



Universiteit
Leiden

The Netherlands

The Formulation of the National Discourse in Vietnam, 1940-1945

Nguyễn Thế Anh,

Citation

Nguyễn Thế Anh,. (2004). The Formulation of the National Discourse in Vietnam, 1940-1945. *Leidschrift : Gevallen Steen*, 19(September), 13-38. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/72918>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/72918>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The Formulation of the National Discourse in Vietnam, 1940-1945*

Nguyễn Thế Anh

One of the literati having most actively participated in the struggle for his country's emancipation, Huỳnh Thúc Kháng could not help complaining in the 1930s about the lot of Vietnam, in his words 'a nation forced for a long time to forget itself',¹ as it appeared to him that no scope was given for moderate nationalism to take root or build mass strength. He was far then from imagining that, after 1945, he was to become the vice-president of a nation freed almost overnight from the yoke of colonialism.

Indeed, the war years and the period of Japanese occupation between 1940 and 1945 had fundamentally changed Vietnam's political environment. During this period, mass nationalist organisations could take root; among the revolutionary movements, the Việt Minh was able to seize power and establish some form of governmental legitimacy. Therefore it would seem meaningful to endeavour to observe how, behind the historical actors' deeds and words throughout those decisive years, the conception of the Vietnamese nation was formulated, and in particular how the Việt Minh could have succeeded in appropriating the national idea, at the expense of other nationalist groups.²

* Originally published in the *Journal of international and area studies* 9-1 (2002) 57-75 and presented as a paper at the Colloquium *Decolonisations, loyalties and nations. Perspectives on the wars of independence in Vietnam – Indonesia – France – The Netherlands*, Amsterdam, November 30 – December 1, 2001.

¹ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer (Aix-en-Provence), *Indochine NF*, 54/632.

² For the succession of events of these years, see beside David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: the quest for power* (Berkeley 1995), Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese experience of the French and the Americans. Nationalism and communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington & Indianapolis 2001) 47-118; Ellen J. Hammer, *The struggle for Indochina 1940-1955* (Stanford 1968); Huỳnh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese communism, 1925-1945* (Ithaca 1982); Paul Isoart ed., *L'Indochine française 1940-1945* (Paris 1982); Masaya Shiraiishi, 'Vietnam under the Japanese presence and the August Revolution', *1945 in South-East Asia*, Part 2 (London 1985) 1-31; Ralph B. Smith, 'The Japanese period in Indochina and the Coup of 9 March 1945', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 9-2 (1978) 268-301; Jaques Valette, *Indochine 1940-1945. Français contre Japonais* (Paris 1993); Vu Ngu Chiêu, 'The other side of the 1945 Vietnamese Revolution. The Empire of Việt-Nam (March-August 1945)', *Journal of Asian Studies* 45-2 (1986) 293-328; Alexander B. Woodside, *Community and revolution in modern Vietnam* (Boston 1976).

The affirmation of the Vietnamese national revival

In August 1940, Japan's Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yōsuke declared Indochina to be a part of the Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (*Tōa Kyōeiken*). In the eyes of Vietnamese patriots and intelligentsia, Matsuoka appeared as a promoter of the emancipation of East Asia. This led to a vision of a Vietnam independent from French rule within the framework of the Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere under Japan's tutelage. Many Vietnamese might have believed in Japan's motto 'Asia for the Asians' and the feasibility of an equal and peaceful confederation. But the expedient policy of 'maintaining tranquillity' in Indochina adopted by Japan by leaving the French regime intact until almost the very end did not fail to induce many a patriotic Vietnamese to ask why Japan professed to liberate Asia on the one hand, yet on the other hand retained the colonial government. Anyway, a complicated situation laden with ambiguities was created. The Japanese had promised to free the Asian nations from Western domination but at the same time they needed the French bureaucracy and police to insure the management of the economy and to maintain order. Admiral Decoux, appointed by the Vichy regime to be Indochina's governor-general, did his best to preserve as much power as he could. Forced by circumstances to open more widely the Indochinese Civil Services to native officials, he tried to win over the Indochinese sovereigns and their elites by enhancing their prestige. At the same time, he launched a sports and youth movement with the intent of developing Marshal Pétain's cult in Indochina and increase the people's loyalty to France, and he advocated in Indochina the Vichy regime's slogan 'National Revolution' and the virtues of 'Work, Family, and Fatherland'. Drawing a distinction between the beneficent political force of patriotism and the subversive political force of nationalism, he endeavoured to enlist the support of the Indochinese, with the hope of thwarting Japanese propaganda. The cultural movement that resulted from his policy, however, gathered such a dynamic that it was no longer possible for the French to stop it, or to control it.

Vietnamese society had indeed gone through significant changes. The main social trend was the erosion of French supremacy and the loss of French prestige. The French colonial authorities' inability to keep the Japanese out of their colony destroyed the myth of French invincibility which had persuaded most Vietnamese to acquiesce superficially in the face of French rule. A new generation of Vietnamese grew up within a context characterized by the decline of the long-held superiority of the white man,

while native pride was rediscovered and patriotism encouraged. Paradoxically, the call by the Vichy regime for a French ‘national revival’ based upon patriotism, the family and work, and opposed to individualism, had anti-colonial effects, as Vietnamese intellectuals began to study their own society and its past for the secrets of a Vichy-like ‘national revival’ and the key to mass action they hoped it might contain. Different groups were created to prepare the cultural ground for a future of national independence. Such reviews as *Thanh Nghị* (Pure Opinion) or *Tri Tân* (Understand Modernity) for example devoted themselves from May-June 1941 to researching the synthesis between Vietnamese national culture and western cultures, in order to modernize the former and propagate it by the means of a ‘silent revolution’.³ Radical thinkers associated with the Hàn Thuyên publishing house reinterpreted Vietnamese historical figures, in particular the Quang Trung emperor whom they saw as a representative of the peasant class struggling against feudalism. Writers such as Ngô Tất Tố began to describe the miseries of the peasants (*Việc làng*, Affairs of the Village). All of this contributed to a cultural effervescence without which the Revolution that was going to break out in August 1945 would have been nothing more than an ordinary military seizure of power.⁴

Disrupting the long French rule of almost eighty years, the Japanese occupation helped revitalize various anti-French movements in Vietnam. In 1939, Cường Để, to whom Japan had given shelter for nearly four decades, had already been encouraged to form the Việt Nam Phục Quốc Đồng Minh Hội (League for the National Restoration of Vietnam), better known as the Phục Quốc League.⁵ Inside Vietnam, the Japanese also encouraged all political groups, including the Đại Việt in north Vietnam, the Catholic bloc

³ A vigorous nationalism was the common denominator of the intellectuals contributing to these reviews, as they were clearly conscious of participating in the collective fate of the Vietnamese nation (see Pierre Brocheux, ‘La revue Thanh Nghị et les questions littéraires (1941-1945)’, *Revue française d’Histoire d’Outre-Mer*, 280 (1988) 347-355.

⁴ Nguyễn Tường Bách, the younger brother of the activist writer Nguyễn Tường Tam (penname Nhất Linh), then the editor of the weekly *Ngày Nay* (Today), in particular left vivid descriptions of the tumultuous atmosphere of the time (see Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt Nam. Những ngày lịch sử* (Vietnam. The historical days; Montreal 1981).

⁵ Several members of this League had been encouraged by the Japanese to form an armed group of about 2,000 men, the Việt Nam Kiến Quốc Quân (Army for the National Reconstruction of Vietnam), attached to the General Headquarters of the Japanese South China Army in Canton. In September 1940, this small force accompanied the Japanese 5th Division to attack and occupy Lạng-sơn, adjacent to the Sino-Vietnamese border.

led by Ngô Đình Diệm and his brothers in central Vietnam, and the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo religious sects in Cochinchina, to join Cường Để's organization. Leftwing Vietnamese, like Tạ Thu Thâu, who had serious doubts about the vision of an independent Vietnam within the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere, were by no means averse to discuss with some Japanese, such as the socialist writer Komatsu Kiyoshi, the possibility of forming 'an anti-French national united front'.⁶ Komatsu enjoyed also a special friendship and trust with Phạm Ngọc Thạch, one of the leading members of the Communist-led resistance in Cochinchina.⁷ All those groups, including a portion of the remnants of the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng (Vietnamese Nationalist Party),⁸ and individuals that were supposed to be pro-Japanese were, however, isolated from each other because of their factionalism and regionalism. The Japanese apparently felt the necessity to put them together under the same banner; without their initiative and assistance, it might have been impossible for those scattered political groups to be unified. In September 1943, Trần Văn Ân, founder of the Phục Quốc branch at Saigon, rallied various groups in the south, including the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo religious sects, and expanded his and Cường Để's organisation to be a wider alliance, incorporating various nationalist groups. In the north, representatives of various groups got together and set up a unified organisation called the Đại Việt Quốc Gia Liên Minh Hội (National League of the Great Viet) at the end of 1943 or at the beginning of 1944.⁹

But in the final analysis, it was to the Vietnamese Communists that the Japanese occupation, along with the preservation of the French colonial regime, had lent support in their rise to power by giving them their justification. The Vietnamese Communists were actually the ones who had consciously and effectively converted the craving for independence of the

⁶ Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 137, note 265.

⁷ Kiyoshi Komatsu, *Vetonamu no chi* (The blood of Vietnam; Tokyo 1954) 19. Phạm Ngọc Thạch was even proposed by the Governor Minoda and the Consul Ida to take the responsibility for organizing youth groups in Cochinchina, as related by Trần Văn Giàu (Alain Ruscio, 'Tran Van Giàu et la Révolution d'août 1945 au Nam Bo', *Approches Asie* 10 (1989-1990) 182-201, there 188-189). This kind of contacts could have contributed to the willingness with which the Japanese authorities in Saigon, headquarters of the Japanese Southern Army, agreed to hand over power and arms peacefully to native authorities, following Japan's surrender in August 1945.

⁸ Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ, *Đại cương về các đảng phái chính trị Việt Nam* (Generalities on the Vietnamese political parties; Montreal 1989).

⁹ Shiraiishi, 'Vietnam under the Japanese presence', 5.

Vietnamese population into a formidable force, and they now had an opportunity to blend their esoteric dogmas with the more easily understood nationalist cause of resistance to both the French and the Japanese. The fatal distraction of French colonialism gave them a chance to acquire a base area on the Sino-Vietnamese border, from where they concentrated on building up a revolutionary nucleus, and establishing contacts across the border with Chinese nationalist leaders, American and Free French liaison officers, and other anti-Japanese Vietnamese nationalists.

The adoption of communism, as one author wrote, 'lent the Vietnamese drive for national liberation a determination and a solidity in the teeth of massive military opposition which are unique in modern history'.¹⁰ It has been generally assumed that, until the introduction of communism, nationalism was equated squarely with anti-colonialism. Fighting French colonial rule in order to regain national independence, without letting questions of ideology or new political institutions obstruct the path of decolonisation, such was the basis of all prior anti-colonial movements. But, following the introduction of communism, nationalism became equated with 'revolution'.¹¹ The anti-colonialist rebel became the nationalist revolutionary. Not only did he want independence, he also advocated *cách mệnh* (revolution). A powerful concept in the Vietnamese political vocabulary, *cách mệnh* was complementary to the concept *thiên mệnh* (heavenly mandate) or the legitimacy to rule over others as conferred by a mandate from Heaven. In this sense to go into revolution meant to take away that mandate. In the usage of the Vietnamese Communists, however, *cách mệnh* assumed the connotation of the Western concept 'revolution' and meant more than just the removal of the right to rule. It also meant a total, radical transformation of the Vietnamese social, economic and political structure, involving both the destruction of the French colonial rule and the collaborative Vietnamese monarchy and the building of a new Vietnamese society.

In its early days, the Communist movement did not consider nationalism as capable by itself of saving Vietnam from bigger imperial enemies with modern weapons, partly because what Vietnamese mass

¹⁰ John Dunn, *Modern revolution: an introduction to the analysis of a political phenomenon* (Cambridge 1972) 145.

¹¹ The communist movement is thought to be the only one to know how to mobilize the vital forces of the nation into the service of the movement of national liberation by linking the social problems to the national question (see Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese communism*).

patriotism could be mobilized was largely anti-modern. Thus internationalism also became the antidote to the continuing entanglement of traditional patriotism with an energy limiting ‘feudalism’. The intention of erasing the old village culture was shown by the Communist stress upon literacy campaigns, and by the quickness with which the revolutionaries tried to celebrate the pantheon of their new post-feudal internationalism in the countryside. In 1931, during the unsuccessful ‘soviets’ uprising in north central Vietnam, Communist organisers compelled Vietnamese peasants to hold ‘anniversary weeks’ for Lenin, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.¹² The ideas Hồ Chí Minh set forth previously in his *Đường Kách Mệnh* – dividing revolution into a first stage of ‘national revolution’ (*dân tộc kách mệnh*), which would bring an end to foreign domination with the collaboration of several classes, and a second stage of world revolution (*thế giới kách mệnh*), during which peasants and workers throughout the world would unite as one family to destroy the capitalist system and bring about universal unity¹³ – were then rejected, including the need to create a broad alliance with progressive elements throughout the country and the establishment of an independent Vietnam. Slogans referring to the issue of national independence were to be supplemented by other appeals reflecting the issue of class struggle and world revolution. One particular goal to be attained would be to overthrow old rural social structures and eliminate private landlordism, in order to end the perceived antagonism between the old feudal state and the masses.

The experience of the 1930-31 revolts had nevertheless shown the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) the great dangers of alienating the wealthy peasantry and landlords by prematurely emphasizing class issues, and of alienating the peasantry generally by taking a dogmatic attitude towards traditional culture. In 1941 the national liberation revolution (*cách mạng giải phóng dân tộc*) again received priority. The Eight Plenum of the ICP set up the League for the Independence of Vietnam (*Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội*), or Việt Minh, consisting of members from different social groups. The Việt Minh front, therefore, was initially conceived as a purely national liberation movement, not as a ‘New Democracy’ front fighting simultaneously for national liberation and against feudalism. The Party thus

¹² Alexander B. Woodside, ‘History, structure and revolution in Vietnam’, *International Political Science Review* 10-2 (1989) 143-157, there 152-153.

¹³ William J. Duiker, ‘What is to be done? Hồ Chí Minh’s *Đường Kách Mệnh*’ in: K.W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore ed., *Essays into Vietnamese pasts* (Ithaca: 1995) 207-220, there 212.

shed its pre-1941 image of class struggle and proletarian internationalism, in favour of class cooperation, timeless patriotism, and sublimation within a national united front. In terms of relations with the villages, one of the results was the acceptance of the ambiguous coexistence of the modern revolution with traditional village patriotism, mobilized through the multiplication of 'national salvation' (*cứu quốc*) associations.¹⁴ Those were mass organizations, such as the National Salvation Cultural Association (*Hội Văn Hóa Cứu Quốc*) established in 1943 with ICP cadres' assistance to recruit urban intellectuals to the Việt Minh cause and find ways of insinuating anti-French, anti-Japanese propaganda into legal newspapers and journals, the Peasants' National Salvation Association, the Students' National Salvation Association, the Women's National Salvation Association, the Teenagers' National Salvation Association, and so on. Together, these associations acted as a shield to the Party; individually, each organization translated esoteric Communist slogans into the language of its group's members. In theory, then, the Việt Minh front was the coalition of these National Salvation Associations, through which it could impulse a broad national movement, uniting large numbers of Vietnamese regardless of their politics, and reaching down into the masses. The theme of unity and national salvation (even the Việt Minh's main newspaper bore the title *Cứu Quốc*) enabled thus the Việt Minh to involve local populations in its cause and the socio-economic reforms it proposed. Talk of a 'genuine world republic' faded; the doctrine of a people's war, requiring the total involvement of the Vietnamese population, invoked a revolution based on nationalism and the national popular culture. The ideology of nationalism was then given an important role in Vietnam's political legitimisation. To strengthen its claim to legitimacy, the Communist movement leadership capitalized on the compatibility between modern and traditional Vietnamese

¹⁴ Faced with the problem of seizing power in practice, the Việt Minh found it very difficult to devise an effective strategy of revolutionary transformation in the villages. There was indeed a fundamental contradiction between the revolutionary practice of mobilizing poor peasants to establish Party control in each village and the ideological principle that rural power lay in the hands of a landlord class. In many villages in the North and northern Central provinces, village power, however, was in the hands of people whose actual property did not justify their classification as landlords, so the question remained to know which local 'ruling class' was really to be denounced and disgraced. (See Ralph Smith, 'Vietnam from the 1890s to the 1990s: Continuity and change in the longer perspective', *South East Asia Research* 4-2 (1996) 197-224, there 215.

values, seeking to fuse the legitimacy of the state socialist system with the legitimacy of Vietnam as a nation.

Yet, for the majority of the rural population, the language of modern nationalism and socialism required translation. Nationalism was therefore linked with traditional Vietnamese patriotic spirit (*tinh thần yêu nước*); to energize the resistance to French colonialism, the memory of resistance against the Chinese invasion and the Vietnamese fighting spirit (*tinh thần đấu tranh*) was evoked, and the Trưng sisters, Triệu Ẩu, Trần Hưng Đạo, Lê Lợi, Quang Trung, et cetera, all of whom fought Chinese invasion, were called ‘ *anh hùng dân tộc* ’, or national heroes. In discussing socialism, complex Marxist-Leninist terms were avoided; socialism was defined as a system in which the Vietnamese would ‘have enough to eat and enough clothes to wear in cold weather’, a system in which there was no human exploitation.

In addition to relying on the rural population to achieve its goals, the leadership also tried to enter into an alliance with both non-communist and communist intellectuals trained during the French colonial period.¹⁵ Because of the Party's anti-nationalist and anti-bourgeois revolutionary line of the 1930s, the Communists had failed for more than a decade to attract students, intellectuals and other urban petit-bourgeois elements into their ranks. To remedy this situation, the ICP resolved during its Plenum of February 1943 to launch a ‘cultural front’ (*mặt trận văn hóa*) to enlist the support of these urban elements.¹⁶ A document entitled *Đề cương văn hóa Việt Nam* (Theses on Vietnamese culture) was the direct consequence of this resolution.¹⁷ Published at a time when both the French colonial government and the Japanese occupying forces were outdoing each other in competing for popular Vietnamese support, it was a deliberate attempt to compete with the French and the Japanese for the collaboration of Vietnamese intellectuals. Containing less than 1,500 words, *Đề cương văn hóa* was a brief document, prepared in the form of an outline, with ideas left incompletely developed. Divided into four main parts, this document summarized Vietnamese literary and cultural development during the early

¹⁵ This alliance would crumble when the Party leadership imported Maoist practices of ideological rectification (*chỉnh huấn*).

¹⁶ Trần Huy Liệu, *Lịch sử tám mươi năm chống Pháp* (History of the eighty-year resistance against France) vol. II, book 2 (Hanoi 1961) 105.

¹⁷ Trần Huy Liệu et al., *Tài liệu tham khảo lịch sử cách mạng cận đại Việt Nam* (Reference materials on the history of the contemporary Vietnamese revolution) vol. X (Hanoi 1956-1957) 90-95.

decades of the twentieth century; called attention to the danger of nefarious ‘fascist’ influences of the French and the Japanese; discussed the importance of a cultural revolution and the relationship between a political and a cultural revolution; and elaborated the urgent tasks of Vietnamese writers and artists. It emphasized the importance of Party leadership in this cultural revolution. A new Vietnamese culture, ‘national in character and democratic in content’, was thus postulated, and the campaign for this new culture was to be based on three principles: 1) national (opposing all enslaving and colonialist influences, allowing Vietnamese culture to develop independently); 2) mass (opposing every tendency that would go against the masses or away from the masses); 3) scientific (opposing anything that would render cultural activities anti-scientific and counter-progressive). To this end, a socialist culture was to be created, in which all cultural activity was to be measured according to the degree that it stimulated simultaneously a sense of patriotism, mass consciousness, and scientific objectivity. This meant the adoption of a strict position that allowed no concept of literary and artistic ideological neutrality: the cultural medium (the printed word, music, painting, film, et cetera) had no value in itself, except in its utility as a conveyor of an ideological message. Neutrality would be considered immoral, if not as an act of treason, when the country was caught in a struggle for survival as an independent nation.¹⁸

For Communist activists, the *Đề cương văn hóa* became an important guideline in their propaganda activities. Several non-Communist writers –

¹⁸The themes of *Đề cương văn hóa Việt Nam* were to be elaborated further in July 1948 in an official report of the Central Committee of the ICP (then non-existent on paper) read by Trường Chinh, the Party's Secretary-General, at the Second National Congress. The report, entitled *Chủ nghĩa Mác và văn hóa Việt Nam* – Marxism and Vietnamese culture (see Trường Chinh, *Chủ nghĩa Mác và văn hóa Việt Nam* (second edition, Hanoi 1974) – approached frontally the many theoretical issues concerning Vietnamese literature and the arts: the relationship between material life and spiritual life, between economic and political reality and cultural development; possibility of artistic neutrality; relationship between art and propaganda, et cetera. It repeated all the themes that had been outlined in the earlier document: the need for a cultural revolution to complement the political revolution; the denial of literary and artistic neutrality in a society fighting for political survival; the necessity of socialist realism as the ‘correct’ approach to literary and artistic expression; and finally, the importance of the three guiding principles of the Vietnamese revolutionary culture: national, mass, and scientific. As a statement of objective of a Communist party-in-power, this document was to become an authoritative guideline for Vietnamese literary and artistic endeavour for many years to come, channeling Vietnamese writers and artists into one direction, that of serving the prevalent revolutionary line of the Communist party.

such as Nam Cao, Ngô Tất Tố, Tô Hoài, and Nguyễn Hồng – later claimed to be much influenced by this document.¹⁹ With it, the goal of creating a ‘new culture’ was proclaimed by the Việt Minh. Nevertheless, care was taken in the ensuing years to avoid that the educational efforts in the countryside to generate a new culture and new attitudes should not be couched in terms of class struggle, and that peasant and minority superstitions and cultural traditions should be treated with respect. Educational cadres were encouraged to go out of their way to understand and respect local customs in order to ‘create an atmosphere of sympathy’; only on this basis should they then put forward new ideas and encourage the people ‘to abate their superstitions’. The point that the revolutionary struggle at this stage was purely patriotic and had no class-based ingredient, was going to be given even greater force in November 1945, when the Indochina Communist Party was officially ‘dissolved’. Moreover, being conscious of the need to compensate for ‘breadth’ of patriotic appeal by ‘depth’ of political education, it was understood that if the ideological coherence of the revolution was to be preserved, the leadership pursued what might be called a policy of ‘anti-feudalism by stealth’, involving among other things a campaign for literacy, the introduction of universal elementary education, and recognition of the equality of nationalities and the equality of sexes.²⁰ Clearly, the new culture was not simply designed by the Communists to ‘democratise’ the Vietnamese countryside and wipe out feudal attitudes; it was also designed to generate at the grass-roots level the beginnings of an irresistible momentum towards a socialist mentality and a socialist society. As Trường Chinh would put it, Vietnamese society was undergoing a ‘metamorphosis’ from the age-old Confucian values of the traditional society to the beginning of the adoption of a newly imported ideology.

19 Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, *Văn học Việt Nam dưới chế độ cộng sản* (Stanton CA 1991) 89-107.

20 Clive J. Christie, *Ideology and Revolution in Southeast Asia, 1900-1980* (Richmond 1995) 95. In August 1946, Trường Chinh offered an analysis of the theoretical basis of the Vietnamese revolution in an essay entitled *The August Revolution* (Hanoi 1962), particularly emphasizing the need to initiate a genuine cultural revolution in the minds of the Vietnamese peasantry: it was necessary that the mobilization of the peasantry should be deep-rooted and based, not simply on patriotic fervour, but on the notion that their lives would be entirely changed for the better, in order to nurture the ‘subjective’ factor of the revolutionary will of the people as a whole.

The blurred image of the new state of Vietnam

By the turn of 1945, the Japanese judged that a coup de force against the French in Indochina would be indispensable, and on 26 February 1945 a final plan for the coup was agreed upon, which projected to purge the French and give 'immediate independence' to the three Indochinese nations. After the coup had been actually carried out on 9 March 1945, Lt. General Tsuchihashi Yūitsu, the newly appointed commander in chief of the occupation forces in Indochina, suggested to Bảo Đại to declare the abolition of the 1884 protectorate treaty.²¹

Two days after the Japanese coup, on 11 March 1945, a royal ordinance was promulgated, acknowledging Japan's 'liberation' of Vietnam and noting proudly that there was now an independent Vietnamese government after eighty years of French protectorate:

In view of the world situation and of the situation of Asia in particular, the government of Vietnam proclaims publicly that as of today, the protectorate treaty with France is abolished and that the country takes back its rights to independence.

Vietnam will endeavour with its own means to develop so as to merit the status of an independent state and will follow the directives of the common Manifesto of Greater East Asia to bring the help of its resources to common prosperity.

Therefore the government of Vietnam has confidence in Japan's loyalty and is determined to collaborate with this country to reach the aforesaid objective. (...)

Huế, the 27th day of the 1st month of the 20th Bảo Đại year.²²

The declaration was followed on 17 March by Bảo Đại's first edict as an 'independent' Emperor, which established the principle *dân vi quý*, meaning 'the most precious thing is the people', as the basis for his reign from that point on. The expression was borrowed from Mencius: 'the people are precious, the country is ranked second, and the ruler is of little value.' The

²¹ It was widely touted then that Cường Để would make a triumphant return to Vietnam to replace Bảo Đại on the throne. But Tsuchihashi stated that his principle was not to interfere in Vietnam's domestic affairs, and that Bảo Đại's fate should not be decided by Japan, but by a formal institution such as Vietnam's national assembly.

²² S.M. Bao Dai, *Le dragon d'Annam* (Paris 1980) 104.

ordinance stated that Bảo Đại would take control of the government and, with the help of men of talent and virtue, work to rebuild the country.²³ This was clearly a historic moment and historic opportunity. However, Bảo Đại admitted in his memoirs that the situation was far from favourable, as his bureaucracy, weakened over the years by French control, simply did not have the capacity to run the country: 'For many, the idea of independence is linked to the disappearance of all regulation. Taxes are no longer collected, protests spread. Authority deteriorates. (...) Yet the government does not have at its disposal any force to assure order. Devoid of officers, the police services and the militia are incapable of intervening. Only the Japanese forces would be in a position to restore order, but I refuse to ask them to do so.'²⁴

At any rate, the significance of the circumstances did not escape Bảo Đại. 'We have seen the realization of the dream which patriots have held for so long,' he exclaimed, as he vowed that his own wish was 'to cultivate a national and patriotic spirit and guide the youth in taking responsibility for opening up the country, raising the people's standard of living, and increasing production.'²⁵ Regretting that he had been unable to have direct contacts with 'the nation' as he had wished, he challenged the Vietnamese to 'unite into one national bloc' in order to work toward the 'total independence' which they would have to earn. In an address read on 8 May 1945, he promised a constitution whereby the 'co-operation between the ruler and the people' would mark the transition from absolute monarchy to a form of government where the people's rights are clearly recognized.²⁶

Bảo Đại also appealed to the Allies to acknowledge the independence of Viet Nam. As the Gaullist Government had made its intention to restore the French colonial system in Indochina clear through its declaration of 24 March 1945,²⁷ only a fortnight after the Japanese coup, he sent a special

²³ Bruce M. Lockhart, *The end of the Vietnamese monarchy* (New Haven 1993) 137. Bảo Đại's edict raised hopes for a wider popular participation in government in order to 'set limits' on royal power and preserve the people's rights without having to depend on the benevolence of a particular ruler (*Ibidem* 145).

²⁴ Bao Dai, *Le dragon d'Annam*, 113.

²⁵ Lockhart, *The end of the Vietnamese monarchy*, 142.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 144.

²⁷ 'The Indochinese Federation will comprise, together with France and the other sections of the community, a French Union whose foreign interests will be represented by France. Indochina will have a federal government of its own, presided over by a governor-general who will be chosen from either the natives or the French nationals resident in Indochina.'

message to General de Gaulle, a message vibrant with patriotic emotion and declaring without ambiguity his nation's will for self-determination:

I am addressing the people of France, the country of my youth. I am addressing also her leader and liberator, and I wish to speak as a friend rather than as a chief of state.

You have suffered too much during four deadly year for you not to understand that the Vietnamese people, who possess twenty centuries of history and a often glorious past, no longer want to, no longer can undergo any foreign rule or administration.

You would understand still better if you could see what is happening here, if you could feel this desire for independence which is in everyone's heart and which no human force can any longer restrain. Even if you come to re-establish a French administration here, it will no longer be obeyed: each village will be a nest of resistance; each former collaborator an enemy, and your officials and colonists will themselves ask to leave this atmosphere which they will be unable to breathe.

I beg you to understand that the only way to safeguard French interests and France's spiritual influence in Indochina is to recognize frankly the independence of Vietnam, and to give up any idea of re-establishing French sovereignty or a French administration under any form whatsoever.

We could so easily reach an agreement and become friends, if you would cease to claim to become our masters again.²⁸

It remains that, while reclaiming Vietnam's rights of independence, Bảo Đại's proclamation said that Vietnam now considered itself to be an 'element' in Japan's Greater East Asian system. His declaration of independence, on the other hand, directly concerned only north and central Vietnam. Although it inspired hopes in Cochinchina, it had for the time being no formal effect on the political situation in that region. Reminding the Vietnamese that Japan's definition of 'independence' was a severely limited one, Governor Minoda would state on 29 March 1945 that no one should misunderstand the fact that Cochinchina was under Japanese

(See Isoart, *L'Indochine française 1940-1945*, 46). From the start, the French government's declaration was totally outdated and contained all the germs of the future disagreements between the French and the different Vietnamese parties. The unity of Vietnam was not acknowledged, and the terms 'nation' or 'state' appeared nowhere.

²⁸ Bao Dai, *Le dragon d'Annam*, 114-115.

authority. Thus, the Japanese failed to recognize the critical divergence between their own notion of independence (*dokuritsui*) and the independence that the vast majority of the Vietnamese population were looking for: the concept of an independent Vietnam that was free from French colonial rule but functioned within Japan's Greater East Asia was essentially incompatible with the ideals of most Vietnamese, for whom independence should not only be from France, but also from any form of foreign rule.

Trần Trọng Kim, a respected figure who had been in exile since the beginning of 1944, was offered the premiership, and his cabinet was formed on 17 April. The Trần Trọng Kim government's first policy statement was to call on Vietnamese of all social classes to unite and develop their patriotic spirit. It promised to free imprisoned 'patriots', to do everything possible so that 'politicians still in exile' could return home, and vowed to avoid abuses and corruption, to strengthen the country's independence, and to ignore personal or partisan interests.²⁹ However, the government of Trần Trọng Kim was, in a sense, living on borrowed time from the moment of its inception, since much of its political authority and all of its military security were tied to the Japanese – there was no Ministry of Defence in the Cabinet, and the government general, now taken over by the Japanese, continued to take decisions concerning Vietnam. Moreover, the regime was confronted with a cataclysmic famine in the north, caused by a combination of bad weather, French and Japanese requisitions of peasants' rice and the disruption of transportation between various parts of the country caused by Allied bombing of Indochina.³⁰ The worsening of the famine to crisis proportions coincided with the Japanese granting of independence to Vietnam in March, so that the problem of hunger in the north was an ongoing concern during the early weeks of the existence of the Trần Trọng Kim government. Despite serious attempts made to deal with the famine, bringing at least partial relief, 500,000 to 600,000 people died by June 1945 in the Red River Delta alone.

Having broken as much as possible with the administration established by the French, the new government lacked most of the resources and the

²⁹ Lockhart, *The end of the Vietnamese monarchy*, 148.

³⁰ Nguyễn Thế Anh, 'Japanese food policies and the 1945 Great Famine in Indochina' in: Paul H. Kratoska ed., *Food supplies and the Japanese occupation in South-East Asia* (Houndmills 1998) 208-226 and Motoo Furuta, 'A survey of village conditions during the 1945 Famine in Vietnam' in: Paul H. Kratoska ed., *Food supplies and the Japanese occupation in South-East Asia* (Houndmills 1998) 227-237.

qualified manpower necessary to build up a comparable system of its own. While the regime was able to implement some measures aimed at strengthening its independence from the colonial legacy, these changes were rather more psychological than structural. For example, the name 'Vietnam' was used officially to designate the entire country (implying the desire of territorial unification), and in French, which was still widely used, 'Vietnamien' came to replace the somewhat loathed term 'Annamite'. Huế was restored to its pre-colonial name of Thuận Hóa. Trần Trọng Kim himself selected a national flag and national anthem which, although probably more influenced by Confucian tradition than many young nationalists would have preferred, were at least symbolic of Vietnam as a unit.

This is not to say that the regime did not accomplish anything beyond the purely symbolic. Initial steps toward fiscal, educational, and judicial reforms were taken, while at the same time, outlets that had not existed under colonial rule were provided for nationalist sentiment. There was renewed attention to heroic figures from Vietnamese history, and new freedom of the press allowed the expression of anti-French feelings of many kinds. Mass political participation was now heartily encouraged – including street demonstrations, meetings and marches propagating a spirit of cultural and political independence. On a more concrete level, the mobilization of youth begun by the Decoux regime was continued, but the focus of loyalty was now 'Vietnam' rather than 'French Indochina'. Through the Thanh Niên (Youth) movement created under the initiative of the Minister of Youth, Phan Anh, and his assistant, Tạ Quang Bửu, youth groups were formed not only in urban centres but also in rural areas. In Cochinchina, the Japanese also permitted the formation of the Thanh Niên Tiền Phong (Youth Vanguard) led by Phạm Ngọc Thạch. The Thanh Niên programme thus mobilized tens of thousands of youngsters who later rallied to the Việt Minh flag (in the name of national independence and unity rather than Marxism-Leninism).

Trần Trọng Kim got down also to a Vietnamisation process ranging from the adoption of Vietnamese romanised script as the official language in government offices and in classrooms to the change of street, city and regional names (such words as Annam or Trung Kỳ, Tonkin or Bắc Kỳ, Cochinchina or Nam Kỳ were gradually replaced by the new terms Trung Bộ, Bắc Bộ, Nam Bộ), the free formation of nationalist parties to a Vietnamisation of the French colonial administration through the

replacement of French officials by Vietnamese bureaucrats. This Vietnamisation process was however complicated by the political issues of independence and territorial unity. Not prepared to grant Vietnam immediate and complete independence, Japan did not even recognize Vietnam diplomatically. Yet, Trần Trọng Kim enjoyed considerable autonomy in North and Central Vietnam, as long as he did not obstruct Japan's strategic goals. His main preoccupation was to try to win concessions from the Japanese that would enable his government to present a more convincing face to the public. Already in June nationalist groups were publicly criticizing the government for failing to reintegrate Cochinchina with the rest of Vietnam, for not obtaining administrative control of the cities of Hanoi, Haiphong and Đà-nẵng (Tourane), and for allowing the Japanese to retain the different services of the former *Gouvernement général de l'Indochine* (Sûreté, Post Office, Finance, Railways, Public Works, Education, Justice). In July, Trần Trọng Kim was able to work out a timetable for the transfer of all the above powers except control of Cochinchina with General Tsuchihashi, the commander in chief of the Japanese occupation forces in Indochina. Then, in the first days of August, Tsuchihashi agreed to the appointment of a Vietnamese viceroy for Cochinchina, and Bảo Đại officially designated Nguyễn Văn Sâm to that position on 14 August.³¹

But the country, on the verge of collapse and faced with rising anarchy,³² urgently needed charismatic leadership, federative political conceptions, as well as administrative experience, things that Trần Trọng Kim and his government did not seem to possess. Considered up to then to be a king who reigned but did not govern, Bảo Đại could not possibly attract mass support. Although Trần Trọng Kim had great moral influence among the intellectuals, he was far from being a political leader suitable for such a volatile situation. Among his associates, there were several talented men, but they were more technicians than politicians, having not acquired much experience in mobilizing politically mass movements. They could not fully understand the extent of the revolutionary forces already at work,

³¹ By the time Nguyễn Văn Sâm arrived in Saigon a week later, groups associated with the Việt Minh were largely in control, and he formally turned power over to them the next day.

³² The French-created administrative structure had remained nearly intact, but a state of confusion persisted after the Japanese coup. Some officials left their posts to take refuge in bigger cities and, under the prevailing conditions, it would take months to bring the system back to normal. Time, however, was not on Trần Trọng Kim's side.

whereas there was an alternative government being formed in the mountains that did understand revolution and indeed was doing everything possible to give the revolutionary wheel a firm push.

Neither did Trần Trọng Kim's government have the means to bring about effective national unity. It is true that, in order to give it support, the Japanese sponsored the unification of various Đại Việt formations in North Vietnam and created the Tân Việt Nam Đảng (New Vietnam Party) in Central Vietnam. But not all pro-Japanese groups stood behind Trần Trọng Kim. The most hostile were the Catholic 'dissidents' in Huế, led by Ngô Đình Diệm and his brothers; rumour had it that Cường Để and Ngô Đình Diệm were to take over power when Japan granted Vietnam its true independence.

Faced with mounting difficulties, as well as with the perspective of Japan losing the war and the disturbing information of the Việt Minh's successes especially in the countryside, the Trần Trọng Kim government even thought of resigning. At the same time, Bảo Đại accepted the cabinet members' request to invite the Việt Minh, which obtained allied support, to form a new government. Thus, before the capitulation of Japan, the decision of transferring authority to the revolutionary forces had already been reached. By their reluctance to encourage and concede Vietnamese independence, the Japanese had therefore helped to discredit the pro-Japanese nationalist groups that they would have preferred to leave in command in Vietnam. On the other hand, Japanese forces still in control of Indochina after Japan's surrender might have crushed the Việt Minh forces, had Bảo Đại and Trần Trọng Kim requested them to do so. Bảo Đại rejected nevertheless such an extreme measure, and agreed to transfer his power to the Việt Minh because he imagined that, with American support secured by Hồ Chí Minh, independence would be guaranteed. In the end, even a Vietnamese government led by Communists who had been generally anti-Japanese seemed to the Japanese preferable to returning the country to the French. This benevolent neutrality observed by the Japanese explains the ease with which the Việt Minh could come to power.

The national discourse after the August Revolution

In a situation of political vacuum created by the removal of the French colonial administration, the weakness of the Vietnamese substitute

government, the absence of a mass nationalist organization ready to fill the empty political space (in some areas of the south, however, local organizations such as the religious sects Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo formed what amounted to local warlord governments), and the concentration of Japanese minds on an increasingly desperate military situation, the Việt Minh seized the opportunity to spread out networks of 'liberation committees' from their northern base. The Japanese did not bother to send their troops into the northern area and the Việt Minh took over the region, expanding their 'liberated zone' beyond Cao Bằng to include seven provinces. They issued a proclamation calling on the people to rise up against the Japanese 'and make of Vietnam a strong country, free and independent.' Denouncing Bảo Đại's proclamation of independence as 'bogus independence' (*độc lập bánh vẽ*), they warned: 'In overthrowing the French yoke, the Japanese plan to occupy our country and turn it into a Japanese colony where they will reserve to themselves the monopoly of plundering our people, abusing our women, slaying our patriots. They are not here to liberate our people. They are here to seize our rice stocks, our cotton, our oil; they will arrest all our young men and turn them into Japanese cannon-fodder.'³³ The famine in the north provided the Việt Minh with the opportunity of eliminating the anti-communist village leaders, and building a mass movement of political and social salvation in the countryside. 'National independence' and 'seize paddy stocks to save the people from starvation' became the slogans around which the people were mobilized. Underground cadres infiltrated nearly all 'patriotic' organs and associations. Besides, the status and credibility of the Việt Minh movement was greatly enhanced by the fact that its Communist leaders had, since 1941, maintained a firm anti-French (the colonial enemy) and anti-Japanese (the fascist enemy) stance, and, as a result, had established military links with the Allies.

Events were moving rapidly towards the climax of the August Revolution. Conditions were ripe for general insurrection, and the Việt Minh were on the verge of taking power. There was no effective government to forestall them, and no organized independent group to compete with them. As a result, the Việt Minh could be seen by many as a broad national movement, uniting large numbers of Vietnamese regardless

³³ Hammer, *The struggle for Indochina 1940-1955*, 99.

of their politics, and reaching down to the masses.³⁴ Not only could they count on Võ Nguyên Giáp's small army for military support, the young people who had been trained under Phan Anh and Tạ Quang Bửu were very eager to show their muscle as well. Both men were to become members of the new revolutionary government and the young people they organized were in the forefront of the revolution, imbued with nationalist ideals. The Japanese having capitulated on 15 August 1945, Hồ Chí Minh judged the moment right to seize power openly, through the agency of the liberation committees. Supported by massive demonstrations in provincial capitals, the Việt Minh took control of the whole country between 19 and 25 August. As Võ Nguyên Giáp and his soldiers moved into Hanoi, there were demonstrations in the city celebrating independence. Bảo Đại's representative, Phan Kế Toại, surrendered his authority to the revolutionaries; and the Việt Minh youth groups and militia took over the city, while the Japanese stood by.

In the old imperial city, Bảo Đại watched these developments uncertainly. There was no longer a government at Huế, and Huế too now had its revolutionary committee. Rapidly, Bảo Đại announced that he was prepared to turn over power to the Việt Minh if that was the people's wish. After having received a telegram from Hanoi informing him that a provisional revolutionary government had been established and asking him to turn over power, he responded that he was ready to abdicate immediately but that he wished to have a formal ceremony for the transfer of power in

³⁴ The situation in the south was somewhat different from the north. In addition to the Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo sects, the southern branch of the League Phục Quốc and various minor Đại Việt parties provided the Japanese occupying power with instruments of political control and manipulation of popular opinion that it lacked in the north. They formed the basis of the United National Front, formally constituted on 14 August 1945, and represented a powerful counter-revolutionary force that the ICP in Nam Bộ had to overcome if it was to carry through a successful general insurrection. By the end of 1943 the Việt Minh had not yet developed as an effective mass organization in the same way as in the north. Here, it was the officially sponsored youth movement, the Vanguard Youth (Thanh Niên Tiền Phong), which provided the legal mass organization through which the Party worked. With the organization of the Vanguard Youth by Phạm Ngọc Thạch, all the districts of Nam Bộ were covered by a dense network directed by the Communist Party and enabling the Nam Bộ Committee to become the actual power next to the formal power of the Japanese. By August 1945 the Vanguard Youth had about a million members in Nam Bộ and 200,000 in Saigon. The Vietnam Trade Union Federation was another powerful, clandestine, mass organization, with about 100,000 members in 300 unions in Saigon on the eve of the general insurrection.

order to fulfil his responsibility to the people. He then proceeded to promulgate his edict of abdication, dated 25 August 1945:

The happiness of the people of Vietnam!
The Independence of Vietnam!

To achieve these ends, we have declared ourselves ready for any sacrifice and we desire that our sacrifice be useful to the fatherland.

Considering that the unity of all our compatriots is at this time our country's need, we recalled to our people on August 22: 'In this decisive hour of our national history, union means life and division means death.'

Considering the powerful democratic spirit growing in the north of our kingdom, we feared that conflict between north and south could be inevitable if we were to wait for a National Congress to decide us, and we know that this conflict, if it ever occurred, would plunge our people into suffering and would play the game of the invaders.

We cannot but have a certain feeling of melancholy upon thinking of our glorious ancestors who fought without respite for 400 years to aggrandize our country from Thuận Hóa to Hà Tiên. We cannot but experience a certain regret while thinking of our twenty years' reign, during which we were in the impossibility of being of help appreciably to our country.

Despite this, and strong in our convictions, we have decided to abdicate and we transfer power to the Democratic Republican Government.

Upon leaving our throne, we have only three wishes to express:

1) We request that the new Government take care of the dynastic temples and royal tombs.

2) We request the new Government to deal fraternally with all the parties and groups which have fought for the independence of our country even though they have not closely followed the popular movement; to do this in order to give them the opportunity to participate in the reconstruction of the country and to demonstrate that the new regime is built upon the absolute union of the entire population.

3) We invite all parties and groups, all classes of society, as well as the royal family, to show solidarity in unreserved support of the democratic Government in order to consolidate the national independence

As for us, during twenty years' reign, we have known much bitterness. We would rather live as a simple citizen of an independent state than as the king of a subjugated nation. Henceforth, we shall be happy to be a free citizen in an independent country. We shall allow no one to abuse our name or the name of the royal family in order to sow dissent among our compatriots.

Long live the independence of Vietnam!
Long live our Democratic Republic!
Huế, Kiền-Trung Palace, 25 August 1945.³⁵

Read to a large crowd during the formal abdication ceremony held on 30 August in front of the Ngọ Môn gate in Huế, Bảo Đại's abdication edict was all the more moving as it was the first time for the Emperor to be called upon to speak in public.

Bảo Đại also promulgated an edict directed at the royal family.³⁶ Evoking the 388 years of history since the first Nguyễn Lord established himself in Thuận Hóa, he acknowledged that it would bring great sadness to all of them if he were to give up the inheritance of these four centuries of rule. However, he reminded them of his attachment to the *dân vi quý* philosophy and of his vow that he would rather be a citizen in a free country than the ruler of an enslaved one. Compared to the sacrifice of 'hundreds of thousands' of compatriots who had lost their lives for their country over the past eighty years, he said, his abdication meant little. He called on the members of the royal family to support the new government and preserve Vietnam's independence in order to demonstrate true loyalty (*trung*) to him and filial piety (*biết*) toward their dynastic ancestors.

Both of these texts made clear Bảo Đại's will to step aside on behalf of the superior interest of the nation, threatened with a civil war that he clear-sightedly predicted. He affirmed also unambiguously that he was transmitting voluntarily his mandate, lending in this way legitimacy to the regime that was to succeed him.³⁷ Yet, few have ever thought of comparing the deeply nationalist accent of Bảo Đại's discourse with the declaration of

³⁵ Bao Dai, *Le dragon d'Annam*, 120-121.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ Arthur Dommen doubted, nevertheless, that Bảo Đại knowingly and of his own free will transferred his undisputed authority as emperor to Hồ Chí Minh's government of the DRV (see Dommen, *The Indochinese experience of the French and the Americans*, 112).

the foundation of the new Democratic Republic of Vietnam read by Hồ Chí Minh on 2 September 1945, to a huge tumultuous crowd of Vietnamese in Hanoi as well as to the nation and the world at large:

‘We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.’

This immortal statement is extracted from the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. Understood in the broader sense, this means: ‘All peoples on the earth are born equal; every person has the right to live to be happy and free.’

The Declaration of Human and Civic Rights proclaimed by the French Revolution in 1789 likewise propounds: ‘Every man is born equal and enjoys free and equal rights.’

These are undeniable truths.

Yet, during and throughout the last eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the principles of ‘freedom, equality and fraternity,’ have violated the integrity of our ancestral land and oppressed our countrymen. Their deeds run counter to the ideals of humanity and justice.

In the political field, they have denied us every freedom. They have enforced upon us inhuman laws. They have set up three different political regimes in Northern, Central and Southern Vietnam (Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina) in an attempt to disrupt our national, historical and ethnical unity.

They have built more prisons than schools. They have callously ill-treated our fellow-compatriots. They have drowned our revolutions in blood.

They have sought to stifle public opinion and pursued a policy of obscurantism on the largest scale; they have forced upon us alcohol and opium in order to weaken our race.

In the economic field, they have shamelessly exploited our people, driven them into the worst misery and mercilessly plundered our country.

They have ruthlessly appropriated our rice fields, mines, forests and raw materials. They have arrogated to themselves the privilege of issuing banknotes, and monopolized all our external commerce. They have imposed hundreds of unjustifiable taxes, and reduced our countrymen, especially the peasants and petty tradesmen, to extreme poverty.

They have prevented the development of native capital enterprises; they have exploited our workers in the most barbarous manner.

In the autumn of 1940, when the Japanese fascists, in order to fight the Allies, invaded Indochina and set up new bases of war, the French imperialists surrendered on bended knees and handed over our country to the invaders.

Subsequently, under the joint French and Japanese yoke, our people were literally bled white. The consequences were dire in the extreme. From Quảng-Trị up to the North, two millions of our countrymen died from starvation during the first months of this year.

On March 9th, 1945, the Japanese disarmed the French troops. Again the French either fled or surrendered unconditionally. Thus, in no way have they proved capable of 'protecting' us; on the contrary, within five years they have twice sold our country to the Japanese.

In fact, since the autumn of 1940, our country ceased to be a French colony and became a Japanese possession.

After the Japanese surrender, our people, as a whole, rose up and proclaimed their sovereignty and founded the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

The truth is that we have wrung back our independence from Japanese hands and not from the French.

For these reasons, we, the members of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, solemnly declare to the world: 'Vietnam has the right to be free and independent and, in fact, has become free and independent. The people of Vietnam decide to mobilize all their spiritual and material forces and to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their right of Liberty and Independence.'³⁸

This declaration, which was the formulation of a political entity, was designed to set the overall tone of the government for both domestic and foreign consumption.³⁹ For the Vietnamese people, it evoked the symbols of unity in a national framework and the fundamental right to socio-economic welfare within a collective whole to state that independence was an accomplished fact, to be defended totally, without compromise.⁴⁰

³⁸ Gareth Porter ed., *Vietnam: a history in documents* (New York 1981) 28-30.

³⁹ David G. Marr, 'Hồ Chí Minh's Independence Declaration' in: Taylor a.o. ed., *Essays into Vietnamese pasts*, 221-231.

⁴⁰ The declaration also demonstrates the large degree to which the Western axiomatic emphasis on civil rights (liberty and equality) had shaped the discursive practices of a new

Reflecting both the historical contingencies and the indigenous political culture, it also emphasized how the French had lost their mandate as ‘protector’ through their subservience to Japan and their partial responsibility for the death of up to two million Vietnamese. For the Allies, the declaration stated that Vietnam’s independence corresponded to what their leaders had pledged at international conferences and that the country therefore ought to be granted recognition. The emphasis on the provisional character was thus not related only to the need for national elections and a constitution, but also signalled to foreign governments that it would be possible to negotiate longer-term arrangements.

However, although the Communists carefully played down class contradictions within Vietnam at this stage, they provided, in Clive J. Christie’s terms, an almost textbook example of the application of the criteria of ‘antagonistic’ and ‘non-antagonistic’ contradictions in the international sphere.⁴¹ First of all, it was vitally important to identify international forces that were fundamentally hostile to the objectives of the Vietnamese revolution – that is, where there was an inherent ‘contradiction’ between these forces and the Vietnamese revolution – and at the same time to distinguish, at any given time, between those contradictions that were ‘antagonistic’ and those that were temporarily ‘non-antagonistic’. This perspective was important for the conduct of foreign policy, since in practical terms it enabled the Vietnamese revolutionary government to build alliances and isolate particular enemies, while at the same time maintaining a proper Marxist historical perspective on the course of events. It was also important internally, since it gave local Việt Minh cadres a theoretical base on which to understand that today’s friends could become tomorrow’s enemies.

In March 1945, the fault-line between ‘antagonistic’ and ‘non-antagonistic’ contradiction had been placed between the Japanese and other world forces of fascism on the antagonistic side, and all ‘anti-fascist’ forces on the other. In the eyes of the Communist leadership, therefore, while the Free French government fully intended to resume colonial control in Vietnam, and while there was an inherent ‘contradiction’ between Free

generation of Vietnamese revolutionary leaders, although, within the native sociocultural logic these terms were redefined primarily in terms of the collective rights of the Vietnamese in relation to their colonial masters. See: Hy V. Luong, *Revolution in the village. Tradition and transformation in North Vietnam, 1925-1988* (Honolulu 1992) 131.

⁴¹ Christie, *Ideology and revolution*, 95.

France and revolutionary Vietnam in the long term, in the short term the Free French and Vietnamese revolutionaries had a common interest in ousting Japan from Indochina; therefore, their relationship at this stage was 'non-antagonistic'.

Once Japan surrendered, however, the axis of antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradiction shifted. The principal contradiction was now no longer that between global fascism and global anti-fascist democracy, but between colonialism and national liberation: that is, between the French government and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. This change in the international situation was signalled in the wording of the declaration. By quoting from the American Declaration of Independence, with its quintessential statement of 'bourgeois-democratic' rights, including the right of national self-determination, the Vietnamese declaration was highlighting the 'contradiction' between French colonialism and American anti-colonialism. By then going on to quote from the French 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen' that was issued at the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789, the Vietnamese declaration was drawing attention to the 'contradiction' between the stated 'bourgeois-democratic' values of the French Republic, and its colonial practice. Whereas de Gaulle had stated that 'France claimed the right to recover its sovereignty over Indochina', the declaration argued that 'our people have seized back Vietnam from the hands of the Japanese, not the French', then went on to abrogate 'all colonial relations' with France, all treaties signed between France and Vietnam, all 'special privileges' of France on Vietnamese territory.

The Vietnamese Declaration of Independence was thus a profoundly Marxist-Leninist document. Unlike other declarations of independence, it did not appeal to the 'inherent' values of the Vietnamese people, or invoke the idea that the Vietnamese nation had some kind of unchanging core identity or 'soul' that was being redeemed. Rather, the declaration reflected the fact that independence was considered as just part of a long-term dialectical process that had a vital international dimension, in which the declaration could play a pragmatic role.⁴²

The Việt Minh theme of national unity and independence, however, captured the hearts and minds of virtually all Vietnamese. August 1945 had been in the first instance a giant outpouring of emotion, and only

⁴² Christie, *Ideology and revolution*, 96.

secondarily a well-engineered seizure of power. Thrilled by the nation's independence, the people took part in the festival of revolution, joining demonstrations, chanting slogans, cheering government representatives, mocking or abusing enemies, electing committees, participating in work brigades and literacy classes. A great deal of this activity was spontaneous, in the sense that individuals or small groups took the initiative on the basis of what they thought the revolution was all about, not in response to instructions from above. In a hundred different ways people indicated how the world had been turned upside down – burning local administrative records, jailing former mandarins or police agents, flouting old laws, appropriating government property, et cetera. Writing retrospectively, Vietnamese historians could thus conclude that the outcome of the Revolution of August 1945, the crest of a conquering, irresistible swell, depended upon the strengths of the leadership and local organization of the Việt Minh, capable through the formulation of their national discourse of 'leading the popular masses in a multiform struggle and defining for the nation and its diverse social classes a precise program and definite prospects for the future.'⁴³

⁴³ Etudes Vietnamiennes, *Un siècle de luttes nationales (1847-1945)* n° 24 (Hanoi n.d.) 95.