationalisms in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

The central tenet of these policies, to Long, was to serve the masses as opposed to the elites. The dominant theme throughout his description remained the contrast between communism and capitalism, not the distinction between Russians and the ethnic minorities – even though the topic was essentially about ethnic policies. Ethnic minorities were viewed more as part of “the masses” than as those with distinctive identities. Nowhere in his memoir (at least the available part) did he mention issues such as national or ethnic independence or autonomy. What excited him was the liberation of *the masses* from *capitalist* and *feudal* exploitation rather than the liberation of oppressed *nations* from imperial Russia.

The second thread in Tran Dinh Long’s description of the Soviet Union was the intrusive yet “humane” methods of social reform that were transforming Soviet society. Similar to Nguyen Ai Quoc, Long was unapologetic about the social problems he found in the Soviet Union. He frankly admitted that in the Soviet Union there were still thieves, robbers, murderers, and of course, counterrevolutionaries.<sup>104</sup> Among the majority of “ideologically conscious” [*giac ngo*] Soviet people, there were still many alcohol addicts, bandits who used to be white soldiers, and kulaks who extorted money. These bad people represented the legacies of feudal and capitalist systems over “two-three thousand years.” On prostitution, for example, he believed that this social vice began when the exploitation of men by men emerged in human society. Kings and nobilities had time to burn and forced women to serve them. “Under capitalist society which was like a putrid, bleeding, and filthy corpse, prostitution grew just like abscesses on the skin.”<sup>105</sup>

Blaming social vices (including religion) on classed societies, Long was fascinated with the “humane” methods used by the Soviet government for reform. On drinking, he noted that the government did not force people to quit, but educated them so that they themselves decided to do so. “This method [maintained] respect, protected individual freedom, and avoided resistance from those who [were] still addicted ... The method of the proletarian government [was] not to stop producing alcohols but to have no one get drunk.”<sup>106</sup> This was accomplished by gradually reducing the alcohol level in the drinks produced and by launching antialcohol educational campaigns using both science and humor. Body organs taken from (dead?) drunkards were on display together with murder cases involving

<sup>104</sup> Le Thanh Hien, ed. *Tuyen Tap Tran Dinh Long*, 68–69.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 78–79.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 88–90.

alcohol. Humorous plays were staged and humorous pamphlets published to make fun of drunkenness.<sup>107</sup>

A similar approach was used to weaken the influence of religions. Quoting Karl Marx, Long argued that religions were even worse than opium. Although the latter destroyed individuals, religions destroyed entire communities. Religions exploited people; stole [*rut tia*] their lands, money, and houses; caused their minds to become feeble, slow, muddled [*ngan ngo, ngay dai*], and melancholic [*u am*].<sup>108</sup> Religions made people lose their sense of autonomy and willingness to struggle in this life. The Soviet government could have closed all churches, imprisoned all priests, and banned people from following religions in one decree, but it did not. The problem was only the priests who were a kind of parasites. Their followers (except capitalists) were, after all, “brothers of the proletariat who were exploited both materially and mentally and were duped by the priests.” The humane method was not to ban, but to educate people with scientific evidence about the origins of humankind and with historical evidence about the close relationship between priests and the Tsar and about past crimes committed by the clergy. Besides plays and pamphlets, two special tools were antireligion museums and antireligion associations established in all the big cities in the Soviet Union.

Tran Dinh Long believed that the method had been effective, as evidenced in the empty and quiet churches he saw that had to use candles because they ran out of money to pay for electricity. Another piece of evidence was the priests he met on Moscow streets who were begging or selling newspapers to make a living. Long was glad that most urban churches had closed down. Rural churches still survived in greater numbers because priests there were supported by the kulaks. He predicted that, after collectivization when the kulaks were liquidated [*tieu diet*], the countryside would catch up with the cities. The days of religion in the Soviet Union were numbered.<sup>109</sup>

Campaigns for social reform sometimes took coercive forms, as in the case of “hygiene teams.” These special teams wore all white like nurses and were all smiling while swooping down on selected neighborhoods.<sup>110</sup> Unlike the tax collecting cops in his native town in Vietnam who generated fear and hatred, Long noted that the hygiene police did not carry

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 90–92.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 93–95.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 95–103.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 83–85.

weapons or beat up people. They were teams of volunteers organized by the unions of doctors and nurses who went house to house in certain neighborhoods on holidays and weekends to check on household hygiene. Tidy and clean families were praised publicly, whereas those untidy and dirty were ordered [*bat*] to help with cleaning up the house, furniture, clothes, and children. Men who wore long hair and beards were made fun of [*che*] and forced to sit down [*keo co*, literally, had their necks held down] for a haircut. Long argued that printing a thousand books was not equal to one hands-on demonstration of hygienic lifestyle provided by the teams. This method was easy to understand, even for the less intelligent [*toi da*].<sup>111</sup> The hygiene teams not only eliminated backwardness [*toi tam*]<sup>112</sup> and uncleanness but also taught people how to live cleanly and hygienically. They served as the link between workers and peasants, bringing light and cleanness to the latter.

The hygiene police reflected the raging Cultural Revolution in the Soviet Union during the First Five-Year Plan.<sup>113</sup> Tran Dinh Long appeared thoroughly mesmerized by this revolution. He marveled not only at the imagined or real contrasts between socialist and capitalist systems but also at the coercive methods and the far-reaching goals of social and cultural reform in the Soviet Union. Like Nguyen Ai Quoc before him, Long was enthusiastic about the Soviet Union not because he found it a perfect country or system. Rather, it was the transformative vision, the radical methods, and the profound promises embodied in the Stalinist revolution that captivated him.

## CONCLUSION

Communism was completely foreign to Vietnam. When Vietnamese revolutionaries came upon Marx and Lenin's teachings, it took them some time, if they were interested, to reconcile radical communist ideas with their existing worldview. In the first transition from Phan Boi Chau to Nguyen Ai Quoc, interest in the Russian revolution slowly developed into limited knowledge of the Marxist-Leninist worldview. It took time and effort for new adherents to that worldview among Vietnamese

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 86–87. In original, “toi da” in the sense of “at most” was perhaps a typo.

<sup>112</sup> Literally means “darkness.”

<sup>113</sup> During the First Five-Year Plan, Soviet cities grew by 44 percent while their salaried labor force increased by about 12 million. Moscow and Leningrad each received 3.5 million peasant migrants during this period. See Lewin, “Society, State, and Ideology during the First Five-Year Plan,” 53–54.

revolutionaries to understand the concept of world revolution in its connection with the Vietnamese revolution. This process of radicalization was filled with confusion for some and with excitement for others. It created tension within the movement because some activists were quicker than others to absorb new ideas and concepts. The rate of absorption naturally depended on personal aptitude, linguistic ability, level of formal education, and international exposure. It varied among those who participated in socialist circles in Paris, those who studied in Moscow, those who had not been abroad but who were sufficiently educated to read and understand Marxist and Leninist texts in French, and those who had little formal education and who received their ideological training second-hand from other Vietnamese communists. Frictions among them were further amplified by changing Comintern policy and by communication problems.

Through the documents produced by Thanh Nien, a gradual process could be observed by which the worldview of Vietnamese revolutionaries became internationalized but still was mostly compartmentalized. Nguyen Ai Quoc's thinking indicated that he was simply an internationalist in evolution. From "Revolutionary Path" to his program for the VCP, he sought to translate internationalist concepts into the Vietnamese language and closely followed the most recent Comintern line of thinking as it was communicated to him.

In the second transition, from Tan Viet to Dong Duong to the Indochinese Communist Party that involved many of Quoc's younger and better-educated comrades, the Marxist-Leninist worldview acquired a dynamic and organic quality thanks to the fusion of aspects specific to Vietnam and those of global politics. The upshot was the clarity and firmness of vision and strategy, with vision fully separated from and deeply influencing strategy. To be sure, both vision and strategy would be continually adjusted to reflect changing reality, but we will see in the next chapters how the core aspects would remain consistent for the next half century as men of Tran Phu's generation stood at the helm of the revolution.

Existing scholarship points to the change in class coalition policy from Nguyen Ai Quoc to Tran Phu as evidence of an "internationalist" and "dogmatic" faction trained by Moscow defeating the "nationalist" and "pragmatic" factions, which were primarily concerned about national independence. Yet the available records suggest that they were all loyal to Comintern leadership and policy. The conflict among various groups and personalities in the movement during 1928–1930 was

primarily about leadership, organization, and strategy, not about revolutionary belief. That belief did not divide these factions; it united them. To them, Marxism-Leninism was not an abstract dogma but a dynamic and successful scientific theory. The evidence was right there in the Soviet Union, where they found a compelling vision of radical change despite the imperfections of Soviet society. Stalinist coercive methods won their admiration, and they showed little sympathy and toleration for the traditional culture and society where they came from.

In this period, ideology served Vietnamese revolutionaries in three ways. First, it redefined their mission, which was not only the liberation of Vietnam from French rule but also the creation of a new revolutionary society and contributions to world revolution. Ideology offered them a vision and blueprint for change, in this case the Soviet model, which would guide their revolution through ebbs and flows. Second, ideology provided the glue for like-minded young men and women such as Phu and Long to create an organization with a mission, the Indochinese Communist Party. Finally, ideology linked Vietnamese revolutionaries to a transnational network of states (the Soviet Union) and movements (French and Chinese communism) that provided funds, training, and sanctuaries from French repression.

Ideology would continue to serve the Vietnamese revolution in the next decade. Next, Chapter 2 will discuss how Tran Phu's vision of the Vietnamese revolution persisted through the 1930s despite two complete turnovers of leadership. To the extent that it was effective, colonial suppression destroyed only the messengers but not the message.