7. From Cheering to Volunteering: Vietnamese Communists and the Coming of the Cold War, 1940–1951

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How did leaders of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) greet the outbreak of the Cold War, and in particular the formation of two opposing ideological blocs? Existing scholarship has depicted an independently minded ICP charting a pragmatic course vis-à-vis Moscow in the 1941–1954 period.1 This line of interpretation would suggest that the arrival of the Cold War, which imposed a rigid global order on small countries, would not be celebrated in Vietnam. Using party documents and Vietnamese newspaper sources, in this chapter I examine the changing worldviews of ICP leaders from 1940 to 1951 in the context of anticolonial nationalist revolution. Long before the outbreak of the Cold War, leading Vietnamese communists had cherished a particular worldview in which the world was divided into two camps.2 In their imagination, the socialist camp represented all the best things in the world whereas the imperialist camp contained the worst.

This binary worldview had three particular characteristics. First, international patterns of alliance were assumed to fundamentally reflect the domestic

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antagonism in Marxist theory between bourgeois and proletarian classes. There were simple and complex versions of this binary world; often complex versions were simply attempts to explain away facts contrary to simple versions. Second, note that the term “binary” and not “bipolar” is used. The binary world of Vietnamese communists did not assume the existence of a central pole within each camp around which other states converged. Their worldview thus suggested a more complex world than a simple bipolar one centered on the United States and the Soviet Union. To the Vietnamese, there would often be a pole or center in each camp; for example, the Soviet Union was always the center of the socialist camp to them. However, the existence of such a center was viewed as a given historical condition; one did not need to assume the hegemony of the center over the periphery nor any inherent inferiority on the part of peripheral states. Third, this particular worldview held by Vietnamese leaders as conveyed in party documents had a stylized, dramatized, and often vulgarized quality to it. On the one hand, this worldview appeared dogmatic because it was based on relatively fixed principles and was repeatedly reproduced in simple forms. On the other hand, the language used to express it was personified and full of lively images. Speculative future scenarios were also drawn with rich imagination, sometimes in spite of the limited information about world politics available to their authors.

Given their binary worldview, the development of the Cold War did not surprise them and was in fact welcome by many top Vietnamese leaders. The evidence shows that first they cheered, and then volunteered to fight on the frontlines. In fact, war was precisely what they had looked forward to at least since the early 1940s. It vindicated their beliefs about the fundamental cleavage in international politics between revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries. It allowed them to proudly display their revolutionary credentials and to work immediately on realizing their revolutionary ambitions. Previously, the revolutionaries had been making empty promises to peasants; the Cold War allowed ICP leaders to finally implement their cherished but long-delayed radical land reform.

The main body of this chapter analyzes ICP documents and other publications beginning with the Seventh Central Committee Plenum in November 1940 and ending with the Second Party Congress in February 1951. Note that the Seventh instead of the Eighth Plenum in May 1941 is selected as the starting point. The Eighth Plenum was convened by Ho Chi Minh, who had just returned from the Soviet Union; it established the Viet Minh as a united front of all social classes and placed class interests as secondary to those of the nation. It thus marked the turning point in the revolutionary strategy of the ICP. However, the Seventh Plenum is a valuable departing point for two reasons. First,
key participants at the Eighth Plenum, including Truong Chinh, Hoang Quoc Viet, and Hoang Van Thu were also present at the Seventh Plenum. The first two rose to the top at this Plenum and would be among the top five of the ICP leadership over the next 15 years. The Seventh Plenum resolution was the first document that systematically expressed the views of these leaders as they assumed ICP leadership. Second, given Ho’s absence at the Seventh Plenum and his presence at the Eighth Plenum, the contrast between the ideas expressed and policies made at the two plenums may shed light on his contribution.

In the conclusion, I draw from the evidence five important implications for the literature on Vietnamese politics. First, the war between the DRV and the United States in the 1960s was not unimaginable in 1945 as many have argued. It was certainly not inevitable, but still predictable based on the worldview of Vietnamese leaders in the early 1940s. Second, the difference between a “pragmatic” Ho and his “radical lieutenants” in conventional historiography was not that great when their fundamental worldviews are examined. Third, it is often suggested that internationalist tendencies in the ICP were weakened after its failed Southern rebellion in 1940. This suggestion, however, confuses Ho and the ICP as a whole; it does not stand up to close scrutiny based on the evidence here. In fact, internationalism may have intensified after 1940. Fourth, existing literature is obsessed with the false dichotomy between nationalism and communism, while slighting ICP leaders’ ideological beliefs and revolutionary commitments. The review of their worldview during this most difficult period of the revolution indicates that those beliefs and commitments were extraordinary. Not only were Vietnamese communists capable of thinking independently, they also possessed radical beliefs that so far have not been sufficiently recognized by outside observers. Finally, I will distinguish two contradictory types of documents during this period and suggest how each ought to be used.

Imperialist War, Socialist Peace
Unlike ICP leaders of the 1930s who were trained in the Soviet Union and worked as Comintern agents, participants at the Seventh Plenum had never been out of Indochina and southern China. How did they conceptualize the world? In the section about the international situation, the resolution of the Seventh Plenum began with a brief but brave announcement: The Plenum would limit its analysis of the war and the world’s revolutionary movement to the previous year, “in sum, (to) the basic factors that would extinguish the fires of imperialist warfare, destroy the capitalist world and build a new one: the so-
Two different worlds existed: One was new and socialist whereas the other was old and capitalist.

The subsection on World War II discussed how fascist Germany and Italy had defeated imperialist England and France. The selfish United States helped the British in this war not only to cope with the fascist threat but also to wrest control of British military bases and to obtain other economic concessions. Overall, the war was characterized as one between rising imperialists (Germany, Italy, and Japan) and richer, more established ones (Britain, France, and the United States) for control of colonies. The question that dominated this subsection involved the reasons why there was war among imperialists, which after all belonged to the same camp. Why did they fight among themselves even though all of these fascist and imperialist states wanted to attack the Soviet Union to “smother the world’s revolutionary oven” (lo lua)? The answer: The Soviet Union had become increasingly more powerful and none of the imperialists wanted to take the responsibility of firing the first shot against it. To prepare for the eventual war with the Soviet Union, the imperialists caused a “war among their own brothers” to consolidate their strength first. Thus, World War II could eventually become a war between the imperialists and the Soviet Union. However, because the imperialists were fighting one another, and the war was causing uprisings by oppressed peoples and the world’s proletariats, even when the imperialists were finally able to reunite and attack the Soviet Union, they would then be annihilated by the Red Army and the “world revolution.” This revolution had a good chance of success because it was led by the Comintern, “the only political party of the world’s proletariats and peoples.”

The resolution made an implicit attempt to defend the Molotov–Ribbentrop agreement between Stalin and Hitler. Why did the leader of the revolutionary camp sign a truce with the counter-revolutionary camp? Was it true, as Trotskyites claimed, that the Soviet Union was preoccupied with building socialism and neglected its responsibility to revolutions elsewhere? It was pointed out that the Soviet Union had intervened from the beginning to prevent the world war from spreading; in the process it wisely expanded its influence, “which would help strengthen the world’s revolutionary fortress” (thanh tri). Russia did not plot with any imperialists to rob Poland and the Baltic nations of their independence; rather, it helped liberate these small nations from the imperialist yoke.

It was further argued that building socialism in one country could help world revolution. The success of the third five-year plan had made the Soviet Union the most powerful socialist country on earth; this changed the balance of force in favor of “the revolutionary camp.” 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” \( (ninh hot) \) it. The Soviet Union stood above them all; it had no interest in \( (khong them) \) helping one imperialist to fight another. Those who pledged not to attack it were accorded good relations (hence, Molotov–Ribbentrop). The section ended with a comparison of the two worlds: “[W]hereas the 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 to follow the Soviet Union.\(^{11}\)

The section on the appropriate revolutionary path for Indochina described the class situation and the ICP vision of the revolution. The two camps abroad corresponded to the two camps at home. The resolution claimed that Indochinese “proletariats” deserved the right to lead the Indochinese revolution more than “the bourgeoisie” did because (1) the former were the most revolutionary, being the most exploited and oppressed class; (2) they had their own political party that had been guided \( (diu dat) \) by the Comintern; (3) they had become a component of world revolution; and (4) they were still in the infancy stage \( (be) \), but they were growing up fast.\(^{12}\) The more imperialists invested in Indochina, the faster they would grow up \( (lon khoe) \). They were born when socialism had been victorious in the Soviet Union. In contrast, the Indochinese bourgeoisie were also infants, but their prospect of a long life was bleak \( (hay con dau xanh da thieu trien vong) \) because they were born when world capitalism had become decayed \( (thoi nat) \).

Even though peasants were the largest class in Indochina, they played only a subsidiary role in this binary conflict between the proletariats and the bourgeoisie. The resolution called for the proletariats “to do all they could to draw peasants to their side. They had to maintain a close relationship to peasants and lead peasants in the struggle. They should not let peasants follow the leadership of the bourgeoisie and urban petit bourgeois or fall into the traps of the pro-French, pro-Japanese Vietnamese traitors.”\(^{13}\) True to Marx, peasants in this view could only be followers and even so they were easily duped.

When the Eighth Plenum was convened six months later, the world situation had not changed significantly. Much of the discussion on this topic in the Eighth Plenum resolution focused on the comparison between World Wars I and II. Both were wars among imperialists for colonies and markets. The second one was on a larger scale and more destructive, indicating the greater extent of conflict among the imperialists. Furthermore, World War II occurred after the birth of the Soviet Union, “a socialist country of one-sixth of world’s area having very important economic and political status and being the pillar
of peace and the fatherland of world proletariats.”¹⁴ In this war, some weak nations such as China had been able to resist fascist aggression. The proletariats this time were also much better organized and united under the leadership of the Third Comintern. These differences meant that this war would be more auspicious for the world revolution “to kill the imperialists.” The resolution predicted that if World War I had given birth to the Soviet Union, World War II would midwife many more socialist countries and successful revolutions.¹⁵

The prediction indicated that ICP leaders viewed the divided world as a recent phenomenon that would become sharper in the near future as the number of socialist countries increased. The contrast between the socialist part of the world and the rest was again described in vivid terms: “[W]hile the whole world was drawn by the imperialists into a fierce massacre, only the Soviet Union enjoyed peace.”¹⁶ Thanks to its “wise and determined” policy to pursue peace, the resolution explained, the Soviet Union had been able to expand its border and stopped the war from spreading to Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union now had “the most powerful army in the world fully armed with advanced weapons”; it was ready to deal with any imperialist aggression and had been selflessly helping small nations such as China to fight the fascists. On the other hand, in the imperialist camp, the United States was still depicted as cunningly profiteering from the war: It was pointed out that the United States did not fight but sold weapons to both sides so that they could “slaughter mankind” (nhan loai).

If the section on international situation did not show any noticeable differences between the two plenum resolutions, the analysis of domestic politics in the Eighth Plenum resolution was less dogmatic. Instead of a simple picture of the ICP versus the rest, the analysis listed the ICP as one of the anti-Japanese parties (still the best though), and also briefly discussed pro-Japanese parties.¹⁷ The resolution had a new section on “the national issue,” pointing out how the Indochinese peoples had been divided and used against each other by the French. To fight the French and the Japanese, all these peoples had to unite because one or two would not be sufficient. As the largest group, the Vietnamese should lead and help (diu dat giup do) other groups, but once independence had been achieved, should offer them the right to self-determination.¹⁸ Although it emphasized “the national issue,” the resolution did not fail to reiterate that the Indochinese revolution was a component of world revolution whereas their enemies, the French and Japanese, were part of world imperialism and fascism. Indochinese nations thus “shared a destiny” with “revolutionary China” and the Soviet Union, both of which were also fighting fascism. Of course, the British, Americans, and Chinese Guomindang government (GMD) were also fighting fascism, but they were not included in this club.
The class analysis in the resolution showed an appreciation of social and political changes in favor of the revolutionary movement. Under the cruel exploitation of resources in Indochina by the Japanese, “the attitudes of various classes” toward the revolution had changed. The working class, peasants, and the petit bourgeoisie all became more supportive of the revolution. Even landlords, rich peasants, and many capitalists had become neutral or sympathetic rather than hostile. The use of “attitudes” (thai do) instead of “interests” (quyen loi) indicated a more flexible approach toward class analysis. Thai do was manipulable; quyen loi was tied to the economic structure and relatively fixed.

As many have noted, the Eighth Plenum placed national interests above those of class. It was concluded that national independence must be achieved before land reform could be carried out. Peasants would still be interested in joining a nationalist revolution because it would eliminate the French–Japanese exploitation and would give them community lands and lands taken from traitors. Furthermore, the nationalist revolution would not delay the social revolution because (1) once the party, the vanguard of the proletariats, had seized the leadership of the nationalist revolution, the party could easily direct this revolution to serve the socialist cause; (2) in the nationalist revolution the party would take control of the government and use it to carry out a social revolution; and (3) once the Indochinese revolution succeeded, “the world would be like a boiling pot.” This situation would allow the Indochinese revolution to leap forward to launch a proletarian revolution and build socialism. These three scenarios suggested that while its authors advocated the nationalist route, a world revolution and a domestic social revolution were never far away from their minds. A nationalist revolution was seen as paving the way for, and once successfully completed, necessarily moving to the side at the earliest convenience for a proletarian revolution.

After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in late June 1941, supporting the Soviet Union became the main activity on the ICP agenda. We have seen in the above plenum resolutions that the Soviet Union was viewed as “the fortress of world revolution” and as a protector of small and oppressed peoples around the world in their struggles against imperialism. As explained, supporting the Soviet Union meant working for Indochinese independence, because if the Soviet Union won the war, it would in turn help liberate Indochinese from French and Japanese imperialist rule. The party instructed its members to propagate about this issue to mobilize mass support for the Soviet Union, form “Friends of the Soviet Union” groups, and raise donations for the Soviet Red Army. Indigenous troops under the colonial government also needed to be ed-
ucated about this issue because one day they might be sent by the Pétain gov-
ernment 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, published an ar-
ticle titled, “What kind of country is Russia?” As this article described, Russia was the largest country in the world. Twenty years ago Russians had been forced to do corvée labor (*di phu*) and pay taxes, and been “exploited, op-
pressed, poor and ignorant like [the 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 worked, had a one-month vacation every year, and all this plus “good salaries.” Peasants had all the land they needed and could borrow plows and 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 food than they needed. Many women became mandarins (*lam quan*), doctors, and pilots; they enjoyed all the rights men had. Free schooling for male and female children was mandatory up to age sixteen years. The state took care of children and the elderly and assigned doctors to treat sick people. The people were free to elect their hamlet chiefs (*ly truong*), subdistrict chiefs (*chanh tong*), and the top leader of the country. If they were not happy with these officials, they could sack them. “No one is oppressed, unlike in our country.” The article offered a glimpse of how ICP leaders imagined and wanted other Vietnamese to imag-
ine the Soviet Union. The rich and happy Soviet Union became a source of in-
spiration and a model for emulation. The extremely high quality of life there (especially compared to Vietnam) gave the USSR a mythical aura; yet the de-
tails 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.

**Conditional Alliance with “Old Imperialist Foxes”**

Pearl Harbor suddenly opened up the strong possibility of an Allied invasion of Indochina. On the one hand, ICP leaders continued to gamble that their des-
tiny would fall in with the Soviet Union and world proletariats. The world was still divided into two camps (*phe*), but these were for the time being over-
laid by two fronts (*mat tran*): fascists and antifascists comprised of the Soviet Union, England, the United States, China, and the global revolutionary forces. England and the United States were now allies in the same front but they were
not to be fully trusted. ICP leaders called on the British and U.S. proletariats to continue applying pressure on the capitalists in these countries so that they would fight the fascists to the end; otherwise, they might capitulate to the fascists and turn to fight the Soviet Union instead.

On the other hand, the possibility of the Chinese GMD, and British and American troops entering Indochina required the ICP to be more accommodating to these imperialists and the GMD. To the GMD, ICP leaders called for cooperation on an equal status (*binh dang tuong tro*); the Chinese must understand that they were in Indochina not to conquer it but to help themselves.25 To the British and Americans, the ICP proposed “conditional alliance and compromise” (*nhan nhuong lien hiep co dieu kien*). If they helped the Indochinese revolution, the party was willing to grant them certain privileges in Indochina. If they helped De Gaulle to reinstate the colonial system in Indochina, the ICP was prepared to denounce them and continue the struggle for independence. The party warned its members that they should harbor no illusions that these countries would offer the Vietnamese freedom for free. It also assured its members that collaboration with the British and Americans did not mean the party was “serving the interests of these imperialists”; this collaboration was necessary to defeat the fascists.

As the war further expanded in 1942, the Soviet–U.S.–British alliance was formally established.26 In response to a new international situation, top ICP leaders gathered and issued a new analysis and changes in policies.27 The resolution of this meeting indicated a lingering uneasiness among these leaders with the new phenomena that apparently contradicted their binary worldview. At one level, the fundamental cleavage remained the same in their view: “[T]he socialist system that represented the new world was fighting with the fascist system which was the most corrupt and barbaric part of the old world.”28 The same old question still haunted the party: Why did American and British imperialists ally with the Soviet Union to fight fascism? Why didn’t they help Hitler to destroy the Soviet Union? To these questions the resolution offered two answers. First, American and British capitalists wanted to defeat Germany to re-take what the latter had taken from them. Second, the British and American masses protested and demanded that their governments fight fascism.29 In allying themselves with the Soviet Union, these capitalist governments were primarily motivated by their imperialist interests but at the same time had to acknowledge (*nhin nhan*) certain legitimate interests of the people in their countries and their colonies. In any case, this was possible because “the bourgeois democratic regimes in these countries still existed and people were struggling to demand more” democracy. This fact allowed these countries “to be called “democratic” and be part of the antifascist democratic front led by the
Soviet Union. Their fight against fascism was no longer an imperialist war but a “progressive war.”

The document insisted that British and American masses should struggle until their governments opened a second front in Europe to share the burden with the Soviet Union. At the end of this war, the resolution predicted, “bourgeois democratic England and America” would become much more democratic and very different regimes. They would be willing to collaborate with the Soviet Union to “organize world peace.” In any case, if the United States and British capitalist ruling classes did not keep their promises, they would be overthrown by the Soviet Union and world revolution. As seen in this example, the ICP leaders’ strategy to explain away the embarrassing but necessary alliance with imperialists was twofold. One was to attribute the progressive policies in imperialist countries to their people, not the ruling classes or the governments concerned. The second was to raise a caveat at the end of the analysis about the counter-revolutionary nature of imperialist powers; this caveat in effect discounted the salience of the entire issue of alliance and reaffirmed the binary worldview. A confrontation with imperialists was always possible and lurking in the background of even the most positive assessment of their behavior.

In contrast with images of British and U.S. governments driven by imperialist interests but forced to accommodate popular demands, the Soviet Union again appeared as a benevolent world power. The Soviet Union had retreated in the early months following the German blitzkrieg “in part because it did not produce enough weaponry right away and in part because it wanted to prolong the war.” 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. In other words, the Soviets were accepting losses to themselves for the sake of world revolution. Among other tasks, the resolution called on party members to do a better job in mobilizing mass support for the Soviet resistance; it then explained in detail what they should do.

In mid-1943, the dissolution of the Comintern posed another theoretical and propaganda challenge to ICP leaders. The party’s claim to leadership in the Indochinese revolution depended in part on its association with the Comintern. The Comintern had also been portrayed as the leader of world revolution. To reassure the rank and file who wondered why the Comintern dissolved itself at such a critical time of war and revolution, the party explained that the Soviet Union needed “to join hands with a relatively progressive section of international bourgeoisie” to fight fascism. This act was to fend off two possible scenarios: (1) the United States, England, and the Axis powers formed a joint imperialist front to attack the Soviet Union, or (2) the United States and
England stood by, saving their forces and dominating the world once the Axis powers and the Soviet Union had destroyed each other. This analysis introduced some complexities into the imperialist camp but the view remained essentially binary; the Soviet–U.S. alliance was only a second-best choice that needed justification. The United States and England were not to be fully trusted because counter-revolutionariness was in their nature. The announcement assured party members that the ICP still stood firm and called on them to cast off their doubts and to fight back the criticisms of the Soviet Union by Vietnamese Trotskyites and other groups.

As an Allied invasion of Indochina seemed imminent in November 1944, the Viet Minh’s journal *Cuu Quoc* published a special issue on the “Overseas Problem” (Van de Hai ngoai). This issue was directed to the various Vietnamese exile groups in southern China; it called for these groups to unite under Viet Minh leadership to prepare for the possibility of Allied forces entering Vietnam to fight the Japanese. The guarded attitude towards the Chinese and Western powers remained the same. The journal advised its readers not to place their full trust in the promise made at the Moscow conference by the United States and England that all they wanted was to liberate Asian peoples. If the Vietnamese were not prepared when Allied forces entered Vietnam, it was argued, England and the United States would not hesitate to carry out their hidden plan of occupying Vietnam. They would set up a puppet regime or help the French to resurrect the colonial system.

Party documents in mid-1945 showed a friendlier attitude toward the GMD Chinese and the United States. A party document in April 1945, following the Japanese overthrow of French rule in Indochina, noted the San Francisco Conference and the Hot Springs meeting. The United States and GMD China were praised for taking a “progressive stand” toward former French colonies in contrast to “British hesitancy” and “French stubbornness.” China had been “democratized”: The Chongqing government had been reformed and GMD–CCP negotiations had born some fruit. The Philippines now enjoyed “autonomy” (*quyen tu chu*). This friendly attitude could have resulted from increased contact between Ho and the American OSS team in southern China at the time. However, when the chips were down, the binary worldview of ICP leaders remained unchanged. On the eve of the Japanese surrender, key party meetings at Tan Trao presided by Ho offered no lengthy analysis but only a brief, bulleted discussion of foreign policy issues. At the beginning, the resolution of the meeting pointed out that thanks to the war, the Soviet Union had expanded its borders while China and other countries were liberated. The fascist states were destroyed, resulting in a weaker world capitalist system. The war did not result in a worldwide socialist revolution, but it did create favorable conditions.
for such a revolution by spreading “new democracies” all over the world. The document noted two salient aspects of the situation in Indochina. The different attitudes toward the colonies between the United States and GMD China on the one hand and France and England on the other would favor the Indochinese revolution. However, England and the United States could also let France return to Indochina because of their antagonism toward the Soviet Union. Why the United States and England must or would be antagonistic toward the Soviet Union (note that at the time they were still cooperating to fight fascism) was left unexplained. What the Soviet Union would have to do with Indochina or why it would be interested in Indochina was similarly assumed but not explained. Underlying this analysis was the entrenched perception of a divided world and the assumption that Indochinese destiny lay with the Soviet camp even at the height of U.S.–Viet Minh collaboration. The United States, England, and GMD China were subjects of manipulation, never treated as true allies like the Soviet Union.

**Imperialist Lies, Socialist Truths**

After proclaiming independence in September 1945 and establishing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi, Ho’s government was soon confronted in the north by GMD Chinese forces and their Vietnamese nationalist protégés, and in the South by a British occupation that brought back thousands of French troops. As president and foreign minister of the new state, Ho pursued a foreign policy that has been labeled as “adding friends and reducing enemies.” This policy had two tracks. The first comprised sending out repeated messages and missions requesting international support, including to the United States and Soviet Union. Ho’s widely quoted declaration of independence that used the language of the American Revolution was part of this strategy. This pragmatic approach involved both existing and new elements: The Viet Minh had been courting American and GMD Chinese aid at least since 1944, while secret cables to Stalin marked the first time Vietnamese communist leaders attempted to contact Moscow since Ho left the Soviet Union in late 1938.38

The second track was to negotiate first with the GMD occupation authorities and then with the returning French, if not for Vietnam’s full independence, then for some forms of autonomy and the recognition of his government as the sole authority of Vietnam. A key decision was to publicly dissolve the ICP to indicate to both domestic and foreign audiences that his government was not communist (the ICP was in fact not dissolved but went underground with a new name, Association for Marxist Studies). How GMD generals reacted to this overture is not known, but this decision, which many have attributed to
Ho, would dog him for years in the form of internal criticism and suspicion from his international communist allies. At the same time, it failed to make an impact on American ambivalence toward his regime.

Efforts to “add friends” would continue through 1947 with secret missions to court both U.S. and Soviet support. In one such mission, the DRV’s representative even offered special trading privileges for American companies in return for American goods and loans. It has been suggested that this gesture signaled the DRV’s serious interest in developing a “realistic and long-term alliance” with the United States. The same account acknowledges that sentiments hostile to the United States began to be voiced in ICP documents in late 1945, but these negative views are dismissed as “muted” and as merely revealing the tensions among various perspectives held by Vietnamese leaders rather than exposing the lack of “sincerity” in the DRV’s diplomatic maneuvers.

Presented as isolated incidents, such expressions of anti-American sentiments may indeed have meant little. As internal party documents since 1940 analyzed above have shown, however, anti-imperialist (and procommunist) thoughts among ICP members had been deep, systematic, consistent, and longstanding throughout. It is true that the encircled DRV was serious in obtaining U.S. recognition; given the profound attachment of its leaders to social and world revolution, it is a great mistake to infer that ICP leaders now considered the GMD and the United States friends. Below I will examine in some depth the substantial amount of documents and other writings that caution us not to attribute any long-term significance to those diplomatic offers.

Several ICP documents dated in November 1945 displayed strong suspicions of U.S. and GMD Chinese motives and a prophetic vision of a coming Cold War. In its analysis of international conditions, a key document issued by the Central Committee pointed out four main antagonisms (mau thuân) in the world: (1) the Soviet Union versus the imperialist countries, (2) the proletariats versus capitalists, (3) the oppressed peoples versus colonialism, and (4) among the imperialist themselves. The Soviet Union was “quietly rebuilding itself and urgently developed advanced machines and weapons to improve the living standards of its people and to defend itself.” The Soviet press had acknowledged the legitimacy of the struggles in Indochina and Indonesia for independence. In contrast, England, the United States, and Canada wanted to form “an Anglo-Saxon bloc” and use it against the Soviet Union. (But “Soviet calmness and determination overawed them.”) The United States did not want to attack the Soviet Union yet, but it had encouraged GMD troops to fire at the Chinese Red Army “to scare the Soviet Union.” The United States lied (noi doi) that it was neutral, but in fact was secretly helping France by lending ships to carry French troops to Indochina. On the one hand, the United States wanted
to compete with the British and French for influence and economic interests in Southeast Asia; on the other hand, it also wanted to collaborate with them to encircle the Soviet Union. For this purpose, the United States would be ready to sacrifice its own interests in the region. The fourth antagonism was thus not sufficient to override the first three, which were simply a more extended version of the two-camp view.43

Long before the Cold War spread to Asia, the ICP had already been predicting it. The same document noted the tumultuous character of world politics at the time: independence struggles in Southeast Asia, GMD–communist conflict, labor protests in England, and Russian–U.S. disagreements about the occupation of Japan.44 It noted that humankind was experiencing a postwar crisis but this crisis would not lead to a third world war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Instead there would be a peaceful and democratizing period before a new era of war and revolution started. War between the United States and the Soviet Union would not start immediately because “the forces for peace” were stronger than “those for war” at that time. Elements of the forces for peace included movements led by the U.S. Communist Party against U.S. policy to increase tension with the Soviet Union and to intervene into China, popular protests against the British government for its help to French and Dutch colonialists, movements in the West to support independence for India and Indochina, and “new scientific inventions” (i.e., atomic bombs) in the Soviet Union. War between the imperialist and socialist countries would be inevitable, although the form it would take was not specified. However, ICP leaders did not look forward to a third world war; they stressed that the independence struggles in Indochina and Indonesia as well as the GMD–communist conflict in China would not lead to such a war but would lead to more peace.45 This reasoning demonstrates their lack of interest in affairs beyond Indochina. They would be satisfied and embrace peace after their struggle in Indochina succeeded; world revolution to overthrow world capitalism (in World War III) would be something of a long-term commitment. They identified themselves with global proletariats, but were not yet ready to go all the way to call for an immediate world revolution.

Late 1945 was the time when the Viet Minh government under Ho ostensibly focused on the anticolonial struggle while rejecting social revolution. However, a different and thinly veiled face of this government is found in Su That (Truth), the biweekly journal of the Association for Marxist Studies in Indochina (the disguised ICP). The editorial in the debut issue of Su That in late 1945 bluntly claimed that one of the periodical’s missions was “to show all fellow Indochinese a basic truth: [T]here was only one way to achieve freedom, peace and happiness for mankind, for every nation and for the working
class. This way was through the thorough execution (thúc hiện triệt de) of Marxism.”

Despite ongoing diplomatic negotiations with France and overtures to the United States, secret party documents and fiery articles in Su That increasingly stressed the two-camp perspective. The “imperialist camp,” now led by the United States, was viewed as significantly weaker (compared to before World War II); they needed time to “bandage their wounds” and prepare for an attack on the Soviet Union and nationalist movements in the colonies. The “socialist forces” had become much stronger, especially the Soviet Union, but they were not powerful enough to destroy the capitalist system and establish a world proletarian government. Indochina had become an important zone of revolution. Antagonisms among the imperialists were brewing in Southeast Asia while they were trying to set up an anticommunist front and suppress national liberation movements. In discussing the Chinese conflict, an article in Su That denounced the United States for favoring the GMD, calling for the Soviet Union to play an equal role in mediation. While a noncommunist newspaper praised the United States for granting independence to the Philippines in July 1946, Su That dismissed the American act as a way of deceiving the world about American goodwill and humanity and deceiving small and oppressed nations about U.S. imperialism and bourgeois democracy. This act reportedly could damage the reputation of other imperialists (because they still wanted to re-take their colonies), but it would help the United States to achieve world hegemony (ba quyen the gioi) and would help consolidate the imperialist camp in their fight against the Soviet Union and “world democratic forces.”

Bui Cong Trung, a Moscow-trained Central Committee member, argued in Su That by quoting Stalin that national liberation was inseparable from world revolution and class struggle. Trung was perhaps responding to an article published earlier in Chinh Nghia, the theoretical journal of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang); this article denied the relevance of class struggle for Vietnam where capitalism had not developed and all classes were impoverished. To those who argued that advanced capitalist societies had found ways to mitigate class struggle through mediation between management and labor, Trung gave a stinging denunciation of U.S. society:

No cities match New York as a capitalist paradise! But in April 1935 in the middle of this city full of skyscrapers there were 600,000 families, a third of its population, living on donations by relief societies. In contrast, about 100 rich families in New York throw their money out the window [tha ho tieu xai phung phi]. The child of a millionaire spends on average $40,160 a year, while 2,280,000 [poor] chil-
dren have no money to pay for their schooling. The capitalist paradise has been built on the miseries of the working masses and the exploitation of small nations. We Marxists believe that, to escape from the capitalist hell, proletariats all over the world have to unite.

While both the United States and the Soviet Union were silent on Vietnam’s requests for recognition, ICP leaders denounced the United States but continued to find excuses for the Soviet Union. An example is the Moscow conference in January 1946, where Indochina was not even mentioned. An editorial in *Su That* warned its readers not to expect too much from this conference because the French and the Chinese were absent there. But why didn’t the Soviet Union bring up Indochina at the meeting? *Su That* speculated that the reason was the Soviet Union’s need for British and French support to deal with the American threat. Indochina could still gain, however: The Soviet Union would join the United States in occupying Japan and participating in the Far East Committee. “Of course the Soviet Union would raise its voice in matters concerning Indochina” because the Soviet Union was always loyal to the interests of weak nations and because “imperialists were not free to make rains and sow winds [lam mua lam gio] in front of the Soviet Union, a first-rate world power with anti-fascist credentials.” It would not be a bad idea, the editorial argued, if Indochina (like Korea) could be freed from colonialism and temporarily placed under an international trusteeship supervised by the Soviet Union before achieving full independence. Although the Moscow conference had not met Indochinese demands for full independence, it “indirectly solved the Indochina problem and opened up the road for Indochina to move ahead.”

The ICP view of two opposing camps was further strengthened in the next two years. In this view, the “antidemocratic camp” continued to evolve with the United States as its leader and a ring of followers; this camp was getting ready to encircle the Soviet Union and destroy world revolution. The United States was seen as dominated by financial cliques who cunningly expanded their power over the entire capitalist world. The Marshall Plan was viewed as a means for the United States to colonize Europe. While French and Dutch imperialists waged wars against anticolonial movements, “the old imperialist foxes” England and the United States deceived the colonized peoples by granting mere formal independence to India, Burma, and the Philippines. Their moves were to avoid war while hiding behind the “puppet governments” in these countries and exploiting and oppressing their peoples.

On the other hand, the “democratic camp” gradually took shape with closer collaboration between Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, as evidenced in the formation of the Cominform among European communist parties in Sep-
tember 1947. As political conditions in France became volatile in early 1948, ICP leaders were imagining a scenario of civil war in France, the collapse of the French government and U.S. open intervention in Indochina. The party realized that this could be a difficult situation for Indochina if the United States, counter-revolutionary France, England, and GMD China allied to fight French communist, Chinese, Indochinese, and Southeast Asian revolutions. The nice thing about this scenario, according to the ICP, was that it offered a good opportunity for Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions to “harmonize their march forward” (hoa nhip tien buoc), and for the weak nations in Asia to build close links and unite with Western European revolutions. The democratic front would have the opportunity to eliminate imperialism, their common enemy.

Similar to the “antidemocratic camp,” which included various regimes (capitalist, fascist, and military authoritarian), party leaders did not view the “democratic camp” as a monolithic bloc of similar states directed by the Soviet Union. In this view, the Soviet Union was a socialist state with a proletarian dictatorship. Eastern European countries, North Korea, communist-controlled China, and Vietnam were “people’s democracies” with a “dictatorship of the people led by the proletariats.” Thanks to Soviet help, the revolutionary path in these countries toward socialism might need less violence, but countries in the same camp faced different historical conditions and should pursue their own paths to socialism. The party did not hide the problems within the “democratic camp”: In response to questions about the Cominform’s criticisms of Tito, it explained that Tito was only “a straw stuck in the new democratic wheel that was rolling forward.” In his own speech, Ho was even blunter, calling Tito “America’s running dog” (cho san cua My). The case of Tito did not expose the weakness of the democratic camp; on the contrary, it indicated that the camp had “iron discipline” (ky luat sat) and would not “condone arrogant militaristic behavior” (quan phiet, tu man).

**From Cheering to Volunteering**

How was the Cold War actually received in Vietnam? One of the specific events that marked the beginning of the Cold War in Europe was the dramatic conflict in Berlin between the Soviet Union and Western powers. Truong Chinh’s report, worth quoting at length below, described the event with un-concealed pride of the Soviet confrontational stand:

The U.S. flaunted atomic bombs to frighten the world and issued new currency notes in West Germany and West Berlin. The Soviet Union reacted strongly: West Berlin was blockaded, no cars were
allowed in and out, hot air balloons were flown above, steel fences as high as six kilometers [sic] were erected, British and American airplanes had to be flown very high to cross these fences in order to transport relief goods into that area. The U.S. tried to coax [phinh pho] and threaten [ham doa] but the Soviet Union was as firm as a big rock [vung nhu ban thach]. British and American representatives went to Moscow, requesting meetings with Stalin and Molotov. The condition of the Soviet Union: the U.S. had to... The U.S. did not comply, so “the cold war” continued. This event caused the U.S. and England to lose face. It showed the world that the Soviet Union was quite strong and that the U.S. was only bluffing [doa gia].

Note the lack of seriousness and a slight sense of glee in the tone; the entire episode appeared like a mildly amusing imperialist farce. Did Vietnamese leaders see any dangers in the new situation? As the fortunes of Chinese communists were rising in China, ICP leaders began to imagine a scenario in which the United States would intervene directly to help the GMD stop the communists and to help the French fight both Chinese and Vietnamese communists. “We are not afraid,” Truong Chinh declared, “because if the U.S. is defeated in China, it shall be defeated in Vietnam.” The Vietnamese guerrilla army was ordered to prepare for joint operations with Chinese forces once they reached southern China. Underlying this military strategy was the familiar prophetic vision: “A time will come when Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions will merge into a new democracy bloc in the Far East to counter American imperialists and their stooges—French colonialists, Chinese and Vietnamese traitors.”

That time arrived around early 1950. The party seized this opportunity with two parallel set of measures. One included cautious diplomatic announcements and broadcasts designed to manipulate world opinion by conveying the sense that in recognizing new Communist China, Vietnam was only seeking national independence and did not intend to join the emerging Cold War blocs. It was not clear whether the idea to proceed cautiously came from the Chinese or was their own idea because the minutes of the Standing Committee meeting mentioned only briefly the steps Vietnamese leaders planned to take:

Based on suggestions from Chinese [Communist] central leadership and also due to our need to act fast, [our Party] has recommended [our] government to announce that we would want to establish diplomatic relations with all countries, then a day later to announce that we recognize the People’s Republic of China. After
the Chinese have responded, we will transmit our announcement to the governments of Siam, Burma, India and Pakistan.64

The reception of Chinese representatives in Vietnam was also instructed to be carried out secretly and as an interparty, not intergovernment, affair. In a follow-up instruction a few days later, the party ordered government newspapers to “attack (cong kich) American imperialists, showing clearly the plots of U.S. military and financial cliques to directly intervene into Indochina.”65 Government radio stations, however, were not allowed to attack the United States directly; they were told to broadcast news of the U.S. intention to intervene in Indochina and to comment specifically that “any imperialists who wanted to mess with Indochina would fail as the U.S. did in China.” Attacking Vietnam’s neighbors such as India and Indonesia was also not permitted. Newspaper content was aimed at and limited largely to domestic consumption, whereas the party knew its radio messages were picked up abroad. The party wanted its people to hate the United States, but it was cautious not to provoke Washington into intervention.

Parallel to cautious measures intended for foreign consumption were bolder steps and proposals to take full advantage of the opportunity. In the same document that explained to (high-ranking) party members the decision to recognize China, it was mentioned that the ICP had “proposed to the Chinese Communist Party to allow Vietnamese forces to enter Chinese territory to intercept and destroy fleeing GMD troops.”66 The party also planned to “propose to the Chinese a common political and military strategy in Southeast Asia and to ask the French Communist Party to coordinate action.”67 Note that collaboration was sought not only militarily but also politically, not only in Indochina but also in southern China and in Southeast Asia. Close links with communist parties in Southeast Asia were also sought.68

The party leaders’ decision to quickly link up with Chinese communists can be explained only within the context of their broader strategic and ideological conception that had always divided the world into two camps and placed the destiny of Indochina solely with the socialist camp. Three weeks after the DRV had been recognized by the Soviet bloc, the standing committee of the party noted that the absolute majority of Vietnamese were “very positive” about this event. It also pointed out that there were a few who were “worried that Indochina would become a battlefield for the democratic and anti-democratic camps to compete for influence.”69 However, these few people were dismissed as caring only about their selfish interests (quyen loi rieng). The committee justified its decision as follows:
After the victory of the Chinese revolution, Indochina has become an outpost [*tien tieu*] in the anti-imperialist front in Southeast Asia. However, the world counter-revolutionary camp is not deterred [*chun*] by the fact that Vietnam has been recognized by [the socialist bloc]; they are even more actively executing their plot to intervene. The issue for us is that we have to act faster [*tranh thu thoi gian*] . . . to move on to the all-out attack phase to liberate our country and also to protect world peace, to protect the Soviet Union, to stall the plot of the warmongers, and to spread revolution to Southeast Asia.\(^7\)

Given the total lack of Chinese and Soviet interest in Indochina up to 1949, and the fierce competition between the United States and Soviet Union up to then in China, DRV leaders—assuming they did not then privilege any camp—should have interpreted the victory of Chinese communists as meaning that Indochina had become an outpost in the imperialist front in Southeast Asia, not that of the anti-imperialist front. After all, the imperialists had been interested in Indochina as early as 1945, and their failure in China only raised the stakes in Indochina for them. Conceivably, the ICP could have tried, as many intellectuals advised it to do at the time, to reassure the imperialist camp that Vietnam would not ally with any bloc.\(^7\) In contrast, what ICP leaders did was to extend the anti-imperialist front into Indochina by actively contacting the Chinese and Soviets and persuading them that they could play a role in Indochina as well, that they should not easily yield Indochina to the imperialist camp, and that Indochina could do its share to help with world revolution. While the ICP leaders dismissed as selfish other Vietnamese who called for Vietnam’s neutrality vis-à-vis the two emerging blocs, they themselves started from a partisan stand in the conflict.

To be fair, U.S. open and secret assistance to the French since 1946 made it clear that, even if ICP leaders had declared allegiance to the imperialist camp, the United States might not have believed them and supported them against the French. However, party documents do not reveal that anyone considered neutrality as an alternative. Clearly its leaders and members would not have accepted giving up their ideology. They had not done so when they appeared hopelessly abandoned by the revolutionary camp. Why would they do so now that they might be able to finally get support from it? To be sure, ICP leaders wanted Vietnam to be independent; however, it was not just any independence, but had to be independence with their party in charge. A potential U.S. intervention, the cost of this independence, was accepted and believed to be surmountable.
A year later, General Secretary Truong Chinh would proudly state in his report at the Second Party Congress in 1951, the congress when the ICP reemerged as the Vietnam Workers Party,

Vietnam has become one of the outposts [tien don] on the front for peace and democracy against imperialists, and has [also] been viewed by the imperialists as a strategic post on their defense line against democracy. History has entrusted the Vietnamese working class and people the responsibility to defend this outpost. The Vietnamese working class and people are determined not to let down people around the world who have placed their trust in us.72

Chinh appeared modest by giving history all the credit for the fact that Vietnam had become an outpost in the coming battles between two world camps. But he may have been trying to dodge the charge that the ICP had dragged Vietnam into the conflict between the superpowers. Regardless of his intention in this statement, there is no doubt that history played a role, but the ICP’s partisan stand and its active efforts to draw international socialist powers into Indochina should not be overlooked.

The Cold War in any case allowed the ICP to accelerate the pace of their domestic revolution. International conditions had always been viewed by party leaders as closely linked to and to a critical extent determined the process of revolution in particular countries. We have seen that they viewed imperialist wars as opportunities for revolutionaries to seize power. Similarly, ICP leaders stated in 1941 that national liberation did not need to delay social revolution; permissive international conditions may allow both to take place at the same time. In 1946, at the height of the national liberation struggle, Truong Chinh continued to argue for merging the two revolutions:

Now a mistaken view about the stages of the Vietnamese revolution needs to be criticized. Some people believe that our revolution has to go one step at a time: (anti-imperialist) national liberation first, then (anti-feudalist) land revolution, then socialism. This step-by-step view that strictly divides the revolution into three stages is not correct. Externally, the Soviet Union, a socialist country, has emerged victorious and the new democratic movement is growing fast. Internally, the leadership of the revolution is firmly in the hands of the proletariats and the democratic progressive forces are united. Under these historical conditions, our national liberation revolution can accomplish anti-imperialist tasks and fulfill part of our antifeudalist responsibilities73 [emphasis in original].
How large that part of antifeudalist responsibilities must be accomplished at any particular time depended on particular international and domestic situations at that time. Note that favorable international conditions were not necessarily synonymous with the availability of international material support. Even when there was no forthcoming concrete support from the Soviet Union, some ICP leaders, of whom Chinh was the most powerful, still called for land reform measures, albeit moderate ones. At the same time, these ICP leaders held a long-term view of the revolution and always kept their eyes open for new opportunities to leapfrog ahead. By mid-1948, when Chinese Red Armies were pouring into central China after their victories in Manchuria, Truong Chinh began to call for a revived campaign to reduce rents for tenants. Rent reduction policy had been issued in 1945, but had not been seriously implemented. Chinh noted that, “If the international situation undergoes a great change favorable to the democratic camp, or if the resistance succeeds [within the near future], our Party can take advantage of the new conditions to take the land reform to one step higher [than merely rent reduction].” The arrival of the Cold War and the promise of concrete Chinese support would mean a great opportunity to leapfrog. As much as ICP leaders wanted to accelerate their anti-imperialist/antifeudalist/socialist revolution, the arrival of the Cold War must have been welcome by many of them, for all the costs that it might incur.

Conclusion
This chapter aimed at capturing the changing worldviews of Vietnamese communist leaders and their attitudes toward the Cold War. The evidence suggests that to them the world was always sharply divided into two camps and it was in the fundamental interest of the counter-revolutionary camp that world revolution, of which the Vietnamese movement was a part, would be destroyed. While the ICP’s internal politics may remain forever obscure, the binary worldview of its top leaders was remarkably consistent. As reality did not conform to what was imagined, this worldview was modified but never abandoned. Regardless of what happened, ICP leaders throughout the period identified themselves with the revolutionary camp. At the darkest moments when no support from this camp was forthcoming, Vietnamese communists did not cease associating themselves mentally with the Soviet Union, imagining it and displaying their admiration for it. Even while they were searching frantically for alternative sources of international support, the lack of contact with the Soviet Union did not reduce but in fact enhanced their ideological loyalty.

When it emerged, the Cold War only reaffirmed the binary worldview of ICP leaders. Although their nation was small and weak, they were only partially
constrained by world events. Viewing the Cold War as a great opportunity, they took advantage of it while being fully aware of the risks and costs of their policy.\textsuperscript{75} It was China and the superpowers that decided to send aid, weapons, and armies to Vietnam, but ICP leaders did everything they could to make the initially uninterested revolutionary camp admit their small nation into its ranks. In this sense, the ICP and not China nor the superpowers brought the Cold War to Vietnam. ICP leaders were not drafted; they volunteered and brought Vietnam to war with them.

While the argument in this chapter thus far has focused on ICP leaders’ attitudes toward the Cold War, the evidence here has many broad implications for scholarly debates about Vietnamese politics during this period. Five main implications can be outlined. A first obvious implication concerns the assertion in many studies that the collision between Vietnam and the United States in the 1960s was something inconceivable from the vantage point of 1945. As Robert McNamara and his collaborators wonder, “How did these two countries, with little common history and less common knowledge of each other, become during the post–World War II period the bitterest of enemies . . . ? Clearly Ho Chi Minh could not imagine this in September 1945. . . .”\textsuperscript{76} Mark Bradley echoes the same point:

From the perspective of Vietnamese and American political elites in the fall of 1945, the subsequent course of Vietnamese-American relations was surely an unimagined contingency. Neither side could have anticipated they would face each other as enemies in 1950 when the colonial war between the French and the Vietnamese was transformed into an arena of the Cold War.\textsuperscript{77}

While this essay does not address the American views, it demonstrates that Vietnamese communist leaders may have possessed little empirical knowledge about the United States, but they never lacked theoretical assumptions about the grave defects of American society and about U.S. behavior as a leading imperialist. These assumptions were informed by their two-camp worldview in which the American capitalist system was unjust and cruel in contrast to the just and progressive Soviet system. In addition, the United States was a clever and dangerous enemy of world revolution, whereas the Soviet Union was its savior; mutually destructive conflict between the two camps was inevitable. As shown in newspaper articles and internal party documents drafted and discussed with all seriousness by all top party leaders, Vietnamese communists harbored these assumptions long before 1945 and continued to hold them, even during late 1944 to early 1945 when the United States appeared to be on their side.
However, even if the above assertion is clearly mistaken when applied to the ICP as a whole, one wonders whether it may be true for Ho Chi Minh. This concerns another longstanding view in the literature that describes Ho as a pragmatic politician in contrast to his radical “lieutenants.” Ho’s pragmatism is unquestioned in his practical decisions such as, in the period of interest here, the pursuit of a nationalist coalition, the negotiations with France, and the dissolution of the ICP. However, one should not conflate his pragmatism in policy prescriptions with his deep beliefs. Here lies the second implication of this reflection. Ho was never as interested in theoretical questions as Truong Chinh was, but the evidence here indicates no noticeable difference between him and his comrades in their fundamental worldview. There was little disparity between the worldview as written in the Seventh and Eighth (and subsequent) Plenum resolutions. The Truong Chinh–edited Su That was indeed more fiery and dogmatic than the Ho-edited Viet Nam Doc Lap, which apparently suggests differences between these two leaders. However, to a great extent these differences were reflections of the different target audiences (the former targeted Hanoi intellectuals, and the latter relatively uneducated peasants and merchants) and the corresponding appropriate styles. As an article quoted above exemplified, Viet Nam Doc Lap devoted significant effort to project a positive image of “Russia” and communism not in doctrinal terms but in language that ordinary Vietnamese could understand. On balance, the baseline of the two-camp worldview was consistent throughout with Ho (in 1941–1942, since late 1944) or without Ho (before 1941 and in 1942 to 1944). Given that Ho chaired or participated in party meetings and helped draft party resolutions during some of the periods examined here, it is hard to imagine that he disagreed fundamentally with these resolutions. Disagreements perhaps had more to do with policies and tactics at particular points, but not with the question of, in the most fundamental sense, who would be true friends and foes.

The third implication concerns an influential hypothesis advanced by Huynh Kim Khanh in his path-breaking study on Vietnamese communism. Khanh writes that the French repression of the ICP in 1940 “helped change the Party’s direction. In addition to the party’s isolation from the international Communist movement, the elimination of most of the internationalist-oriented leaders, who had complied closely with whatever line Moscow espoused, facilitated the reascendancy of leaders who had stressed the creative adaptation of Marxism-Leninism to the sociopolitical conditions of Vietnam.” While it is true that Ho’s taking control of the ICP in 1941 was made easier by the French, this does not mean that internationalism died with Le Hong Phong, Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, Nguyen Van Cu, Ha Huy Tap, and Phan Dang Luu, the ICP
leaders captured and executed in 1940–1941. Defined as a strong sense of ideological affinity with the international communist movement that began with Marx and of which the Soviet Union was only a component—albeit the most important one—internationalism was not reserved only for those leaders who had been to the Soviet Union. In fact, the Soviet system may have been more attractive as imagined from afar; those who had never been there may have been more idealistic than those who had.

There are reasons to believe that ICP leaders who survived French repression, including Le Duan, Hoang Quoc Viet, Pham Hung, Truong Chinh, Nguyen Luong Bang, Le Duc Tho, Bui Cong Trung, Nguyen Duy Trinh, Nguyen Chi Thanh, Pham Van Dong, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Le Van Luong, to name only the best known, were just as internationalist as those executed although none of them except Trung had been to the Soviet Union. Many among the surviving leaders, such as Duan, Trung, Dong, Hung, and Luong, worked closely or spent years in prison with their fallen comrades. All received their first ideological training in the early 1930s, mostly in French prisons, although the unusually slavish Stalinism of the French Communist Party in the interwar years perhaps helped shape their thinking. French repression opened up a temporary leadership vacuum for Ho to step in, but in fact hardened the internationalism held by most ICP surviving leaders. To the extent that these leaders wielded any influence, and collectively it is safe to assume that they wielded more influence than Ho on most matters, the post-1940 application of Marxism-Leninism to Vietnam would become less “creative,” contrary to what Khanh argues. The evidence of this radical internationalism is undeniable in the pages of Su That published in late 1945 at the height of the nationalist movement and in party documents the above men drafted and debated. This chapter thus hopes to correct the dual tendency in the literature to slight Vietnamese internationalism and focus exclusively on Ho as if he and the ICP were one and the same.

The fourth implication involves another common portrayal of Vietnamese communist leaders in the literature as nationalists first and communists second. The obsession with these seemingly dichotomous labels apparently originated from the debate between supporters of and opponents to U.S. involvement in Vietnam in the 1960s. The former justified the war by arguing that Vietnamese communism was a tool of Soviet and Chinese ambition, while the latter claimed that Vietnamese communism was fused with and tamed by indigenous nationalism. Whether they supported the war or not, many respected scholars have adopted or contributed to the second view. For example, Duiker asserts that “communists, like other nationalist groups . . . , wanted above all to find a solution to the national problem. . . . Marxism, like democ-
racy or fascism, was a tool in this process” (emphasis in original). Kahin \(^{85}\) agrees that Vietnamese communist leaders were “men in whom the strength of nationalism decisively overshadowed any propensity to follow some line dictated in the Kremlin.” Herring), \(^{86}\) the author of a popular college text on the Vietnam War now in its fourth edition, notes, “The [Indochinese] revolutions were not inspired by Moscow, and although the Soviet Union and China at times sought to control them, their capacity to do so was limited by their lack of military and especially naval power and by the strength of local nationalism.” According to these scholars, the strength of Vietnamese nationalism was further enhanced by a combination of traditional Sino–Vietnamese enmity and the DRV’s isolation from the international communist centers in the 1945–1949 period. Only after U.S. policymakers mistakenly rebuffed the DRV was the ICP forced to turn to China and the Soviet Union for support.\(^{87}\) The United States, in other words, pushed hapless Vietnamese communists to join the Soviet camp. But as Bradley argues, even “if the Vietnamese were anxious to gain Chinese support after 1949, they still hoped to retain the flexible revolutionary nationalist character of their foreign policy and to remain apart from the emerging bipolar structure of the international system.”\(^{88}\)

The evidence here suggests that these scholars have taken the labels “nationalists” and “communists” too seriously while neglecting exploration of the worldviews and actions of Vietnamese communists on their own terms. While they correctly reject the notion that Vietnamese communists were Soviet or Chinese puppets, they fall into the trap of making their arguments based on the same false dichotomy imposed by outside observers. Vietnamese communists did not think of national and class interests in contradictory terms. Upon reading volumes of party documents,\(^{89}\) one gets the sense that the question for them was not posed at the abstract level of blanket terms such as “nationalism” or “communism,” but rather at the strategic and tactical level, namely at which stage were certain slogans were most appropriate. The fact that they emphasized national goals at one stage does not by itself prove that these were their end goals. Vietnamese leaders were not subservient to the Soviet Union or China, but this does not mean that they could not choose to be loyal to the broadly defined international communist cause on their own. They were at one point pragmatic in their tactical foreign policy maneuvers, but these measures must be separated from their hidden strategic thinking and worldview, which was dominated by the themes of domestic social revolution and world revolution.

The view shared by the above scholars shows that Vietnamese leaders were capable of independent thinking, but it denies their extraordinary ability to imagine the impossible, to gamble the destiny of Indochina on a nonexistent revolutionary camp, to keep the faith regardless of circumstances, and even-
ually to secure a larger role in international politics than the status of a small and weak Vietnam could grant them. To say that Vietnamese communists thought of Marxism merely as a tool, that their revolution was not inspired by Moscow, that they were forced by circumstances against their will to align with the Soviet bloc, and that they were loyal to the Soviet Union only when there were contacts and aid, not only contradicts the evidence here but also denigrates their revolutionary commitments and efforts, however disastrous the consequences of their socialist revolution would prove to be for Vietnam from the vantage point of the twenty-first century.

The final implication concerns the party documents that form the core of this essay. Researchers of Vietnamese foreign policy during the 1940s are confronted by two contradictory sets of sources. On the one hand are such statements such as Ho’s declaration of independence and the Viet Minh’s programs that spoke of the nation and repeatedly invoked Vietnamese historical heroes such as Tran Hung Dao and Le Loi. On the other hand are internal party documents where such heroes never appeared; in their places were Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. The dilemma is not resolved by incorporating all sources into the analysis because one set so different from the other. If the thoughts of Vietnamese leaders were really a mixture of ideas about the nation and world revolution, which is conceivable, both Tran Hung Dao and Stalin should have appeared side by side in both sets of documents. They didn’t.

One is left with two other possibilities. First, it is possible that the two sets of documents were produced by different leaders whose beliefs differed and who were not coordinating their messages. Different writing styles clearly indicated that they were written by different authors, but given the close-knit structure of the ICP leadership, lack of coordination is unlikely. Alternatively, the contradiction between the two sets may be deliberate: One set targeted the broadest audience possible and the other a limited circle of party leaders. One was aimed for public relations or propaganda purposes and the other for internal debate and consumption. Evidence of the intention and ability to manipulate public opinion has been shown above in the case of clever propaganda measures taken by the DRV when it established relations with China and the Soviet Union in 1950; these maneuvers would confuse such well-informed outside observers as George Kahin for decades. If the hypothesis of deliberate contradiction is true, it follows that scholars must use the two sets of documents differently. The first set is valuable as source material for analyses of ICP techniques and skills in propaganda and mass mobilization, whereas the second set serves for research on the ICP’s genuine views and calculations. The first set is examined for popular arguments and forms of speech and the second set for content. Misuse would lead researchers to wrong answers.
Last but not least, the value of these party documents is not limited to the time they were written because they have been and are still used as indoctrination materials today. No longer abstract considerations when originally written, they have long become institutionalized and even mythologized. Subsequent generations of Vietnamese communist leaders often knew about the outside world primarily through these documents, which they were required to read, discuss, memorize, transmit down and out, and reproduce in their own words. Based on these documents, generations of Vietnam’s court historians have woven a seamless historiography of the party’s central role in modern Vietnamese history to be taught to students from primary to graduate school. In fact, a recent study of Vietnam’s foreign policy (in the context of Sino-Vietnamese relations) up to the late 1990s shows that although the Cold War has long ended, the dichotomous worldview remains deeply ingrained in the minds of many top party and government leaders.91

Endnotes

2. Which particular leaders were more committed to this worldview is a matter that can be settled definitively with the opening up of the Vietnamese Communist Party’s archives. Many documents examined here were authored by Truong Chinh, general-secretary of the ICP during the 1941–1956 period, and arguably the most powerful leader rivaling Ho Chi Minh in the ICP leadership. Other documents (party resolutions) were jointly authored. My research over eight months at the National Archive III and the Revolutionary Museum in Hanoi did not uncover any information on internal party debates.


4. Thu was captured and executed by the French in 1944. When the ICP re-emerged as the Vietnamese Workers’ Party in 1951, its Central Committee elected a Political
Bureau listed in original order as follows: Ho Chi Minh, Truong Chinh, Le Duan, Hoang Quoc Viet, Vo Nguyen Giap, Pham Van Dong, and Nguyen Chi Thanh (Le Van Luong was an alternate member). *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* (Collection of Party Documents, hereafter VKDTT) (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia), 12: 521.

5. The only exception is Hoang Quoc Viet, who mentioned in his memoir that he was in France briefly in 1930. See Hoang Quoc Viet, *Con Duong Theo Bac* (Following Uncle Ho) (Hanoi: Thanh Nien, 1990).

6. “Nghi quyet cua Hoi nghi Trung uong” (Resolution of the Central Committee Plenum), November 6–9, 1940, VKDTT, 7: 20.

7. Ibid., 24.

8. “Cach mang the gioi” in original. The use of the term suggested the conception of a single proletarian revolutionary movement.

9. VKDTT, 7: 32.

10. Ibid., 33.

11. Ibid., 34.

12. Ibid., 71–73.

13. Ibid., 74.

14. “Trung Uong Hoi Nghi Lan Thu Tam” (The Eighth Central Committee Plenum), May 1941, VKDTT, 7: 98.

15. Ibid., 100.

16. Ibid., 102.

17. Ibid., 109–10.

18. Ibid., 113–14.

19. Ibid., 115–17.


21. Ibid., 120–21.

22. “Phai ung ho Lien Bang Xo Viet” (We have to support the Soviet Union), October 31, 1941, VKDTT, 7: 203–5. See also “Nghi quyet cua Hoi nghi can bo toan xu Bac ky” (Resolution of the Tonkin Cadre Meeting), September 25–27, 1941, VKDTT, 7: 189–90.

23. B.V., “Nga la nuoc the nao?” *Viet Nam Doc Lap*, n. 126, July 11, 1942. 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 printing worker. Bao Tang Cach Mang Viet Nam, *Bao Viet Nam Doc Lap, 1941–1945* (Hanoi: Lao Dong, 2000). The style of this article suggests that it was likely to have been written by Ho.

24. “Cuoc chien tranh Thai binh duong va trach nhiem can kip cua Dang” (The Pacific War and the urgent tasks facing the Party), December 21, 1941, VKDTT, 7: 238–53.

25. Ibid., 243–44.

26. This was the result of the meeting between Stalin and Churchill in May 1942.

27. “Nghi quyet cua Ban Thuong vu Trung uong.” (Resolution of the Standing Committee of the Central Committee), February 25–28, 1943, VKDTT, 7: 272–315. The resolution stated that a Central Committee meeting was needed, given the new important developments, but convening such a meeting was not feasible.
29. Ibid., 274.
30. Ibid., 279.
31. Ibid., 278.
32. Ibid., 302–4.
33. “Day manh cuoc chien tranh chong phat xit xam luoc” (Stepping up the fight against the fascists), November 12–13, 1943, VKDTT, 7: 322–26.
34. One wonders whether this Comintern example and the instrumental logic used here to explain it would help Ho later to justify the decision to dissolve the ICP in November 1945.
35. Cuu Quoc, November 1944, 18. (Copy courtesy of the Revolutionary Museum in Hanoi.)
36. “Nghi quyet Hoi nghi quan su Bac ky” (Resolution of Northern Regional Committee on military issues), April 15–20, 1945, VKDTT, 7: 382. It can be assumed that the view in this resolution reflected the views of central leaders.
37. “Nghi quyet cua Toan quoc Hoi nghi Dang cong san Dong duong” (Resolution of the National Party Conference), August 14–15, 1945, VKDTT, 7: 423–33.
39. See Christopher Goscha, “Courting Diplomatic Disaster? The Difficult Integration of Vietnam into the Internationalist Communist Movement (1945–1950),” Journal of Vietnamese Studies 1, nos. 1–2 (February–August 2006), 59–103. French historians have also suggested that many leaders such as Truong Chinh and Hoang Quoc Viet were critical of Ho’s policy to negotiate with the French. See Phillipe Devillers and Jean Lacouture, End of a War (New York: Praeger, 1969), 11.
40. Bradley, Imagining Vietnam and America, 127–33.
41. Ibid., 151.
42. “Chi thi cua Ban Chap hanh Trung uong ve khang chien kien quoc” (Instruction of the Central Committee about resistance and nation-building), November 25, 1945, VKDTT, 8: 21–34.
43. In a subsequent instruction issued after the Sino–French agreement to let French troops replace Chinese GMD troops in North Vietnam, it was similarly claimed that England and the United States wanted the French and the Dutch to re-take control of Indochina and Indonesia so that they could devote their efforts to encircling the Soviet Union. “Tinh hinh va chu truong” (The current situation and our policy), March 3, 1946, VKDTT, 8: 41.
45. Ibid., 21. See also the editorial in Su That, January 17–20, 1946.
46. Su That, December 5, 1945. As the ICP dissolved itself, it closed Co Giai Phong (Liberation Flag), the Party’s journal up to then, and started Su That. Su That was under Truong Chinh’s direct supervision. See Quang Dam: Nha Bao, Hoc Gia (Hanoi: Lao Dong, 2002), 29.
47. “Nghi quyet cua Hoi nghi Can bo Trung uong” (Resolution of the Central Cadre Conference), July 31–August 1, 1946, VKDTT, 8: 99.
49. Dan Thanh (The People’s Voice) (Hanoi), July 4, 1946.
50. Tran Quoc Bao, “Y nghĩa độc lập của Phi luật tan” (The meaning of Filipino independence), Su That, July 12, 1946, 5.
51. B.C.T., “Thuyết đấu tranh giai cấp và dân tộc” (The theory of class struggle and the national issue), Su That, July 5 and 12, 1946.
52. To Khanh, “Giai cấp đấu tranh hay dân tộc đấu tranh?” (Class struggle or national struggle?), Chinh Nghia (The Just Cause) (Hanoi), June 3, 1946.
56. “Chúng ta chiến đấu cho độc lập và dân chủ” (We fight for independence and democracy), Trương Chinh’s speech at the Fifth Cadre Conference, August 8–16, 1948, Ban Chap hanh Lien khu Dang bo Lien khu X, 1948, 15–18.
57. Ibid., 18–19.
58. Ibid., 6–12.
59. Ibid., 20.
60. Ho Chi Minh, Bao cao chánh trị (Political Report), speech at the Second Party Congress in 1951 (Trung Uong Cuc Mien Nam, 1952), 52. Note that this statement together with praises for Mao’s thought and guidance that appeared in the original speech are deleted from the same speech published in VKDTT, 12: 31.
61. “Chung ta chien dau cho doc lap va dan chu,” op. cit.
63. Ibid., 36–37, 53.
64. “Quyet nghi cua Ban Thuong vu Trung uong” (The decision of the Standing Committee), January 15–16, 1950, VKDTT, 11: 11. The DRV’s clever arrangement succeeded to confuse even informed observers for a long time. Nearly forty years later, Kahin, in Intervention (1986, 35), still argued that “[i]n 1950, not having yet received diplomatic recognition from any country, the DRV leaders felt the urgent need to break out of their isolation, and on January 14, 1950, they appealed worldwide to all governments for diplomatic recognition. Four days later, once Hanoi had recognized Mao’s government (on the 15th), Peking reciprocated; and on January 30, the Soviet Union followed suit.”
65. “Chi thi cua Ban Thuong vu Trung uong ve viecuyen truyen chinh sach ngoai giao cua Chinh phu ta” (The instruction of the Standing Committee on propaganda about our foreign policy), January 18, 1950, VKDTT, 11: 16.
66. “Quyet nghi cua Ban Thuong vu Trung uong,” op. cit., 11.
67. “Nghi quyết cua Thuong vu Trung uong” (The resolution of the Standing Committee), February 4, 1950, VKDTT, 11: 223.

In another document, Party leaders also discussed the attitude of “pro-American” intellectuals such as Hoàng Xuan Han (a former minister in the Trần Trọng Kim gov-
ernment) and Nguyen Manh Ha (the first Minister of Economy in the Viet Minh government in 1945) who wanted the ICP not to ally with any camp for fear of Vietnam becoming the battlefield of a Third World War. “Tình hình các Lien Khối trong bốn tháng 1, 2, 3 năm 1950” (The situation in the Interzones during the first quarter of 1950), n.d., VKDTT, 11: 271.

70. Ibid., 223.
71. See footnote 68 above.
72. “Hoan thanh giai phong dan toc, phát triển dan chu nhân dân, tiến tới chủ nghĩa xã hội” (Finishing national liberation, developing people’s democracy and marching forward to socialism), February 1951, VKDTT, 11: 47. Italics added.
74. “Chúng ta chiến đấu cho độc lập và dân chủ” (We fight for independence and democracy), Trương Chinh’s speech at the Fifth Cadre Conference, August 8–16, 1948 (Ban chap hanh Lien khu Dang bo Lien khu X, 1948, 80–85).
75. Vietnamese communists were not alone in seeing the Cold War as a great opportunity. As Odd Arne Westad concludes in his study of Chinese communist foreign policy, “while anticolonial insurgents of the late 19th and early 20th centuries had little hope of forming alliances with a foreign power, the bipolarity and the scope of the Cold War conflict opened the door for Third world rebels to exploit the international great power system for their own purposes.” See Westad, Cold War and Revolution (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 178.
77. Bradley, Imagining Vietnam and America, 6.
79. I’m indebted to Peter Zinoman for this point.
80. In The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1896–1940 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 4, Peter Zinoman argues that the Indochinese colonial prison “founded to quell political dissent and maintain law and order,” in fact became “a site that nurtured the growth of communism, nationalism, and anticolonial resistance.” In Imagining Vietnam and America (2000, 40), Bradley also suggests that colonial prisons radicalized many Vietnamese communist leaders.
82. In Imagining Vietnam and America, Bradley goes further than most in incorporating Vietnamese views but his discussion of socialist internationalism (8 pages) is much briefer than those of neo-Confucianism and social Darwinism (16 pages) and Vietnamese radicalism in general (12 pages). Whereas the index has 62 entries under Ho Chi Minh, there are 52 for Trương Chinh (14), Pham Van Dong (16) and Vo Nguyen Giap (22) combined. An exception to this tendency is Bernard Fall’s astute analysis of


89. The newly released forty-one volumes of *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2002).

90. If Indonesia’s Muslim leaders such as “Red Haji” Misbach could believe in both Marx and Mohammed, it is not unthinkable for Vietnamese revolutionaries to embrace Tran Hung Dao and Stalin at the same time. See Takashi Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912–1926* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).