DREAMS OF PARADISE:
THE MAKING OF A SOVIET OUTPOST
IN VIETNAM*

Introduction

Until its collapse the Soviet Union was Vietnam’s most important ally. USSR was the deepest source of inspiration to Vietnamese communists and the most powerful protector of the Vietnamese revolution from various “imperialist” threats. The Soviet Union rivaled, if not surpassed, France, China and the United States in shaping the history of postcolonial Vietnam. Yet one does not appreciate this fact by reading the literature on the Cold War. Although useful, this literature has failed to grasp the full significance of the Soviet Union in Vietnamese postwar history. First, the Soviet-Vietnamese relationship has been viewed primarily from the perspective of the superpowers – either the United States or the Soviet Union. Most analysts are based in the United States and primarily interested in the failed adventure

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of the United States in Vietnam.¹ US-Vietnam relations dominate their research agendas. As a result, the United States appears to be the single most important country in postcolonial Vietnamese history. This view emerges even in works that make extensive use of Vietnamese sources.² Recently, as access to Soviet archives has increased, new research has examined the relationship from the Soviet point-of-view,³ yet the Vietnamese side remain understudied.

This lack of Vietnamese voices leads to a second bias: security aspects of the Soviet-Vietnamese relationship preoccupy observers. As a result, the strong ideological bonds between the two states have been downplayed.⁴ The USSR appears merely as the supplier of weapons for Vietnamese communists to achieve their nationalist goals and the Vietnamese turned to it simply because there was no one else to turn to.⁵ Underlying this bias is the assumption of Vietnamese communists as pragmatic nationalists who were motivated only by their narrow concerns for national independence. Observers of Vietnamese foreign policy often fail to appreciate Vietnamese leaders’ deep ideological commitments and dogged efforts to construct socialism at home and promote it abroad.⁶ They fail to realize that the Soviet

⁶ For their deep commitments to cultural reforms, see Kim Ninh. A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965. Ann Arbor, 2002; for their dogged efforts at rural collectivization, see Benedict Kerkvliet. The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy. Ithaca, 2005; for efforts to defend the communist doctrine at home and to promote it abroad during 1940-1960, see Tuong Vu. From Cheering to Volunteering: Vietnamese Communists and the Arrival of the Cold War, 1940-1951 // Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann (Eds.). Connecting Histories: The Cold War and Decolonization in Asia (1945-1962). Stanford, forthcoming; and Vu. To Be Patriotic Is to Build Socialism: Communist Ideology and
Union was the source of inspiration and role model for such extraordinary commitments and efforts. The USSR motivated Vietnamese revolutionaries as much as their yearning for national independence did. More importantly, while their patriotism may have led them to Leninism, Marx, Lenin and Stalin taught them that national identities were secondary to those of class. In their thinking, national independence would not bring colonized peoples real liberation and happiness; only socialism would.\(^7\) In other words, Vietnamese revolutionaries were far more idealistic and imaginative than observers assume.

This paper examines how the first generation of Vietnamese communists looked to the USSR and how they understood or imagined Soviet realities. It also discusses (briefly) how they sought to promote a Soviet cult and committed North Vietnam to being a Soviet outpost in the 1950s. I found that these Vietnamese communists viewed the Soviet Union with intense affection as a laboratory of revolution and socialism. Attached to this theme was the notion that it represented the promises of a socialist paradise and Vietnam’s desired destiny. As a laboratory but not yet the paradise it promised to be, the Soviet Union was not free of all social problems. Ironically this fact increased the affection and respect of Vietnamese communists for Lenin’s fatherland. The fact that Soviet society was undergoing rapid changes gave Vietnamese visitors greater sympathy and solidarity as they reflected on their own country’s struggle out of colonialism and backwardness. Those who lived, studied and worked in the Soviet Union gained further excitement as participants in what they believed to be the greatest transformation in human history. While Vietnamese attitudes toward the Soviet Union were shaped in part by their colonial experiences, I found that class mattered more.

By analyzing early Vietnamese perceptions of the Soviet Union, this paper seeks to explore the Soviet-Vietnamese relationship in a more nuanced manner. This relationship was based not only on strategic interests as is usually the case in foreign affairs, but also on the special admiration and affection Vietnamese communists held for the Soviet system. Regardless of how Soviet leaders behaved, in fact at many points they displayed mistrust in and contempt for the Vietnamese, the relationship was special to Vietnamese communists because of what the Soviet Union stood for.


\(^7\) See Vu. To Be Patriotic Is to Build Socialism.
Despite the asymmetry of the relationship, they refused to think of it as another form of colonial dependency in which the USSR supplanted France as Vietnam’s patron. Their sincere belief in proletarian internationalism explained this mindset.

**Historic encounters**

To understand the thoughts of early Vietnamese communists about the Soviet Union, one needs to appreciate the historical and political context of the 1920s and 1930s in which they encountered it. By the turn of the 20th century, the French colonial system had been firmly established in Vietnam and was about to experience a period of rapid expansion.\(^8\) In the following four 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 more effective.

Against the backdrop of colonial expansion, a formal school system with limited coverage was established, the Vietnamese vernacular language *Quoc Ngu* was adopted, and a reading public emerged.\(^9\) Similar to other colonies, these developments fueled the rise of modern nationalism in Vietnam.\(^10\) On the one hand, their plight as a colonized people humiliated Vietnamese elites and increased their willingness both to challenge traditional values and to look for new ideas around the world.\(^11\) On the other hand, the colonial context created a general mistrust and total rejection of elements associated with the colonial system such as Western capitalism and liberalism – often without careful thinking. Yet, as we shall see below, the experience of colonialism *per se* does not explain all the various ways early Vietnamese communists viewed or imagined Soviet realities. Some Soviet achievements were admired because they compared favorably to conditions in colonial Vietnam. Other achievements were viewed through class lenses which of-

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9 Ibid.
ferred a particular way of explaining French colonialism but involved more factors than simply colonizer and colonized.

A remarkable feature of the relationship between the USSR and Vietnam is that most ordinary Vietnamese had never heard of the Soviet Union until the 1950s. French censorship may have prevented information about the Russian revolution and the Soviet Union from reaching colonial Vietnam, but geographical distance and the absence of historical relationship certainly contributed to lack of Vietnamese interest. If the situation in Russia during 1917-1921 was discussed in Vietnam at all, it was portrayed negatively in both French and Vietnamese language press. For example, a Vietnamese account in late 1917 described Lenin’s Bolshevik party, whose name was translated as “qua khich dang” [the extremist party], as favoring the use of violence to redistribute power and wealth from the “powerful capitalist middle class” [trung luu co the luc, co tu ban] to the people. Violence led to resistance, causing domestic social disorder. Externally, the Bolsheviks were “slaves to the barbaric Germans” as shown in their act of signing the Brest-Litovsk agreement. The civil war of 1918-1921 was depicted as being caused by the German-Bolshevik alliance against “Russian patriots” supported by England and France.

With greater access to information, exiled Vietnamese revolutionaries in France and southern China welcomed the Russian revolution, though for different reasons. Phan Boi Chau, 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.” They promised to provide all expenses to interested students on the condition that those students believe in communism and be committed to spreading the doctrine and carrying out the revolution in Vietnam after graduation. Phan Boi Chau did not reveal his reactions to this offer but

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12 This is an argument made by many Vietnamese official historians. See, for example, Minh Tranh. Chung run so truoc anh huong cua Cach mang Thang Muoi toi Viet Nam [They trembled with the influence of the October Revolution in Vietnam]. Hanoi, 1958.


no further contacts followed. A year later, he wrote an article published in a Chinese military journal praising Lenin as a superb revolutionary strategist.\(^{16}\) While he credited the Soviet government for establishing the first ever government of workers and peasants [chinh phu Lao Nong], he was mostly impressed not with communism but with the Bolshevik’s success in seizing power. This same reaction was also found in the writings of Phan Chau Trinh, another veteran revolutionary of Phan Boi Chau’s generation. In his letter to Nguyen Ai Quoc (the future Ho Chi Minh) in 1922, Phan Chau Trinh displayed general admiration for the 1917 revolution but for him the main lesson of this revolution was that revolutionaries could succeed only if they operated inside the country (as opposed to operating from abroad).\(^{17}\)

Unlike the two Phans, the young Nguyen Ai Quoc was attracted to the new Soviet Union primarily for the radical vision it embodied. He would later claim to have become a communist after reading an early draft of Lenin’s “Theses on the Colonial Question” published in France in 1920.\(^{18}\) Arriving in the Soviet Union in June 1923, Nguyen Ai Quoc studied at the University of the Toilers of the East for some time before leaving for southern China to work as a Comintern agent in late 1924.\(^{19}\) In one of his writings during his time in China,\(^{20}\) he expressed his deep gratitude to Lenin for the Bolshevik leader’s concern for colonized nations. As perhaps the first leader of the international communist movement who was sympathetic to colonized peoples, “Lenin represented a turning point in the painful history of those enslaved peoples and embodied a bright, new future for them.”\(^{21}\)

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\(^{19}\) 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: The Missing Years. Chapter 3, for a recent analysis of politics in southern China among various anti-French Vietnamese groups.

\(^{20}\) Southern China by the mid-1920s was “an anti-imperialist Mecca” for East and Southeast Asian dissidents (Marr. Vietnamese Anticolonialism. P. 259). See Quinn-Judge. Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years. Chapter 3, for a recent analysis of politics in southern China among various anti-French Vietnamese groups.


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But Nguyen Ai Quoc appreciated Lenin’s vision not only because he was interested in Soviet help to liberate his country from France. This fact was clear from his enthusiastic description of the University of the Toilers of the East created by the Soviet government in 1921 to train young men and women from other countries in communism and revolutionary science.\(^{22}\) He was impressed with the school’s diverse student body, the majority of whom came from working classes’ backgrounds. In the classroom, he wrote, “young people of 62 nations sat side-by-side like brothers.” They did not just study but also helped with agricultural work. They lived 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 movie theaters. While they were denied political freedoms in their own countries, they were invited to participate in the management of their university and even to vote in local elections just like Soviet citizens. Nguyen Ai Quoc passionately called on his “brothers in colonized countries” to compare “bourgeois democracy” with “proletarian democracy.”\(^{23}\) Prior to arriving in the USSR, Nguyen had lived in France for many years where he was active in leftist circles and helped found the French Communist Party in 1920. He did enjoy many political freedoms in “bourgeois” France but this experience apparently did not compensate for his anger at empty French promises of liberty and equality for colonized Vietnam. In this sense the colonial experience led him to a total rejection of “bourgeois democracy.” At the same time, the class concepts he used had no direct relationship to the colonial experience.\(^{24}\)

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\(^{23}\) Ibid. P. 61.

\(^{24}\) In its early years (1921-1924), the University of Toilers of the East was staffed by many Muslim “national communists” who attempted “to reconcile the conflicting and often contradictory ideological trends of their environment – bolshevism, menshevism, anarchism – with their radical nationalism;” see Alexander Bennigsen and Enders Wimbush. Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union: A Revolutionary Strategy for the Colonial World. Chicago, 1979. Pp. 15 & 110. There are two reasons why these national communists had limited, if any, influence on Nguyen Ai Quoc and other Vietnamese after him. First, Nguyen Ai Quoc’s time at the University was short and he was not formally enrolled. As Bennigsen and Wimbush argue, the Muslim national communists’ acceptance of Marxism and the equation of anti-imperialism and Soviet power existed “only in a superficial sense,” primarily because they were impressed by the success of the Bolsheviks in seizing power (Ibid. P. 30). Sultan Galiev, the foremost
Nguyen Ai Quoc was not oblivious to problems facing the Soviet Union at the time. As he remembered 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 time not yet a paradise. It was a country in transformation with many superior characteristics but still had not eliminated all defects yet. 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 experienced four years of world war and one year of civil war… [I] did not forget to compare Russia where a revolution was advancing with Vietnam that had been colonized for decades.25

As seen in this quotation, the imperfections in Soviet society did not lessen Nguyen Ai Quoc’s admiration for the country; they ironically augmented it as he could relate the difficulties facing the Soviet Union with those confronting his own homeland. We will see that this phenomenon also applied to other Vietnamese arriving in Moscow.

Having studied Marxism and Leninism, Nguyen Ai Quoc appreciated not only Lenin’s strategy of seizing power as the two Phans had done, but also the radical nature of the Russian revolution compared to its “bourgeois” counterparts. As he argued in his “textbook” used for training young Vietnamese revolutionaries in southern China,

All over the world revolution has truly succeeded only in Russia, that is, the [Russian] people now enjoy genuine liberty, equality and

thinker among these Muslim communists, maintained that “[a]ll Muslim colonized peoples are proletarian peoples and as almost all classes in Muslim societies have been oppressed by the colonialists, all classes have the right to be called “proletarians” (Ibid. P. 42). As Nguyen Ai Quoc’s writing about the Russian, French and American revolutions discussed below testifies, he was much more ideologically committed than Sultan Galiev was. The second reason the Muslim national communists perhaps had little influence on Vietnamese communists is because they gradually lost their roles at the University after three purges in 1924, 1927 and 1930 (Ibid. P. 110). Most were to be executed by Stalin by the mid-1930s. Before 1924, Nguyen Ai Quoc was the only Vietnamese student at the University. The next group of Vietnamese students arrived in 1927-1928 and most Muslim national communists would have been purged by then.

25 Tran Dan Tien (Ho Chi Minh). Nhung mau chuyen ve doi hoat dong cua Ho Chu tich [Stories about the life and career of Chairman Ho]. Hanoi, 1976. P. 59. This book was first published in China in 1948 and in Paris in 1949. In the book Ho Chi Minh also described in detail and with admiration Soviet collective farms, child care and the social system, but he must have recalled his observations in the 1930s, not those he made in the 1920s when he was there the first time. Ibid. Pp. 59-63.
happiness, not the fake liberty and equality that French imperialism boasts in Annam. The Russian revolution has overthrown kings, capitalists and landlords, and [the Soviet Union] is now helping workers, peasants, and oppressed people in colonized lands carry out their revolutions to destroy imperialism and capitalism in the world.26

In contrast, French and American capitalist revolutions did “not go far enough” [khong den noi]. These revolutions were “ostensibly in the name of republicanism and democracy, but in fact they suppressed workers and peasants internally while oppressing colonized peoples externally. After four revolutions, French workers and peasants are still plotting another revolution to liberate themselves.”27 National independence, which French and Americans enjoyed, was clearly inadequate to him as it did not guarantee true equality and democracy.

By the late 1920s, many young Vietnamese men and women had followed Nguyen Ai Quoc to study in the Soviet Union. One of these was Tran Dinh Long, who studied in the same university with Nguyen Ai Quoc during 1928-1931. Tran Dinh 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, Tran published serially a long memoir in two newspapers recounting his experience in the Soviet Union. Apparently the first half of this memoir has been lost, but the remaining half of nearly 200 pages is sufficient to offer another interesting account of the historic encounters between Vietnamese and the Soviet Union.28

27 Ibid. P. 31. Nguyen Ai Quoc also reportedly wrote a booklet entitled “Nhat ky chim tau” [Diary of a shipwreck] in which he told the story of three young men landing on the shores of the Soviet Union after a shipwreck and being marveled at the society without exploitation of men by men there. This booklet was said to circulate illegally in Vietnam in the late 1920s but I was unable to find it. See Nguyen Duy Trinh. Chien dau duoi co Xo Viet Nghe Tinh [Fighting under the banners of the Nghe-Tinh Soviets] // Hoi Ky Cach Manguyen chon [Selected Revolutionary Memoirs]. Hanoi, 1995. P. 179, who claimed to read the booklet. Nguyen Duy Trinh was a participant in the Nghe-Tinh Soviet movement and later became Minister of Foreign Affairs of the DRV. In his report to the Comintern, Nguyen Ai Quoc also mentioned this booklet. Quinn-Judge. Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years 1919-1941. P. 177.
28 Le Thanh Hien (Ed.). Tuyen Tap Tran Dinh Long [Tran Dinh Long’s Selected Works]. Hanoi, 2000. The memoir was published during 1938-1939 under the title of “Ba nam o nuoc Nga Xo Viet” [My three years in the Soviet Union]. Tran Dinh Long became an
Unlike Nguyen Ai Quoc, Tran Dinh Long was in the Soviet Union at the high tide of revolution: 1928-1933 were the first and formative years of the Stalin era. These roughly coincided with the first Five-Year Plan (1929-1933) which involved an all-out drive for industrialization and rural collectivization.\(^{29}\) Furthermore, a cultural revolution sponsored by Stalin had taken on a life of its own, becoming a mass movement directed against the old intelligentsia as class enemies. As Sheila Fitzpatrick described, 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 local dictatorships and attempted to revolutionize their disciplines.”\(^{30}\) Although Tran 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.

Tran Dinh 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, childcare and “hygiene police;” cultural activities such as arts, sports, dance and cinema; and social and cultural “vices” such as prostitution, drugs, drinking and religion. Tran’s often defensive tone indicated his effort to confront an audience that had been flooded for years with anti-Soviet and anti-communist propaganda from the colonial press. 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.” While 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 and their class interests in national and international

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\(^{264}\) important official in the Viet Minh government in 1945 before he was allegedly abducted and killed in late 1945 by agents of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party.


arenas.” Tran believed that this class consciousness helped maintain true equality between officers and soldiers. While 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 incorrect orders or who displayed inappropriate attitudes to them. If the whole unit expressed disapproval of an officer, he could be reprimanded and transferred. Tran admitted that most soldiers came from peasant backgrounds and were still deferent [rut re e so] to officers, while some officers still displayed an upper-class [truong gia] mentality in their behavior and treated soldiers without respect [venh vao]. Yet 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 pro-justice character of the former. “Every Red Army soldier I asked,” he recalled, “told me straightforwardly that he was enlisted to defend the Soviet Union and serve the world’s proletariat when needed.” 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 its struggle with the capitalist class. Rephrasing a statement by Soviet leader Voroshilov, Tran 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 these weak nations resist foreign invaders. “The Red Army [was] the only army in the world that [fought] sincerely for justice” [cong ly].

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 jab at the caricatures of communists in Vietnam at the time. In the negative depictions of these caricatures, communists shared everything, including their wives. In positive versions, communists were depicted as monks who were so devoted to their ideology that they never knew romance [tinh ai]. Tran argued that communists were only human beings with normal feelings. Although their feelings for justice were stronger than ordinary people, they were capable of being

32 Ibid. P. 44.
33 Ibid. Pp. 45-46.
34 Ibid. P. 56.
moved by natural beauty and by “romantic feelings that were 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 Soviet women were independent financially, whereas their counterparts in capitalist societies were not. One was truly liberated and could enjoy true love, the other was only a slave of her husband and was forced to cling to him.

Spending vacations in the Crimea and “Ughennana” (Ukraine?), Tran Dinh Long described physical contacts between genders in the 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.35 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 am on an empty beach. Tran 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. Tran credited the Russian revolution for “having enlightened Russian women and placed them equal to men in all respects.” He eloquently declared that “Russian women have demolished the wall between men and women – the wall built by self-serving morality of feudalists and capitalists that split society into two halves and blocked the evolutionary path [con duong tien hoa] of humankind.”36

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 being able to divorce.37 Soviet courts held trials in courthouses less frequently (especially of counter-revolutionaries) than in capitalist countries. Proceedings were

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36 Ibid. P. 58.
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 to factories, offices, schools and collective farms to hold trials on site, unlike “capitalist courts” that were aloof [quân đặng, bek ve] of the people.\textsuperscript{38} Soviet sports did not develop professional players who were in effect commodities for sale in capitalist countries.\textsuperscript{39} Sports in the Soviet Union were meant 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 done for money and serving only a wealthy minority. Under declining economies and decadent political systems, capitalist arts necessarily took the forms of “pornographic literature [khieu đam, phong đang], obscene dances [uon eo, tho tuc] and movies full of naked women, lust and crimes.\textsuperscript{40}

As an example of how the Soviet system was conducive to the development of arts in service of the masses, Tran Dinh Long discussed Soviet policy to protect and promote the cultures of ethnic minorities.\textsuperscript{41} Before the revolution, he noted that 90% of minorities in northeastern Russia were illiterate. These peoples used to have their own literatures but their cultures had been gradually destroyed under “the dictatorship of the ruling class” after 200 years being Russian colonies. 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.\textsuperscript{42} It also did its best to improve education and develop ethnic literatures based on the languages of each group, “bringing bright literary light to shine on the most remote areas” where Mongolians, Turkestans and Eskimos lived.\textsuperscript{43} The “proletarian approach to literary development” specifically aimed to develop “literary concepts and spirits” for each ethnic group based on their native tongues to be aided by Russian if necessary. Only the promotion of native tongues to be foundations for ethnic literatures and arts allowed these to “develop freely according to their natural characteristics.”\textsuperscript{44} Thanks to efforts by the Soviet government, “all ethnic groups in the USSR today possessed their own print media to develop their own talents and to gather the refined

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. Pp. 73-78.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid. P. 125.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid. P. 127.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. Pp. 134-137; and Pp. 143-144.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid. P. 143.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid. P. 135.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. P. 136.
knowledge [tri thuc cao sieu] of all the masses that had long been trampled and wasted by capitalists.”

Tran Dinh Long’s account of Soviet “affirmative action” policies to protect ethnic cultures is indicative of where he placed his loyalties. While such policies were unprecedented in world history, Tran did not treat them in a separate section but subsumed them under Soviet literary policies, the central tenet of which 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 (the available part) did he mention issues such as national or ethnic independence or autonomy. The liberation of the masses from capitalist and feudal exploitation rather than the liberation of oppressed nations from imperial Russia was what excited him.

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, Tran Dinh 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, counter-revolutionaries. Among the majority of “ideologically conscious” [giac ngo] Soviet people, there were still many alcoholics, bandits who used to be white soldiers, and kulaks who extorted money. These bad people represented the legacies of the feudal and capitalist systems of the past “two to three thousand years.” For example, he believed that the social vice of prostitution began when the exploitation of men by other men emerged in human society. Kings and nobilities had time for leisure and forced women to serve them. “Under capitalist society which was like a putrid, bleeding and filthy body, prostitution grew just like abscesses on the skin.”

Blaming social vices (including religion) on classed societies, Tran Dinh 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 educate them so that they themselves would decide

to do so. “This method [maintained] respect, protected individual freedom, and avoided resistance from those who still drank… The method of the proletarian government [was] not to stop producing alcohol but to have no one get drunk.”48 This was done by reducing gradually the level of alcohol in drinks produced and by launching anti-alcohol educational campaigns using both science and humor. Organs taken from (dead?) drunkards were put on display together with murder cases involving alcohol. Humorous plays were staged and humorous pamphlets published to make fun of drunkenness.49

A similar approach was used to weaken the influence of religion. Quoting Karl Marx, Tran Dinh Long argued that religions were even worse than opium. While the latter destroyed individuals, religions destroyed entire communities. Religions exploited people; expropriated [rut tia] their lands, money and houses; caused their minds to become feeble, slow, muddled [ngan ngo, ngay dai] and melancholic [u am].50 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 practicing religion in one decree, but it chose not to. The problem lay solely with priests who were a kind of parasite. 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 mankind and with historical evidence about the close relations between priests and the Tsar and about past crimes committed by the clergy. Besides plays and pamphlets, two special tools were anti-religion museums and anti-religion associations established in all the big cities in the Soviet Union.

Tran Dinh Long believed the method had been effective, as evidenced in the empty and quiet churches he saw that had to use candles because they had run 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. Tran gladly observed 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 eliminated [tieu diet] the countryside would catch up with the cities. The days of religion in the Soviet Union were numbered.51

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50 Ibid. Pp. 93-95.
51 Ibid. Pp. 95-103.
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 smiles as they swooped down on selected neighborhoods. Unlike the tax collecting police in his native town in Vietnam who generated fear and hatred, Tran Dinh Long noted that these hygiene police did not wear 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, while the untidy and dirty were ordered [bat] to help clean up their house, furniture, clothes and children. Men who wore long hair and beards were mocked [che] and forced [keo co] to sit down for a haircut. Tran enthusiastically commented that printing a thousand books was not equal to one hands-on demonstration of hygienic lifestyle provided by these teams. This method was easy to understand, even for the less intelligent [toi da]. The hygiene teams not only eliminated backwardness [toi tam] 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. Tran Dinh Long, and perhaps his Vietnamese classmates, 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 aggressive methods and the far-reaching goals of social reform in the Soviet Union. Numerous accounts published later in Vietnam would express similar feelings, but Tran Dinh Long’s was not only one of the first, but also one based on observations at a transformative period in Soviet history. The society he described was in flux and its dynamics must have enthralled many Vietnamese readers who were reading a positive account of the Soviet Union published legally for the first time back home in Vietnam. Most Vietnamese, including most hard-core

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53 Ibid. Pp. 86-87. In original, “toi da” in the sense of “at most” was perhaps a typo.
54 Literally means “darkness.”
55 During the First Five-Year Plan, Soviet cities grew by 44% while their salaried labor force increased by about 12 million. Moscow and Leningrad each received an influx of 3.5 million peasant migrants during this period. See Lewin. Society, State, and Ideology during the First Five-Year Plan. Pp. 53-54.
revolutionaries who were members of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), never had the chance to visit the Soviet Union until the 1950s. What they knew about that far-away country must have come from accounts like those of Nguyen Ai Quoc and Tran Dinh Long, aided by the power of their imagination.57 Their accounts, while often passionate, were short on details and personal feelings because they relied on secondary sources. They were more clearly intended for propaganda, although this did not mean that they did not believe in the Soviet Union. As we will see in following sections, the focus of these accounts also came down to contrasts between capitalism and socialism as their authors sought to convince other Vietnamese that a socialist future was worth fighting for.

Far away but so close by

For about a decade from the late 1920s to the late 1930s, Vietnamese communists received and followed direct instructions from Moscow through the Comintern. In the early years this relationship benefited greatly from Soviet efforts to assist the Chinese revolution. As Soviet advisers helped found the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), brought the CCP and the Guomindang (GMD) into an alliance, and trained a new Chinese army,58 Nguyen Ai Quoc was educating young Vietnamese men in southern China in communism and revolutionary theories.59 Soviet money channeled through Soviet advisers helped Nguyen recruit students from inside Vietnam and send many onwards to the Soviet Union. After Chiang Kai-shek broke off relations with the Soviet Union and massacred CCP labor activists in Shanghai in 1927, it was far more difficult for Vietnamese communists to receive Soviet help. Nevertheless, the brief but favorable revolutionary opportunity in the late 1920s was sufficient to fuel a nascent communist movement in Vietnam. This movement involved the emergence of several communist groups in all three regions of Vietnam that would join to form the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930. Part of this movement was a peasant uprising.

57 To those who read French, there were numerous works by French authors or works translated into French on Marxism and on the Soviet Union. These books were never banned in South Vietnam, and were allowed in North and Central Vietnam in the mid-1930s. See Tran Van Giau. Su phat trien cua tu tuong o Viet Nam tu the ky XIX den Cach mang thang Tam [The development of Vietnamese thoughts from the 19th century to the August Revolution]. Vol. 3. Ho Chi Minh City, 1993. P. 86.


in central Vietnam during 1930-1931 led at some points by Moscow- or Guangdong-trained communists.

The Soviet Union figured frequently in the discourse of this movement. Soviet support for oppressed nations was an important theme but did not dominate communist propaganda. The Soviet Union was said to have returned independence and freedom to small nations previously conquered by the Tsar, and also helped many Near East colonies achieve their independence.60 Vietnamese communists apparently were not preoccupied with national independence but looked forward to something grander, as evidenced in the prominence given to images of a progressive Soviet society in their propaganda. The generous Soviet welfare system was a big selling point. One statement, for example, described the Soviet Union as a country where workers worked only 8 hours a day; where all peasants owned land; where workers and peasants enjoyed freedom, equality and all political rights; and where women were equal to men, delivered babies at maternity hospitals, and could take four months off with pay before and after birth.61 The Soviet Union was “the most free and happiest country in the world.”62

The liberation of Russian women was another big theme. On March 8, 1931, the Southern Committee of the ICP issued a lengthy analysis about the contrast between women’s status in the Soviet Union and that under capitalist systems.63 Women under capitalism were said to work hard with low pay; to be treated like slaves in their workplaces; to be oppressed by feudal customs; to be burdened by household chores; and to be abused in their families. In the Soviet Union, in contrast, progressive laws banned female workers from dangerous jobs and guaranteed them good pay and generous vacation time. Women’s burden with childcare and household chores was taken away with 17,000 childcare centers and “collective canteens” serving 20 million people. Women were enrolled in schools and well represented in the political system. 312,000 women were members of representative councils (soviet) of workers and peasants. 56,000 women were members of workers’ councils. They accounted for 20% of Party committee membership. The analysis forcefully concluded that only by overthrowing capitalism could women be liberated and achieve equality with men.64

60 Cac anh em chi em tho thuyen va dan cay! [To our brothers and sisters, workers and peasants!]. July 31, 1929 // VKDTT. Vol. 1. P. 235.
62 Cac anh em chi em tho thuyen va dan cay! P. 223.
64 Ibid. Pp. 63-64.
Interestingly, Vietnamese communists not only looked to the Soviet Union as the savior of colonized Vietnam but also considered defending the Soviet homeland one of their main obligations. As they came to view the world through class lenses, their mental bonds to the Soviet Union strengthened because it represented the hopes of the working classes all over the world. Throughout 1929-1931, before they were violently suppressed by the colonial regime, communist groups issued repeated calls for people to help defend the Soviet Union from imperialist attacks by not paying taxes and avoiding service in colonial armies. The Soviet Union must be protected not only because it was “the Fatherland of workers and peasants around the world,” but also because it was “our [own] Fatherland.” More evidence of the strong bonds Vietnamese communists had with the Soviet Union is the fact that they operated not according to the Vietnamese calendar, but by the Soviet one. Occasions that were selected by activists to rally the masses for struggle were not historical Vietnamese events; and the heroes that activists chose to commemorate were not Vietnamese. Instead, the Russian revolution and the anniversary of Lenin’s death served as their occasions for activities.

While images of the Soviet society as a socialist paradise were always central to propaganda of Vietnamese communists, the Soviet Union preoccupied their minds in two other critical ways. First, developments in the Soviet Union, especially socio-economic achievements in Five-Year plans, were enthusiastically followed and closely compared to those in the capitalist world. Often Soviet domestic success was viewed by Vietnamese communists not only for its own value, but for prophesying something greater for mankind. Every step forward for the Soviet Union was also a step forward for the world’s revolutionary movement and for the eventual triumph of socialism over capitalism. In the resolution of the first Party Congress of the ICP in 1935, it was reported that halfway through the Second Five-Year Plan, Soviet industrial production in 1934 was twice that in 1930 while that in the “capitalist countries” in 1934 was 25% less than in

65 “Cac anh em chi em tho thuyen va dan cay!” and “Mot so loi keu goi.”
1929. Collectivized farms now accounted for 92% of total area. Workers’ salary increased from 991 dong in 1930 to 1,519 dong in 1933. In 1933, collective farmers received 1.6 billion dong of funding from the Soviet government while 280 tractor stations were built. These achievements stood in stark contrast with a capitalist world still roiled in the midst of the Great Depression. These achievements, which “opened up the road to liberation for workers and the oppressed people all over the world,” suggested that “socialism [had] become inevitable.” A similar attitude is found toward the subsequent Third Five-Year Plan. In the words of Vietnamese communists, the success of this Plan made the USSR the most powerful country on earth and tipped the balance of force in favor of “the revolutionary camp.”

In addition to following socio-economic achievements in the Soviet Union, Vietnamese communists paid close attention to Soviet foreign policy and devoted extraordinary effort to present such policy as befitting a great world power and a generous friend of oppressed people, including colonized Vietnamese. While “imperialist” foreign policy was always associated with war, Soviet policy was aimed at peace. The consistent loyalty in Vietnamese attitude toward erratic Soviet policies to Nazi Germany in the late 1930s can serve as a good example. When the Soviet Union joined the Non-Intervention Agreement in 1936, Vietnamese Trotskyites criticized this act as amounting to abandoning Spanish Republicans. ICP General Secretary Ha Huy Tap responded that Soviet policy was based on the calculation that General Franco of the Nationalists would be quickly defeated by “democratic people’s forces” in Spain without the help of Germany and Italy. Soviet leaders anticipated that fascist Germany and Italy would violate this agreement, but they signed it anyway. This was in part in order to show Soviet desire for peace and in part to provide the world with concrete evidence of the criminal nature of those regimes. Ha Huy Tap argued that despite the

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69 The “dong” is the Vietnamese unit of currency.
70 Ibid.
71 Nghi quyet cua Hoi nghi Trung uong [Resolution of the Central Committee Plenum]. November 6-9, 1940 // VKDTT. Vol. 7. P. 33.
72 This agreement was signed by most Western European powers and was meant to prevent the Spanish Civil War from spreading over Europe.
agreement the Soviet Union still provided material and mental support to the “heroic workers” of Spain.

The desire for peace was reportedly behind Soviet participation in the League of Nations. While imperialist Britain and France were surrendering to Hitler’s demands at Munich, the Soviet Union was described in the Vietnamese communist press as trying to use the League to shore up an anti-Fascist coalition. While England and France “plotted” with Germany and Italy to isolate it, the Soviet Union wisely and resolutely pursued a policy of collective security, which Vietnamese communists believed to be the most effective policy to preserve peace. At the same time, another ICP source argued that thanks to help from the Soviet Union, Lithuania was able to preserve her independence despite threats from “Polish militarists and German fascists.”

The Treaty of Non-Aggression (or the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in 1939 raised many difficult questions for ICP leaders. Why did Soviet leaders sign a treaty with Fascist states? Was it true, as Trotskyites accused, that Stalin harbored territorial ambitions and wanted to annex Poland and the Baltic nations? ICP leaders argued on the contrary that the Treaty helped world revolution by allowing the Soviet Union to focus on building socialism and strengthening her power. The evidence of increased Soviet power was shown in the fact that “the most aggressive and counter-revolutionary imperialists were now trying to “curry favor with” the Soviet state. The Soviet Union stood above them all; it had no interest in helping one imperialist fight another. Those who pledged not to attack it were accorded good relations (hence, the Treaty of Non-Aggression).

ICP leaders also maintained that the Soviet Union did not collude with any imperialists to rob Poland and the Baltic nations of their independence; rather, she helped liberate these small nations from the imperialist yoke. The Soviet Union emerged as a generous state in sharp contrast with greedy imperialist states. Soviet policy was praised for creating peace: “whereas the

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76 Nghi quyet cua Hoi nghi Trung uong (Resolution of the Central Committee Plenum). November 6-9, 1940 // VKDTT. Vol. 7. P. 32.
capitalist world was now full of wails and sobs, of smashed bones and rotten flesh, the socialist world was a humane place where people lived in peace and happiness.” This contrast, it was suggested, urged the oppressed peoples and classes to overthrow imperialism and follow the Soviet Union.77

Subsequent documents did not show how ICP leaders reacted to the news of the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941. Yet the Red Army’s rapid retreat following the German blitzkrieg in 1941 was something that needed to be explained. Why could the most powerful country on earth be defeated so fast? Nearly two years later, ICP leaders were still trying to grapple with this question. They explained that the retreat was “in part because [the Soviet Union] did not produce enough weaponry right away and in part because it wanted to prolong the war.”78 It wasn’t losing but was only waiting for the consolidation of the international democratic front and also for revolutionary movements in other countries to get ready for the opportunity to rise up against imperialism. In other words, the USSR was accepting losses to itself for the sake of world revolution.

After war broke out, supporting the Soviet Union became a main activity on the ICP agenda.79 As enunciated in several Party resolutions, supporting the Soviet Union meant working for Indochinese independence, because if the USSR won the war, it would in turn help liberate Indochinese from French and Japanese imperialist rule. The Party instructed its members to propagandize this issue to mobilize mass support for the Soviet Union, to form “Friends of the Soviet Union” groups and to raise donations for the Soviet Red Army. Indigenous troops under the colonial government also needed to be educated about this issue because one day they might be sent by the Pétain government to fight the Soviet Union.

As part of this campaign to raise support for the Soviet Union, *Viet Nam Doc Lap* (Independent Vietnam), the Viet Minh weekly newsletter edited by Ho Chi Minh, published regular news of the war that exaggerated Soviet success in fighting Nazi armies while advertising the Soviet paradise to Vietnamese readers. One account of the war went as follows.

Russia is a revolutionary state. In this country, people enjoy freedom, equality [and] happiness. Externally she does not bully other

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77 Ibid. P. 34.
countries but helps oppressed nations. Germany is a fascist state, meaning she is extremely cruel and wants to rob other countries only. In this country people live hard lives. If Germany prevails, all mankind will be enslaved. Only if Russia wins will the world see glorious days.\textsuperscript{80}

In another article, it was reported that,

[i]n the 5 months since the war began, Germany has suffered from 4.5 million casualties, whereas Russia lost only 1.4 million people… In many German cities, most soldiers are only 15 or 16 years old. Officers are only 17 or 18 years old because older officers and soldiers have all been killed or wounded.

In an article entitled “What kind of country is Russia?” we can see a different version of Tran Dinh Long’s account discussed earlier, but this time the story was targeted at uneducated Vietnamese.\textsuperscript{81} As this article claimed, Russia was the largest country in the world. Twenty years ago Russians suffered from forced labor [di phu] and heavy taxes and were “exploited, oppressed, poor and ignorant like [Vietnamese].” Thanks to Russians’ “unity and struggle,” the emperor was overthrown in 1917 and since then the people had enjoyed “equality, freedom and happiness.” Currently, Russian workers worked only seven hours a day, had a day off for every five days working, had a one-month vacation every year, plus “good salaries.” Peasants had all the land they needed and could borrow plowing and harvesting tractors [may cay, may gat] from the state [nha nuoc]. A peasant received at least five kilograms of rice [gao] a day; everybody had more clothes and foods than he needed. Many women became mandarins [lam quan], doctors and pilots; they enjoyed all the rights men had. Children, regardless of whether they were male or female, had to go to school at least up to 16 years of age.

\textsuperscript{80} Nga-Duc chien tranh [Russia-Germany war] // Viet Nam Doc Lap. No. 109. October 21, 1941. In the introduction to a recently published volume that contains the entire collection of Viet Nam Doc Lap at the Revolutionary Museum in Hanoi, its director Pham Mai Hung writes that Ho founded the journal in August 1941 and from then until August 1942 when he left for China, he was its editor in chief, main contributor, often illustrator and printer. Bao Tang Cach Mang Viet Nam. Bao Viet Nam Doc Lap 1941-1945 [The Viet Nam Doc Lap newspaper 1941-1945]. Hanoi, 2000. The style of this article suggests it was likely written by Ho Chi Minh.

\textsuperscript{81} B. V. Nga la nuoc the nao? // Viet Nam Doc Lap. No. 126. July 11, 1942. This article was also likely to have been written by Ho Chi Minh. The use of “Nga” (Russia) instead of “Lien Xo” (the Soviet Union) in this context perhaps indicated the writer’s effort to talk in the language of ordinary people. “Nga” is Vietnamized to a greater extent and more commonly used word than “Lien Xo,” which also sounds very formal. This usage should not be interpreted as reflecting the Russo-centric turn in the USSR at the time.
age. Schools were free. The state took care of children and old people and assigned doctors to treat sick people. The people were free to elect their hamlet chiefs [ly truong], subdistrict chiefs [chanh tong] and the head of the country. If they were not happy with these officials, they could impeach them. We can see in this article a crude attempt by ICP leaders to introduce the Soviet Union to Vietnamese peasants. The extremely high quality of life there (especially compared to Vietnam) gave the Soviet image a mythical aura; yet the details made it believable. Foreign concepts (nha nuoc, may cay, may gat) were interspersed with familiar ones (di phu, gao, lam quan, ly truong, chanh tong), making the myth novel yet accessible to ordinary Vietnamese.

After seizing power following the Japanese surrender, the DRV government immediately sent telegrams to both the United States and the Soviet Union asking for recognition. Both did not respond. While the American attitude was easy to understand to the ICP (the imperialist US was expected to share fundamental interests with French imperialists), Soviet silence must have been puzzling, embarrassing and frustrating to ICP leaders. They had expected a different USSR that was always ready to come to the aid of oppressed peoples. From then until early 1950, the ICP’s secret diplomatic maneuvers to appeal for Soviet help also yielded no results.

Despite being rebuffed by Stalin, Vietnamese communists never resented the Soviet Union – certainly not in public but perhaps not in private either. There is no evidence of such resentment in all available internal documents. Ironically, Ho Chi Minh rather than Stalin was blamed for the problem. By the late 1940s Ho Chi Minh was in fact criticized openly by many high-ranking leaders for his policy to dissolve the Party publicly in November 1945. Although the Party was never really dissolved, the policy made Stalin even more suspicious of the ICP (he had earlier been disapproving of the DRV leader’s collaboration with US intelligence during World War II). In public and in all ICP internal documents, however, the attitude toward the Soviet Union remained the same as it had been prior to 1945. Vietnamese communists followed events in the Soviet Union

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82 The Vietnamese government has released letters Ho sent to Truman, but has not done so with his letters to Stalin.


84 Ibid.

85 This is according to Maurice Thorez cited in Gaiduk. Confronting Vietnam. P. 3.
closely and defended its foreign policy with the same zeal found in earlier periods.86

Eventually, only thanks to personal appeals made by Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi to Stalin was Soviet policy toward the DRV reversed. Ho Chi Minh was granted an audience with the Grand Marshal in Moscow but his request for a Soviet-Vietnamese mutual security treaty was laughed off by Stalin.87 The Soviet Union offered the DRV diplomatic recognition and some aid, but Stalin assigned China to be the principal caretaker of the needs of communist Vietnam.

**The making of a Soviet cult and Soviet outpost in Southeast Asia**

After coming to power in North Vietnam in 1954, ICP leaders did not lose much time in promoting a Soviet cult. Propaganda took many forms: publications of pamphlets and newspaper articles, organization of “friendship months” [Thang huu nghi], and visits for top government officials and highly respected intellectuals to the Soviet Union (and China and North Korea along the way).88 On their return, travelers gave speaking tours around the country to talk about their wonderful experiences.

Although the booklets and speaking tours were clearly meant for propaganda purposes, excitement about the Soviet Union among Vietnamese intellectuals was genuine for many reasons. The trips were the first abroad for most. Militarily, Soviet and Chinese support had just helped DRV troops scored major, almost unthinkable, victories on the battlefield, leading to the defeat of France. The novelty of the experience, the deep appreciation for Soviet help, and a developing belief in the future of socialism were hard to separate but reinforced one another. The blissful reactions of Vietnamese on arriving in the communist dreamland were palpable and genuine, as

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86 See Vu. From Cheering to Volunteering: Vietnamese Communists and the Arrival of the Cold War.
described by the famous poet, novelist and playwright The Lu while riding the train to Moscow: “So we are now inside the Soviet Union. Since… we crossed the Chinese-Soviet border, we have been really living our first hours in a real world that came from the most beautiful dream ever.”

While the new relationship between communist Vietnam and the USSR can be viewed as merely reproducing the colonial dependency under a new patron, Vietnamese intellectuals did not show the slightest hint of this view. Tu Mo, a well-known satirical poet who was on the same train with The Lu to Moscow and later to Yerevan, Armenia, described this Caucasian republic as being oppressed and exploited to the extreme by the Tsarist regime. Only after the Bolsheviks helped overthrow the “bourgeois government” of Armenia in 1920 and provided assistance was Armenia able to develop economically and culturally. The Soviet Union did not want just itself to be rich but was ready to help others so that communism could be achieved globally. The US “gave one and took back ten [giup mot lot muoi], turned her aid recipients into her vassals, and enticed them into aggressive pacts to sacrifice the blood of their own people for American interests.”

In contrast, the Soviet Union had no ulterior motives in helping small and backward countries like Armenia take back their independence, freedom and happiness.

Nguyen Huy Tuong, another playwright, writer and member of the executive committee of the Soviet-Vietnamese Friendship Association, visited the Soviet Union during October 30-December 2, 1955 as part of an official delegation of the Association. Nguyen Huy Tuong described frankly and in detail his feelings in his personal diary that was made public by his family for the first time in 2006, more than 40 years after his death. Here is what he wrote under the entry for November 16, 1955, after having spent many days sightseeing in Moscow and attending meetings with Soviet people:

[I] love the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union has experienced so much suffering, so she is sympathetic to other peoples’ suffering. [I] love the efforts of the Soviet Union [and] love [Soviet] working people. [I] feel closer to the Soviet Union. [I] feel that I have to propagandize [tuyen truyen] about the Soviet Union, praise the Soviet Union, [and] keep a complete [tuyet doi] belief in the Soviet Union.

90 Tu Mo. Lien Xo: Dang phuc, dang yeu (The Soviet Union: To be admired and loved) // Chung toi tham Lien Xo. Pp. 22-27.

[II] talk to Rima [and] Sergei… about Vietnamese’s feelings about the Soviet Union… Talking about the poverty in [my] country, Rima said, Vous l’aurez (you will have everything). [She] said, “it was the same [in the Soviet Union] when Lenin was alive. At the time the Soviet Union was all by itself. Now [because] Vietnam has the Soviet Union [as an ally], [Vietnam will] make rapid progress.” [I] feel greater gratitude to the Soviet Union. The more I know about the Soviet Union, the closer I feel…

The whole night I have not been able to sleep [tran troc] because I keep thinking about the Soviet Union. I feel I must protect her.92

This was what Nguyen Huy Tuong wrote to himself. His love for the Soviet Union was just as real as his love for his wife and daughter. Below is what appeared as a draft of a speech he delivered in Red Square during the same visit (under the entry for November 6, 1955):

When I was a little pupil in Hai Phong, on a night on either May 1 or the anniversary of the Russian Revolution in 1930, I was assigned the [secret] task of raising a hammer-and-sickle flag on a street lamp post in [the local] Sat market. [As I did this,] I was worried about the police while thinking about the Soviet Union at the same time. I knew people over there had freedom and happiness, but I also thought that because my country was enslaved I would never have the chance to go there.

Then the Vietnamese people rose up to liberate our country, following the light of the Russian Revolution. The Soviet Union defeated fascist Germany, helping our revolution to succeed. Then our resistance prevailed and the Geneva Agreements, thanks to the support of the Soviet Union that we will never forget, brought peace to our country. After that, Soviet ships brought rice to Vietnam; Soviet specialists came to Hanoi; Vietnamese delegations visited the Soviet Union. Everyday I felt closer to the Soviet Union…

My dream [uoc vong] of 20 years has become true. I’m honored to set foot on the Soviet Union… I have visited the tombs of the great Lenin and Stalin… As I walked by the bodies of these two great revolutionsaries, solemnly and respectfully like everyone I promised them that I would struggle harder to advance [tien len].93

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There was little difference between Nguyen Huy Tuong’s private thoughts and his public speech (although the public speech perhaps required him to dramatize a little). His personal feelings were genuine and the belief was strong. As a Party member, he was perhaps more convinced of the experience than others. However, available sources suggest that affection for the USSR was broadly shared among the cultural elites.

An enthusiastic intelligentsia contributed greatly to bringing the Soviet Union closer to North Vietnam. With their help, numerous works of Soviet authors were translated into Vietnamese. While data for all authors is not available, the most translated was perhaps Lenin. During 1955-1959, 73 works of Lenin were published with a total circulation of 343,546 copies. These included Lenin’s Complete Works (4 volumes). Given that the overall number of books published in North Vietnam during the same period is thought to be about 35 million, Lenin’s works must have topped the list by comprising one out of every 100 books published. With a total population of about 14 million in North Vietnam at the time (assuming all were literate and could understand Lenin), there was one copy for every 41 people.

In this propaganda effort to inculcate loyalty to the USSR, Ho Chi Minh played an active role as a regular commentator. During 1952-1955, he authored 22 short articles under the pen name of C.B. published in the Party newspaper Nhan Dan [The People]. Most articles were about 500 words long. They were written in simple style for ordinary readers but the language was concise and idiomatic. Stories about the Soviet Union conveyed the happy life, advanced technology, economic success and progressive society there. In an article to celebrate the 37th anniversary of the birth of the Red Army, Ho Chi Minh displayed unconcealed pride that Vietnam was an outpost of the new Soviet Empire. After reviewing the history of the Red Army in the Civil War and World War II, he wrote,

Today, this Red Army is more powerful than ever, because:

- For every 100 soldiers, 77 are communist party and communist youth union members who are the most elite of the Soviet Fatherland.

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96 See the collection of these articles: C. B. [Ho Chi Minh]. Lien Xo Vi Dai [The Soviet Union is Great]. Hanoi, 1956.
The Red Army had 11 brother armies of new democracies: China, (North) Korea, Mongolia and Vietnam in the East, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Democratic Republic of Germany, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania in the West. The Red Army never stops training and making progress, and is always ready to fight.

[There are now] twelve heroic armies with strong solidarity supported by 900 million people (not to mention the support of peace-loving people around the world). What a great and strong force for protecting peace, democracy and socialism! If the warmongering imperialist camp led by the US becomes crazy [and attacks us], it will share the same fate as Hitler.97

**Conclusion**

This paper argues that ideological loyalty was a critical component of Soviet-Vietnamese relations. Based on recently published sources in Vietnamese, I hope to have shown how the first generation of Vietnamese communists encountered the Soviet Union and fell head over heels in love with it. The Soviet Union promised a new world sharply contrasting to the colonial society in which they grew up and the capitalist system some of them had observed in France or elsewhere. Although the colonial experience helped shape their views of the USSR, their class perspectives played a greater role. The liberation of the masses, not that of oppressed nations, preoccupied their minds as they thought about what the Soviet Union represented.

Their infatuation with the Soviet Union was genuine and must have made a lasting impact on them.98 It is thus not surprising that, on coming to power in 1954 in North Vietnam and in 1975 in South Vietnam, they were absolutely devoted to Stalinist programs of socialist construction. Back to 1954, communist leaders achieved cooperation with the Northern elites in creating a mass cult of the Soviet Union in North Vietnam. By then, the North Vietnamese intelligentsia’s affection for the Soviet Union was influenced in part by their appreciation for its help during the anti-French resistance.

98 There were efforts to fabricate and mythologize history as in the case of Ton Duc Thang, but these do not invalidate the true encounters or experiences of others. See Christoph Giebel. Imagined Ancestries of Vietnamese Communism: Ton Duc Thang and the Politics of History and Memory. Seattle, 2004.
This article hopes to correct the tendency to neglect Vietnamese ideological loyalty to the Soviet Union in the literature. To Vietnamese communists – at least the first generation – alliance with the Soviet Union was not simply a foreign policy decision, but one that was in accordance to their conscience and belief in communism. They did not view Vietnam’s relationship with the Soviet Union simply as a strategic alliance, and would certainly deny that it was a new kind of colonial dependency. As true believers in world revolution and proletarian internationalism, Vietnamese communists thought of their country as an “Eastern outpost” of a revolutionary dreamland headquartered in Moscow. This belief was reinforced by their deep affection for and gratitude to the Soviet Union. Of course, Vietnamese leaders from time to time had to balance their ideological commitments with realpolitik, as when Stalin abandoned them during 1945-1949. Yet the Soviet Union to them stood for long-term commitments and noble values that had originally motivated them to risk their lives to become political activists.

SUMMARY

В статье Туонга Ву рассматривается проблема восприятия вьетнамскими революционерами и интеллектуалами 1920–1930-х гг. Советского Союза. Переосмысливая традиционный подход, в рамках которого взаимоотношения советской империи и стран третьего мира рассматриваются с точки зрения внешнеполитического доминирования, Ву раскрывает процесс конструирования образа СССР вьетнамскими интеллектуалами как результат сложной динамики, в которой колониальное прошлое Вьетнама играло особую роль. Образ СССР в текстах вьетнамских интеллектуалов и революционеров отражал не только видение современности, социальной справедливости и технологического прогресса (лаборатория революции и социализма), но и становился своего рода Иным колониальных западных империй, под господством которых находился Вьетнам. По мнению автора, несмотря на асимметрию взаимоотношений вьетнамских революционеров и Советского Союза, вьетнамские интеллектуалы отказывались видеть в этих отношениях какую-либо новую форму колониальной зависимости. По мнению автора, его подход позволяет продемонстрировать субъектность интеллектуалов стран третьего мира во взаимоотношениях с СССР и
показать их активную роль в историческом процессе деколонизации и возникновения независимых государств третьего мира.